

Teachers' Practices and Awareness of Grammar Teaching Principles

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Abstract

Despite consensus on the important role of grammar instruction, there are debates about teaching it. Teachers' perceptions about grammar and how it should be taught influence their teaching. Classroom observations indicate that regardless of teachers' experience and proficiency, their grammar teaching practices are not usually void of problems. Identifying language teachers' areas of weaknesses in grammar teaching, finding such problematic areas, raising their awareness and providing solutions in line with effective grammar teaching principles can enhance the effectiveness of grammar instruction. This qualitative study aimed at identifying the main problems in the grammar teaching practice of 34 experienced Iranian English teachers through observing their classes, exploring their awareness of effective grammar instruction principles using a semistructured interview and finding mismatches between their grammar teaching knowledge and practice. The most frequently observed problems in grammar lessons and teachers' corresponding beliefs were reported, and suggestions for alternative practices were made. The findings suggest that teacher educators should provide more focused training to preclude posttraining grammar teaching complications, and language teachers should be more reflective about the effectiveness of their grammar teaching practices.

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1. Introduction

A brief review of language teaching history shows that grammar has been a major concern to language teachers and learners. Debates on inclusion or exclusion of grammar in language teaching have given way to discussions on how to teach grammar effectively. Ellis (2006) states that grammar has always been a subject of controversy, and despite research findings, there are controversial issues about how to teach it. A good number of studies focus on problems and challenges in grammar teaching (Ahmed, 2013; Akbari, 2015; Al-Makhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011; Behroozi & Amoozegar, 2014; Ebrahimpourtaher & Eissaie, 2015; Mishra, 2010; Nazari & Allahyar, 2012; Park, 2002, Teevno, 2011; Underwood, 2017). Likewise, the relationship between teachers' cognition and practices regarding grammar teaching has extensively been studied (Borg, 2001, 2006, 2018; Borg & Burns, 2008; Phips & Borg, 2009; Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2017; Farrell, 2016; Farrell & Ives, 2015; Farrell & Yang 2017). The research findings indicate that teachers' perceptions about grammar and grammar teaching are reflected in their teaching practice, and prevalent issues related to grammar teaching may be attributed to their lack of awareness of grammar teaching principles or socio-cultural and contextual factors. Less studied areas are inconsistencies regarding principles of effective grammar teaching and teachers' awareness of such principles. Knowledge of the existing problems in grammar teaching practice and what causes them can provide teacher educators with insights to help in-service teachers and preemptively address the challenges they are likely to face. In order to do so, this study attempted to identify the frequent problems in Iranian teachers' grammar teaching practice, examine their awareness of the effective grammar teaching principles, discuss the existing mismatches between their beliefs and practices and finally suggest alternative practices for effective grammar instruction.

2. Review of Literature

Grammar has been an indispensable part of almost any language teaching method and approach. Nassaji and Fotos (2010) state that until the seventies, the fixation of language teaching was on grammar and description of structures. Grammar Translation, Audio Lingual method, Direct Method, Total Physical Response and Silent Way based their syllabi on grammar points.

According to Baudcco (2017) the movement from grammar-dominated to absolutely-no-grammar approaches was strengthened by the inadequacy of the former approach in helping learners communicate. Based on Hymes' (1972) model of 'Communicative Competence' and Krashen's (1981) ideas about language acquisition, the meaning-focused 'Communicative Approach' emerged in reaction to the form-focused approaches of the past. Strong versions of the communicative approach discouraged teaching grammar and emphasized teaching functions because the aim of language teaching was communication rather than language description. However, after a while, advocates of communicative approach realized that in the absence of grammar teaching, language learners develop fluency at the risk of accuracy, and therefore, focusing on language forms became important.

Brown (2001) argued that there should be no question as to whether we should teach grammar; in fact, grammar needs to be taught in communicative contexts encouraging accuracy and fluency. After a comprehensive study of the role of grammar in foreign language teaching, Liviero (2014) reported that teaching grammar compensates for some of limitations in foreign language contexts; through teaching grammar, learners gain awareness of the foreign language forms, which, otherwise, would have not been noticed due to lack of exposure to that language. Nassaji and Fotos (2004) also argued for the significant role of teaching grammar in the communicative approach.

Ellis (2006) points that despite the agreement on the significance of grammar instruction, there is no consensus on how to teach it (Braine, 2014; Corzo, 2013). Generally, the purpose of teaching grammar in a foreign language teaching is promoting accuracy along with effective communication; therefore, as Baudcco (2017) notes, the traditional view of grammar defining it as a static set of rules governing language is not appropriate. Similarly, Larsen-Freeman (2001) asserts that it is not helpful to think of grammar as a discrete set of meaningless, decontextualized static structures because grammar is for communication; According to her, there are three dimensions in defining grammar: *structure or form*, *semantics or meaning*, and *the pragmatic conditions governing use*.

The question of how grammar should be taught has been addressed extensively. Guidelines and principles suggested by Brown (2001), Dendrinis (2015), Ellis (2005) and Batstone and Ellis (2009) for grammar teaching not only are consistent with one another but also are in line with Larsen-Freeman's (2001) view of grammar (i.e., form, meaning, & use). Brown (2001) offered a set of guidelines for teaching grammar when the purpose of grammar teaching is effective and accurate communication:

- 1.Explanations should be short and simple;
- 2.Teachers should not confuse learners with exception to rules;
- 3.Clear and unambiguous examples ought to be provided;
- 4.Visual stimuli and graphical depictions should be used;
- 5.Teachers should not confuse learners with complex terminologies;
- 6.Grammar should be intrinsically motivating and interesting;
- 7.Grammar should be contextualized in meaningful language use;
- 8.Grammar should play a positive role in communicative goals;
- 9.Grammar should attempt to encourage accuracy within a fluent communicative context;
- 10.Learners' cognitive styles should be taken into account when teaching grammar; analytical learners learn better by explanations compared to holistic learners;

11. Grammar lessons should be integrated to the whole curriculum;
12. The curriculum should determine the content of the grammar lessons;
13. Grammar lessons should be designed in a way to deal with specific problems that learners may have encountered in the curriculum;
14. Assessing the success of a grammar course should be evident from the learners' performance outside of the grammar class and not through grammar tests.

Similarly, Dendrinos (2015) suggested that grammar teaching and activities should be integrated in a communicative framework, where language is presented and learnt within a context; furthermore, clear explanations with simple vocabulary, relating new information to old, learners' active involvement and attention to form, meaning and use are essential to grammar teaching. Following a comprehensive study on instructed language learning, Ellis (2005) suggested ten principles for teaching a foreign languages, among which focusing on meaning and form, developing implicit and explicit knowledge of second language, having opportunities for interaction and assessing controlled as well as free production of learners are particularly related to teaching grammar. According to Batstone and Ellis (2009), for effective grammar instruction three principles should be observed. The first one is *given-to-new*, which implies that the existing knowledge of the learners must be exploited as a resource for connecting given meaning to the new concept. The second one is *awareness*, which means that discovering the relation between meaning and form requires awareness, and the third one is *real operating conditions*, which means that learners should use the language interactively and meaningfully in order to learn it. In other words, the process of acquiring the meaning-form relation is incomplete until the learners can practice them in a communicative context with a focus on meaning rather than form.

Given that these guidelines and principles are not limited to any particular method or approach and can be implemented in communicative language teaching, it is plausible to claim that teaching grammar within the framework of these principles is likely to result in better second language acquisition. However, teachers' understanding and interpretation of such guidelines in their teaching practices is imperative to their effectiveness as misapplication of these principles may result in giving unnecessary credit to one option at the expense of ignoring others. It is important to know teachers' ideas about grammar teaching because their attitudes control their practices and any incongruity between their attitudes and current knowledge of principles can result in unproductive practices and poor learning (Salimi, Safarzadeh, & Monfared, 2014).

Teachers' understanding, beliefs, attitudes, thoughts about language and language teaching or what Borg (2006) calls "teachers' cognition" is reflected in their classroom practice and influences the outcome of instruction. Borg (2003) asserted that decisions teachers make regarding how and when to teach grammar are based on their cognition. In a study, Borg and Burns (2008) found that mismatches between terminologies teachers used in reporting their beliefs about grammar teaching and their theory of reference is indicative of their misinterpretation of the theory or partial understanding of the principles of teaching grammar. Salimi, Safarzadeh, and Monfared (2014) also noted that teachers' cognition with regard to teaching grammar was not always reflected in their practices; in their study teachers stated ideas that were consistent with principles of grammar teaching, but they did not follow those principles in their classroom practices. Similar studies investigating teachers' cognition and their practices also point to mismatches between teachers' grammar teaching beliefs and their actual practice (Farrell & Lim, 2005; Ferreira, 2014; Phipps & Borg, 2009). Nevertheless, some research

findings show convergence between teachers' cognition and their practice of teaching grammar (Alghanmi & Shukri, 2016; Lee, 2008). Inconsistencies in the findings of previous studies suggest that there are other factors influencing teachers' beliefs in their grammar teaching practice. Therefore, in this study, an attempt was made to a) identify the prevalent problems in the grammar teaching, b) explore teachers' awareness of grammar teaching principles with regard to the observed problems and c) to pinpoint the source of the prevalent problems.

3. Method

Firstly, the researchers used an observation checklist developed based on effective grammar teaching principles in order to identify grammar teaching flaws of a group of Iranian English language teachers teaching in private language institutes. Then, a survey of the observed teachers' beliefs and awareness with regard to the flaws was carried out to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the main problems in Iranian EFL teachers' grammar teaching practice in communicative courses?
2. What mismatches, if any, are there between teachers' awareness and practice of grammar teaching and what are the reasons for such mismatches?

3.1 Participants

Thirty-four Iranian EFL teachers (12 males & 22 females, age 20 to 35, teaching experience 2 to 13 years) were selected based on availability sampling from two English language institutes in Tehran, Iran. All participants were either university students or graduates. There were 13 participants whose academic field of study was not English, but the rest of the participants were either undergraduate students or graduates with BA and MA degrees in English language teaching, literature or translation studies. Based on the institutes' reports following a mock proficiency test

administered to their teaching staff prior to the training course, their general English level was upper-intermediate and advanced (B2+ and C1 based on Common European Framework of Reference). The participants were informed that the data gathered from their class observations and interviews would mainly be used for their training, but later, the same data might anonymously be used for research purposes.

3.2 Instruments

An adapted checklist (Appendix A) was used for observing the participants' grammar teaching. The items of the checklist were developed based on a) suggested guidelines for effective grammar teaching (Batstone & Ellis, 2009; Brown, 2001; Ellis, 2005; Dendrinis, 2015; Baudcco, 2017; Larsen-freeman, 2001), b) items of a questionnaire on grammar teaching principles developed by Burgess and Etherigton (2002) and c) Teachers' teaching practice assessment checklist of International TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). A focused interview with 15 teachers (Appendix B) also followed the analyses of the observation checklist results.

3.3. Procedure

First, the participants' grammar teaching practice was observed using an adapted observation checklist with 28 items. In order to minimize the observer's subjectivity during observation and to obtain more objective and reliable data, two of the researchers observed each participant and independently filled out the observation forms. Then, the two forms for each grammar lesson observation were juxtaposed for the identification of commonly observed flaws.

Peer observation, as a means of teachers' professional development, is not a common practice among English language teachers in Iran and not many teachers and learners are used to it. Observing a teacher during a real lesson can be a source of distraction, stress and unusual performance of the learners.

In order to minimize these problems, each participant's class was observed three times during the term. The first observation was an unassessed one aimed at getting the participant teachers and learners used to having an observer in the class. However, the information obtained from the other two observations of the grammar lessons was used for the purpose of the study. At the end of the observation stage, there were 68 observation forms, two for each participant, each completed by one of the researchers. Firstly, the common flaws for each participant were identified through checking the two observation forms for each participant; their shared flaws noted by observers were recorded. Next, the reported flaws with high frequency among all participants were shortlisted.

The data obtained through recording frequent grammar teaching flaws was used for developing the items of a focused interview. Within two weeks after observations and identification of teaching practice problems, all participants were invited to an interview. However, only 15 participants declared their readiness to take part in a 30 to 40-minute post-observation interview; therefore, the researchers conducted the second phase of the study with 15 participants, comparing their answers to the interview questions with their available teaching practice observation results. During the interview, one of the researchers asked the focus questions and recorded the answers of each participants. He asked the follow-up questions to learn more about the participants' awareness about and their attitudes toward each item when required. The obtained data was mainly used for planning a series of needs-based teacher training sessions aimed at improving the participants' grammar teaching practice.

4. Results

The researchers used the results of the participants' grammar teaching practice observations to shortlist their teaching practice (TP) flaws. Table 1 shows the prevalent flaws in the TPs of the participants.

Table 1

The Frequency of the Common Flaws Observed in the Grammar TP

| No. | Flaw | Frequency |
|-----|--|-----------|
| 1 | Lengthy and boring explanation of forms | 21 |
| 2 | Use of decontextualized or unclear examples | 18 |
| 3 | Little or no learner involvement during teaching | 15 |
| 4 | Teaching the book, not the learners | 26 |
| 5 | Using technical grammar terminology | 15 |
| 6 | Insufficient controlled practice | 26 |
| 7 | Ignoring meaning and use | 25 |
| 8 | Ineffective or insufficient activation of schemata | 20 |
| 9 | Little or no meaningful production activities | 17 |
| 10 | Inappropriate error correction | 19 |
| 11 | Little or no use of visuals | 15 |

Fifteen participants were interviewed and their declarative knowledge of grammar teaching was elicited through open-ended questions. Table 2 presents the interviewed participants' awareness of the principles of effective grammar teaching related to each shortlisted flaw. During the interview, the participants were asked follow-up questions related to the items of the questionnaire, and if their answers indicated that they were theoretically informed about practices, they were counted as aware participants. Participants' awareness with regard to each concepts addressed in the questionnaire was recorded item-wise irrespective of their teaching practice.

Table 2
Interviewed Participants' Awareness of the Principles for Effective Grammar Teaching

| No. | Flaw | Frequency | | |
|-----|--|-----------|-----------|--------------------------|
| | | Aware | Not Aware | Aware but not practicing |
| 1 | Lengthy and boring explanation of forms | 6 | 9 | 4 |
| 2 | Use of decontextualized or unclear examples | 8 | 7 | 7 |
| 3 | Little or no learner involvement during teaching | 11 | 4 | 7 |
| 4 | Teaching the book, not the learners | 5 | 10 | 2 |
| 5 | Using technical grammar terminology | 6 | 9 | 2 |
| 6 | Insufficient controlled practice | 3 | 12 | 0 |
| 7 | Ignoring meaning and use | 2 | 13 | 0 |
| 8 | Ineffective or insufficient activation of schemata | 3 | 12 | 1 |
| 9 | Little or no meaningful production activities | 8 | 7 | 4 |
| 10 | Inappropriate error correction | 9 | 6 | 5 |
| 11 | Little or no use of visuals | 4 | 11 | 2 |

The following is a synopsis of the participants' TP observation and interview with regard to each of the observed shortcomings in Tables 1 and 2.

4.1 Lengthy and Boring Explanation of Forms

Twenty-one participants tended to explain grammar points explicitly to the learners. A considerable amount of time was devoted to teachers' explanation of the grammar points through examples, and exceptions to the rules with little involvement of the learners. There was little or no concept checking of the new language points using questions during explanation; instead the teachers asked questions like "is it clear?", "any problem?", "Did you get it?"

In the interview, six participant teachers noted that explanation of the grammar point confused the learners and, therefore, they preferred to advocate shorter explanations. These participants thought that the main grammar points can be explained briefly and complementary notes may be provided as learners work on exercises. Nine participants emphasized

grammar explanation; they argued that there is so much of grammar in the lesson for the learners, and they have to teach it all.

Although six participants were against extended grammar explanations, four of them had explained grammar extensively in their TPs. One reason for lengthy explanations was learners' preference for learning the rules of grammar. Teachers' desire to help weak learners who relatively need more explanation to understand the grammar lesson was another reason for such explanations. Participant teachers who explained grammar rules extensively stated that explicit grammar instruction is more effective. They thought that multiple examples should be used for explaining a grammar point because different exercises in the coursebook and workbook require extensive knowledge of the intended grammar point. When the participants were asked what they thought "grammar" was, thirteen had similar answers such as *rules that make a language* or *structures that link words together in the language* ignoring that grammar includes meaning and use components as well (Larsen-Freeman, 2001).

4.2 Use of Decontextualized or Unclear Examples

Eighteen participants used decontextualized example sentences for teaching grammar. This happened while the lesson they taught contained reading and listening passages with contextualized examples of the intended grammar points which could be used for contextualizing the grammar lesson. Six participants tried to contextualize a few examples of the intended grammar through making up unnatural and boring stories about themselves, which increased teachers' talking time at the expense of learners' interaction. Twenty-two participant teachers ignored drawing learners' attention to how the intended grammar point was used in different sections of the lesson such as dialogs, listening and reading passages containing examples of the intended grammar point.

When interviewed, eight participants emphasized that contextualizing grammar helps learners have a better understanding of the forms and their use. Seven participants noted that since the context in the learners' book is limited and not clear, they prefer to provide learners with better examples. Three of them even thought that the best way to contextualize a grammar lesson is making stories with examples of the intended grammar point. Except for one participant who used a suitable context for teaching grammar in his TP, the rest either did not use a meaningful context or their context was in the form of uninteresting and unnatural stories that contained the intended grammar point without activating learners' schematic knowledge or moving from known to unknown. Regarding contextualized grammar teaching, five participants argued that the aim of reading and listening passages is comprehension, so teachers had better not change a reading or listening passage to a vocabulary or grammar lesson. Two of the participants used their own sentences as additional examples for teaching grammar, and three who considered contextualization of grammar important, preferred to ask learners to find examples of the intended grammar point in the reading and listening passages of the coursebook.

4.3 Little or No Learner Involvement during Teaching

There was very little or no interaction with learners in grammar TPs. The learners were silently listening to the teachers' explanations and taking notes. At times the teachers asked occasional questions which only required short answers like "yes", "no", "in the past", etc. and there was no elicitation of meaning-focused questions from the learners.

Eleven participants in the interview strongly advocated learner involvement in grammar teaching. Four participants preferred to teach the lesson first and let the learners ask their questions in case further clarification was needed. Overall, only four participants engaged the learners in their TPs.

The participant teachers considered 'asking learners to provide examples' the main technique for involving learners in the teaching act; however, there was little elicitation in their actual practice.

4.4 Teaching the Book, not the Learners

Twenty-six teacher participants only followed the sequence of activities in the course book. These teachers read aloud the written instructions to the activities in the book and asked the learners to work on them. The teachers read the examples of the grammar lesson first, then completed the gap-fill exercises or did the matching exercises together with the learners and finally moved to the next activity. The only examples and explanations provided were those in the grammar section of the learners' coursebook and no additional example was provided.

Ten of the interviewed participants supported following the order of the activities in the course book because they thought these activities have been sequenced in a way to help learners get enough input and practice. When asked if the grammar exercises were adequate, ten participants answered positively, but five teachers were of the opinion that if learners needed more practice, they would provide them with some extra exercises. Those participants who believed the sequence of activities in the course book should be followed, attached much importance to using activities in the lesson and agreed that due to time restrictions, they cannot spend more time on one section or exercise. They added that if learners need further practice, they may be asked to work on supplementary materials at home. Five participants considered changing the order of activities in the book and doing extra practice on grammar lessons.

4.5. Using Technical Grammar Terminology

In their explanation of the language forms and in the exercises following the lesson, fifteen participants used terminologies such as "participial phrases" or

"adverbial clauses of comparison and contrast", which were unfamiliar and confusing for the learners. Six participants thought that learners do not need to know all the technical words, hence preferred not to confuse the learners with such terminologies. Nine participants, however, supported using grammar terms because they were used in the coursebooks, workbooks and grammar supplementary materials. These participants noted that using grammar terminologies make teaching grammar easier; moreover, in their opinion, learners are curious about knowing grammatical terms. Two of the participants noted that their learners even asked for the translation of the grammar terms believing that it helps them learn better. Two of the participants who disagreed with using complex grammar terms used them several times in their TPs. One participant noted that she preferred not to use grammar terminologies because they were confusing for her.

4.6. Insufficient Controlled Practice

Twenty-six participants only used the few gap-fill, sentence completion and matching exercises in the course book. There was little variety of controlled practice (CP) types in the class. Four of these participant teachers did not ask learners to answer all the controlled practice exercises individually; instead, they asked each learner to answer one of the questions at a time and continued this like a chain-drill activity, so each learner only answered one question. Other participant teachers asked learners to take turns and read their answers to each of exercises aloud; the teacher corrected the mistakes and provided feedback when necessary.

In the interview, twelve participants noted that controlled practice exercises following a grammar lesson provide enough practice for learners. One of these participant teachers insisted that if it were necessary to practice more, the course book would provide more exercises and activities. Three of

the participants, however, agreed that books do not have enough exercises for learners who need practice with accuracy-oriented exercises.

Regarding controlled practice activities, ten participants agreed that it was important for the learners to do the exercises individually. One of the participants thought that it is better to correct the learners on the spot when there is a mistake. Three participants supported the idea of providing learners with a few more controlled practice exercises that might be more challenging than the ones in course book.

4.7 Ignoring Meaning and Use

Twenty-five participants wrote examples with the intended structure on the board and drew learners' attention to certain forms by underlining parts of the sentences. The structure was mainly explained, and the meaning or use of the intended grammar point was not given much attention. There were only occasional comments to let learners know when a certain form is used.

Thirteen participants who defined grammar as *rules that make a language* or *structures that link words together in the language* only taught the structures and forms of the grammar. When asked about use and meaning, only two of the participants agreed that teaching grammar should include focusing on meaning and use as well as focusing on the form of the intended grammar point.

4.8 Ineffective or Insufficient Activation of Schemata

Twenty participants wrote examples with the target form on the board and explained the intended grammar point without activating learners' schemata. At times, some learners asked if the grammar point was different from or similar to what they had learned before. Two of the participants engaged in so much irrelevant review of the previously taught language forms that learners were confused. For example, one of the participants who was teaching conditional type 3 sentences, began with asking questions and

giving examples of conditional type 1 and conditional type 2 sentences and then he moved to conditional type 3 sentences emphasizing the form “would + have + past participial.

Three participants acknowledged the importance of activating learners' background knowledge before teaching a new grammar point. Except for one participant teacher who could not link the intended grammar point to the learners' related schemata, the other two did it in their TPs. Twelve participants agreed that it is not easy nor is it necessary to relate the new grammar points to what learners know. These participants had difficulty linking intended grammar points to learners' knowledge of language. Two other participants argued that when they review previously taught grammar points, some learners do not remember anything and expect the teacher to teach those grammar points again; therefore, apart from the new lesson, they have to teach the grammar points that they had no intention of teaching, and this takes much of class time. Therefore, they preferred to teach the new grammar lesson without referring to learners' previous grammar knowledge.

4.9 Little or No Meaningful Production Activities

Seventeen participants explained the grammar and provided controlled practice exercises to the learners with a focus on form. They explained structures and focused on grammar exercises in the course book. There was no freer practice, allowing learners to personalize and use the language point for meaningful communication with their classmates. Even if there was a speaking activity related to the grammar point following the controlled practice exercises, often the time allocated to the activity was insufficient, and learners did not interact in groups. The learners completed the speaking activities expressing their opinions one by one without using the intended grammar point. In addition, much of the interaction in the class was between the teacher and each of the learners; therefore, not every learner had a chance

to work in pairs and speak with a partner where the focus would primarily be on exchanging meaning using the intended grammar point.

The participant teachers unanimously agreed that it was important to use the newly taught grammar point in speaking or writing. However, they were not sure how this could be done. Seven participants referred to the controlled practice exercises and asked the learners to provide decontextualized sentences with the intended grammar form before doing controlled practice. One teacher suggested that it is a good idea to ask learners to work in pairs and check their answers to the grammar exercises with their classmates.

Three participant teachers used the speaking and writing activities in the book to allow learners express their personal opinions about a topic using the grammar point. Eight participants used the words “communication” and “communicative activities” when referring to language production; two of them noted that using language communicatively means giving learners speaking or writing activities. Four participants provided meaningful speaking activities to the learners after CP.

4.10 Inappropriate Error Correction

Regardless of the focus of practice activities (accuracy or fluency), nineteen participants corrected learners' mistakes immediately. Even when the learners exchanged ideas in pairs or groups, the participant teachers interrupted them and corrected lexical, grammatical and pronunciation mistakes.

Six participant teachers agreed that grammar errors must be corrected; otherwise, they become fossilized. Nine participants noted although error correction is important, if all errors are corrected, learners may become demotivated and unwilling to speak; they claimed that they only corrected those errors that were serious. One participant stated that students need time to learn to use language correctly; regardless of teachers' frequent corrections, learners will continue to make mistakes until they learn;

therefore, he only corrected those grammar errors that were serious. According to one of the participant teachers, while some learners do not like to be corrected, others insist that teachers correct their mistakes; therefore, he corrected only those learners who were willing to receive feedback. Except for six participants who thought on-the-spot correction is more effective, others agreed that delayed error correction is better because it does not interrupt the learners' interaction.

4.11 Little or No Use of Visuals

Fifteen participants used verbal explanations and refrained from using visuals such as timelines or diagrams to enhance the presentation of the meaning of the intended grammar point. Four participants agreed that pictures and timelines can be helpful in teaching certain grammar points. Eleven participants found pictures useful for teaching words and expressions but not for grammar teaching. Two of them occasionally used timelines and drawings on the board when teaching tense and aspect-related points.

Figure 1 illustrates the frequency observed flaws in their grammar TPs.

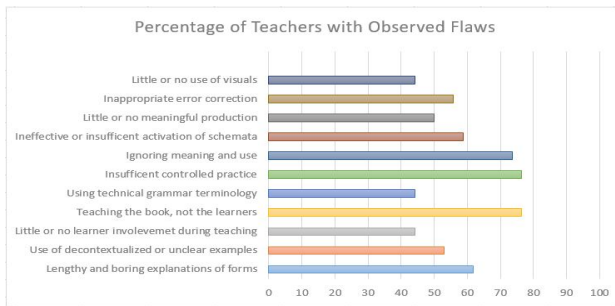


Figure 1. Participants with common observed flaws in their practice of teaching grammar

As it can be seen, the three main common flaws among the observed participants were:

Teachers' Practices ...

- a."ignoring meaning and use when teaching grammar at the expense of explaining the structure",
- b."insufficient amount of controlled practice, which focuses on the accuracy of using a certain form in isolation before moving on to meaningful communicative activities", and
- c."teaching the book, not the learners, which entails that most of the observed participant teachers just followed the sequence of activities and instructions in the book instead of prioritizing learners and their learning needs".

Figure 2 represents the percentage of interviewed participants, from among a larger group of observed ones, who either had or did not have the awareness of effective grammar teaching principles, and the percentage of those participants who had such an awareness but failed to teach based on the principles. Each of the interviewed participants was asked follow-up questions about the problem categories in Table 1. Participants labeled as “unaware” were those whose ideas were not in line with effective principles of grammar teaching; "aware" participants were those whose remarks suggested that they had the knowledge of grammar teaching principles, and "aware but not practicing" participants were those whose knowledge of grammar teaching principles was not put into practice in the class.

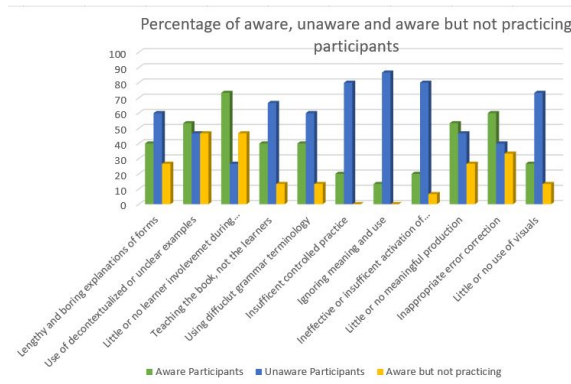


Figure 2. Percentage of aware, unaware and aware but not practicing participants

The findings of the study may not be generalizable due to the qualitative nature of the research and the availability sampling of the participants for the interview; nevertheless, based on observations and interviews, the four main flaw categories the participants were aware of included "the importance learners' involvement during teaching grammar", "correcting learners' errors, taking the error type and the focus of activity into consideration", "the importance of contextualization and setting clear and understandable examples when teaching grammar" and "the importance of having enough meaningful communicative activities where learners can focus on exchanging meaning and practice fluency with a focus on form in their interactions".

The interview results showed that different participants were aware of the principles of effective grammar teaching related to different shortlisted flaws; however, a second analysis of the class observation of these participants revealed that being aware of what should be done does not mean that teachers practice it in their class. As Figure 2 suggests, the four main flaw categories in TPs despite participants' knowledge of the related teaching principles were "ignoring meaning and use and only explaining forms", "ineffective or insufficient activation of learners' schemata", "insufficient controlled practice" and "little or no focus on the phonological features of a grammar point during teaching".

5. Discussion

The findings confirm the results of previous studies on grammar teaching issues, teachers' beliefs and classroom practices. Within Iranian EFL context, the findings support Ebrahimpourtaher and Eissaie (2015) who argued that Iranian adult EFL learners are frustrated by their teachers' lengthy explanations of detailed grammar rules and the use of complex grammar terminologies. Likewise, the findings are in line with Akbari (2015) who stated that teaching forms and structures without considering their meaning is

a common practice among Iranian EFL teachers. The study also confirms the findings of Al-Mekhlafi and Nagaratnam (2011) and Mishra (2010), who regard "teachers' use of complex grammar terminology", "focusing on the rules of grammar disregarding meaning and use", "lack of productive activities that can help proceduralize learners' declarative knowledge of grammar", "teachers' tendency to correct any form-related error of the learners immediately to avoid fossilization", "decontextualized grammar teaching" and "explanation of a lot of rules to the learners" as major issues in teaching grammar.

In the following sections, the obtained results from observations and interviews have been compared with available research findings in literature, and suggestions based on effective grammar teaching principles have been provided with regard to each observed weakness in the participant teachers' grammar teaching practices.

5.1 Lengthy and Boring Explanation of Rules

Three main reasons for participant teachers' lengthy explanations of grammar structures were learners' desire to know the rules in detail, doing exercises in the course book and the desire to perform well on the achievement tests that require learners to have detailed knowledge of grammar rules. Research findings support the effectiveness of grammar teaching (Ellis, 2006; Nassaji & Fotos, 2004); however, making generalizations about learners' preferences to learn grammar through teachers' explanations and direct teaching of forms sounds rather subjective. Teachers' personal learning preferences are likely to be reflected in their beliefs and teaching practices (Borg, 2003). Therefore, when teachers believe that grammar is just a set of rules and structures, they will only teach rules and language forms. However, grammar teaching consists of teaching meaning, use and structure (Larsen-freeman, 2001). Learners not only need to know grammar rules, they also need to know what

a certain structure means and when it is used in communication; otherwise, they are not likely to use language communicatively. Arguing against lengthy explanation of forms when teaching grammar, Brown (2001) suggests that grammar explanations should be short, not confusing, interesting and intrinsically motivating; similar to Larsen-freeman (2001) who emphasizes teaching meaning, use and form, Ellis (2005) argues that teaching grammar needs to ensure that learners predominantly focus on meaning and form.

5.2 Use of Decontextualized or Unclear Examples

Two main reasons for decontextualized grammar teaching were the participant teachers' opinion about the clarity of their own examples and their perception that some of the examples of the reading or listening passages in the book are not suitable for the learners due to sociocultural factors or unfamiliar lexical terms. This practice is not supported by Larsen-Freeman (2001) or Ellis (2005), who emphasize that teaching meaning and use is attainable through contextualization and focusing on form. Brown (2001) emphasizes that grammar should be contextualized in meaningful language use. Likewise, Dendrinis (2017) states that grammar should be taught through a context that shows what language means and how it is used. Therefore, reading and listening passages in the learners' coursebook containing the intended grammar point can be utilized by teachers as a suitable context for teaching grammar.

5.3 Little or No Learner Involvement during Teaching

Participant teachers agreed that it is important to involve learners, but learner involvement for some teachers only meant asking yes/no questions, or answering controlled practice exercises. Research shows that learners' involvement during the lesson, not only helps them construct their own knowledge of the language, but it also makes the grammar lesson less boring for the learners. When learners are not involved, they may not attend to the

lesson. Asking learners to provide examples or eliciting their responses to certain questions while teaching grammar engages them and makes the lesson meaningful and interactive; this is endorsed by Dendrinis (2017) who argues that teachers' explanation of the grammar should encourage active involvement of learners. Teacher-learner interaction can help teachers decide if learners understand the point being explained, so they can adjust their explanations and examples as they teach. Teachers frequently need to ask questions to keep the learners involved, give learners activities to complete individually, in pairs or groups and monitor learners' involvement in the lesson process.

5.4 Teaching the Grammar Point in the Book Regardless of the Learners' Need

According to most of the participant teachers, the course book makes teaching easy because it provides a logical sequence of activities, and contains passages, examples and exercises that are focused on a specific grammar point. Nevertheless, course books sequence materials differently. Sometimes, learners do not have background knowledge to understand the intended language point. Teachers need to prioritize their learners' needs and customize their input to maximize learning opportunities even if the book does not contain suitable activities. Learners do not learn similarly or at the same rate, so depending on their abilities and needs, the pace of the lesson and focus on different sections of the course book should vary. Teachers should also remember that course book is only a tool for facilitating teaching and its content can be modified to meet learners' learning needs.

5.5 Using Technical Grammar Terminology

Two reasons for participant teachers' extensive use of grammar terminology were learners' willingness to know technical terms and achievement tests. The aim of teaching grammar is enabling learners to use structures

meaningfully during communicative activities not describing grammar rules and learning about grammar. This is in line with Brown (2001) who notes that teachers should not confuse their learners with complex grammar terminologies. Frequent use of grammar terms when explaining forms foregrounds syntactic structures described by such terms, so both teachers and learners are likely to focus on the structure overlooking meaning and use.

5.6 Insufficient Controlled Practice

Nearly all interviewed participant teachers believed that controlled practice exercises such as gap-fills, sentence completion, sentence matchings and sentence transformations are important and useful; nevertheless, they only used the few available sample exercises in the course book. Our observation revealed that teachers often do not provide learners with supplementary exercises from other books to help them practice accuracy. According to Batstone and Ellis (2009), understanding the meaning-form relation when teaching grammar requires awareness; controlled practice and the teachers' feedback on accuracy are essential for awareness raising. Sometimes, learners need more controlled practice exercises followed by teachers' feedback and correction of errors in order to master the grammatical form. Since focusing on the form is an important aspect of teaching and learning grammar, accuracy-oriented activities and controlled practices that provide learners with context-restricted exercises focusing on grammatical accuracy are important. Ignoring controlled practice at the risk of encouraging learners to use the grammar point immediately after teaching it in an interactive activity may lead to inaccuracies in production. Asking learners to produce example sentences of their own may not be a good alternative to controlled practice because controlled exercises help learners notice and practice certain structures before producing language.

5.7 Ignoring Meaning and Use

For the participant teachers who defined grammar as a set of rules and structures, teaching grammar involves teaching rules and structures. Teachers need to be clear about the nature of pedagogic grammar. There are three dimensions to grammar: structure or form, meaning, and use (Larsen-freeman, 2001); therefore, teaching forms is not enough. In grammar teaching, attention should be given to how the structure is formed, what meaning the structure entails, how language patterns operate in specific contexts of situation, and specific discourses and texts (Dendrinis, 2015); thus, it is the teachers' responsibility to enable learners use grammatical structures accurately, meaningfully and appropriately. Teachers need to consider several factors while teaching a grammar point. Firstly, learners need to know what the meaning of a particular structure is and how its meaning is similar to and different from the meaning of other structures learners know. Secondly, they need to know where and when that structure can be used and for what purpose. Finally, learners need to know how that structure is formed and what syntactic features it has.

5.8 Ineffective or Insufficient Activation of Schemata

Those participant teachers who did not activate learners' background knowledge before teaching a new grammar point believed that reviewing other grammar points confuses the learners and takes the class time. Grammar explanation should relate new information to old in order to make learning meaningful (Dendrinis, 2015) and learners' existing world knowledge should be exploited as a resource for connecting known meaning to the new concept (Batstone & Ellis, 2009). Teachers should activate learners' background knowledge so that they can relate the meaning of the reviewed concept to the meaning of the new grammar point. If prior

background knowledge needed for grammar teaching does not exist, it may be established through teacher-learner interaction.

5.9 Little or No Meaningful Production Activities

Nearly all participant teachers agreed that it is important for learners to produce language; however, they had a different perception of language production. Asking learners to produce a decontextualized sentence example based on a model or ignoring the use of an intended grammar point in meaningful interactions are not appropriate production activities following a grammar lesson. Presentation of a grammar point and doing controlled exercises that focus on the form result in formation of the declarative knowledge in learners. Unless learners practice language point in meaningful and communicative activities, their declarative knowledge will not become proceduralized. This is supported by Batstone and Ellis (2009), who noted that learning grammar and making meaning-form connection is not complete unless learners practice them in communicative contexts with a focus on meaning rather than on form; this is what happens in real communicative activities, where the focus is on exchanging meaning. Similarly, Ellis (2005) states that successful instructed language learning requires opportunities for output to allow learners use and practice the language forms they have learned in real language production activities.

5.10 Inappropriate Error Correction

Some participants agreed that errors should be corrected because otherwise they are fossilized. As their learners insisted on being corrected, they corrected errors immediately. Mistakes play an important role in language learning; they allow learners to experiment with language and measure their success in communication. However, correcting every mistake that learners make is unnecessary and even demotivating for the learners. Teachers need to be selective and careful about what mistakes or errors to correct.

When deciding how to treat an error factors such as learners' language proficiency level and the type of error should be considered. Depending on the focus of an activity, on-the-spot correction or delayed correction may be advisable, but interrupting the flow of communication during a meaningful interactive activity for the sake of correction is not acceptable. For fluency-focused activities, where learners engage in meaningful interactions delayed correction is recommended.

5.11 Little or no Use of Visuals

Participants who did not use pictures while teaching grammar noted that visuals are mostly useful for teaching vocabulary and lexical phrases. Nevertheless, using visuals can enhance teaching grammar considerably; pictures can be used to elicit different sentences that contribute to a better understanding of the meaning of the intended grammar. Brown (2001) supports this idea suggesting that using visual stimuli and graphical depictions enhance grammar teaching. Visuals facilitate meaning-form association when accompanied by meaningful elicitation and explanations.

5.12 Teachers' Awareness and Practice of Grammar Teaching

The findings of the study support the idea that there are mismatches between teachers' grammar teaching beliefs and their actual practice (Farrell & Lim, 2005; Ferreira, 2014; Phipps & Borg, 2009). As discussed, some of the participant teachers' practices did not reflect their knowledge of grammar teaching principles. Awareness of effective teaching principles may be part of the declarative teaching knowledge of EFL teachers, which may be raised as a result of teacher training courses they take, teaching methodology books they study, workshops they attend and the occasional feedback they receive on their teaching practice from informed experts. Nevertheless, unless the awareness of such principles is proceduralized, they will not become part of teachers' cognition, and will not be reflected in their actual teaching practice.

Teachers should realize that their interpretations of effective teaching principles may be incorrect and rather subjective; reflective teaching and coaching feedback can help teachers notice flaws in their TPs and improve them.

6. Conclusion

The research reported in this article focuses on major problems in the grammar teaching practice of Iranian EFL teachers and their awareness of the principles of effective grammar teaching for communicative purposes. The findings have implications for teacher trainers, who plan preservice and in-service teacher training courses. Informed by the findings of the study, trainers can enrich their course input focusing on the identified areas of weakness in the practice of grammar teaching and raise teacher trainees' awareness. The findings can also help English language teachers to be sensitive to and reflective of their own practice of grammar teaching.

There were some limitations to this study. Participant teachers were selected based on availability sampling from two different language institutes in Tehran. Although these participants had different teaching experiences, they all had participated in an entry-level teacher-training program before teaching at that language institute. Furthermore, the researchers had no control over the academic background of participants, gender distribution, years of teaching experience and their proficiency in English language.

Because this study was conducted in a small scale, the reported results about teachers' awareness, beliefs, grammar teaching flaws and challenges are limited to Iranian EFL context; therefore, replication of the study in different teaching contexts and with different participants is suggested. Through shortlisting potentially problematic areas in the TPs of teachers, surveying their knowledge of teaching principles, knowing their reasons for

practice, teacher trainees can plan more informed, practical and context-specific training programs for language teachers.

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Appendix (A)
Effective Grammar Teaching Practice Observation Checklist
 (Researchers)

(Adapted from Larsen-freeman, 2001; Burgess and Etherington, 2002; Brown, 2001, Ellis, 2005; Batstone and Ellis, 2009; Dendrinis, 2015; Baudcco, 2017)

| No. | Criterion | Yes | No | Comments |
|-----|---|-----|----|----------|
| 1 | Using context for grammar teaching | | | |
| 2 | The appropriacy and clarity of context | | | |
| 3 | Relating learners' existing world knowledge to connect known meaning to the new language point | | | |
| 4 | Focusing on the meaning of the language point | | | |
| 5 | Focusing on the use of the language point | | | |
| 6 | Focusing on the form or structure of the language point | | | |
| 7 | Exposing learners to natural language use through authentic reading or listening passages | | | |
| 8 | Learner involvement and elicitation | | | |
| 9 | Using grammar terminology | | | |
| 10 | Using visuals or meaningful situations for conveying meaning | | | |
| 11 | Accuracy focused controlled practice | | | |
| 12 | Fluency focused communicative practice | | | |
| 13 | Effective monitoring of learners for mistakes | | | |
| 14 | On-the-spot error correction during accuracy focused practices (CP) | | | |
| 15 | Delayed error correction after communicative practice of the language point (FP) | | | |
| 16 | Short and clear explanation of the grammar point | | | |
| 17 | Providing clear examples | | | |
| 18 | Different activities to accommodate different learning styles | | | |
| 19 | Integrating grammar lesson with other language skills | | | |
| 20 | Using learners' L1 for clarification | | | |
| 21 | Upgrading learners' current level of language if possible (teaching a new point if learners ask related questions or if the situation is appropriate) | | | |
| 22 | Using extra activities and practice exercises from different sources if necessary | | | |
| 23 | Providing learners with related homework assignment and extra CP and FP | | | |
| 24 | Focusing on phonological features of grammar points if applicable | | | |
| 25 | Appropriate allocation of time to teaching grammar, CP and FP | | | |
| 26 | Logical sequence of activities for presentation, CP and FP | | | |
| 27 | Encouraging individual practice in CP exercises | | | |
| 28 | Providing learners with answers to CP exercises | | | |

Teachers' Practices ...

Appendix (B)
Focused Interview Questions

1. How long does teaching a grammar lesson take on average?
2. How much time do you often spend on explaining forms?
3. Do you ever extend your grammar explanation time for a particular reason?
4. Is it necessary to use context when teaching grammar?
5. What kind of context do you often use for teaching a grammar point?
6. What sort of examples do you use when teaching grammar?
7. Is it a good idea to involve the learners through asking questions when you teach grammar?
8. How do you involve the learners throughout the lesson?
9. Do you prefer to use the course book and the activities in the book when teaching a grammar lesson or do you use your own materials? Why?
10. Do you use technical grammar words and terms when teaching grammar? Why?
11. What kind of practice do you give your learners after teaching a grammar lesson?
12. What is your idea about mechanical exercises that focus on accuracy?
13. Are the controlled practices available in course books enough for learners?
14. Do you ever provide learners with more controlled practice exercises?
15. How do you define grammar?
16. What do you teach when you teach a grammar lesson?
17. Do you ever relate a grammar lesson to what the learners know?
18. Is it possible to teach a grammar lesson through activating learners' background knowledge first?
19. How do you relate what learners know to the new grammar point you want to teach?
20. What kind of practice is more important for learners to use a new grammar point?
21. How do you make sure learners can use the grammar point you have taught in their interactions?
22. What kind of activities do you think are useful to encourage learners use a grammar lesson they have learned?
23. Do you ever correct learners' grammatical problems?
24. When and how would you correct learners' mistakes? Why?
25. Do you think using pictures or diagrams help with grammar teaching? Why or why not?
26. How often do you use visuals when you teach grammar?
27. Is it important to focus on features such as intonation and contractions when teaching grammar?
28. Do you ever focus on the pronunciation and phonological features of the sentences when teaching grammar? How?