

Grammatical Awareness Among Primary School English Language Teachers

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Abstract

This paper reports a study of Malaysian primary school teachers' grammatical awareness. In particular, the study seeks to examine the English language teachers' nature and level of grammatical awareness. Questionnaire and interview techniques were used to elicit data from primary school teachers who were following their B. Ed TESOL programme in Universiti Sains Malaysia in 2006 and 2007. Findings of the study shed light on an important facet of primary school English language teachers' metalinguistic awareness in Malaysia, and informs the improvement of teacher education in the country.

Keywords: grammatical awareness, grammar, ELT, teacher education, metalinguistic knowledge.

Introduction

There has been considerable public concern in the media about the standard of English language teaching in Malaysia and it is not uncommon to find comments in the newspapers about various inaccuracies in teachers' use of English in the classroom. One of the related issues is the language awareness of teachers, i.e. the explicit knowledge that teachers have of the underlying systems of the language that enables them to teach effectively. Andrews (1999) argues that this explicit knowledge about language is an important part of any second language (L2) teacher's language awareness.

The importance of having grammatical awareness among English language teachers has been emphasised by many scholars for various reasons. Denham and Lobeck (2002), for instance, states that many English education textbooks point out that teachers must be aware of certain grammatical fundamentals in order to help students recognise patterns of errors. Azar (2007:24) states that it is the teacher's job to clarify grammar information for students. Andrews (2005:74) argues that both "initial and continuing teachers" should have access to grammar knowledge. According to him, "a teacher with a rich knowledge of grammatical constructions will be in a better position to help young writers".

Despite the high importance of having grammatical awareness various scholars such as Beard (1999), as cited in Cajkler and Hislam (2002), have noted that regardless of years of experience in English teaching, many teachers still lack grammatical awareness or

knowledge about language. The situation appears to be similar in Malaysia. Studies such as Mohd. Sofi Ali (2002) have demonstrated that ESL teachers lack sufficient English language proficiency to teach the subject.

The aim of this paper is to report on a study of Malaysian primary school teachers' grammatical awareness. In particular, the study seeks to examine the English language teachers' nature and level of grammatical awareness. Questionnaire and interview techniques were used to elicit data from primary school teachers who were following their B. Ed TESOL programme in Universiti Sains Malaysia. Findings of the study would help to shed light on an important facet of primary school English language teachers' metalinguistic awareness in Malaysia and contribute towards the improvement of teacher education in the country.

While there have been many studies on grammatical awareness of learners of English as a second language, there have been very few studies on grammatical awareness of English language teachers. One related study is Nurazila Abd Aziz (2007) which looks at grammatical awareness of prospective English language teachers in a teacher training institution. There have been no studies to date on grammatical awareness of practising English language teachers in Malaysia at both primary or secondary school level.

Methodology

This section introduces data about the profile of the respondents involved in the research including the gender of the respondents, the age of the respondents, courses in English Grammar that have been taken by the respondents, the number of years respondents have taught English Language in school prior to joining Universiti Sains Malaysia, and whether or not they taught grammar to their students.

Sample

The total number of respondents in this research is 71. They were following B. Ed. TESOL programme at Universiti Sains Malaysia. All the respondents were primary school English language teachers from various schools in Malaysia.

Table 1 shows the overall gender of the respondents. From the total 71 respondents, 13 respondents are males and 58 are females.

Table 1: Gender of the respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	13	18.3
Female	58	81.7
Total	71	100.0

Table 2 shows that the respondents' age ranged from 26 years old to 44 years old. Majority are in the age of between 26-30 years old (46.8%).

Table 2: Age range of the respondents

Age	Frequency	Percent
20-25	0	0
26-30	36	46.8
31-35	26	33.8
36-40	6	7.8
41 - 44	3	3.9

Table 3 below illustrates that from the 71 respondents, majority (33.8%) had taught English for 4 years as primary school teachers before joining USM. There were also some respondents who had taught English for more than ten years, but the number was relatively small (8.5%).

Table 3: Number of years teaching English prior to joining USM

No. of Years	Frequency	Percent
3	7	9.9
4	24	33.8
5	15	21.1
6	7	9.9
7	5	7.0
8	4	5.6
9	3	4.2
13	1	1.4
15	3	4.2
17	1	1.4
18	1	1.4
Total	71	100.0

Table 4 shows that almost all respondents (98.6%) taught grammar to their students in school except for 1 respondent who did not teach grammar to his/her students.

Table 4: Number of respondents who taught grammar to students

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	70	98.6
No	1	1.4
Total	71	100.0

Theoretical Framework

The study is based on the assumption that in order to be effective, English language teachers must be able to draw on both explicit and implicit knowledge of the language and that they must be able to reflect upon the knowledge of the underlying systems of the language. This view has been advocated by various scholars including James and Garrett (1992), Thornbury (1997) and Andrews (1999). Such view is supported by various studies on the teaching of grammar among English language teachers. Studies by Grossman, Wilson and Shulman (1989) and Beard (1999), for instance, demonstrated that teachers tend to avoid teaching grammar due to their uncertainty about their knowledge of grammar and inadequacy of grammatical knowledge. For example, Beard (1999:48), as cited in Cajkler and Hislam (2002:163), noted that besides having much 'intuitive implicit knowledge' about grammar, the uncertainty for teachers is the extent to which they are able to make the implicit knowledge explicit and the appropriate technical terms to be used.

The study adopts Andrews' (1999) theory of grammatical awareness. Andrews (1999) states that grammatical awareness comprises four types:

- 1) Type 1: ability to recognize metalanguage
- 2) Type 2: ability to produce appropriate metalanguage terms
- 3) Type 3: ability to identify and correct errors
- 4) Type 4: ability to explain grammatical rules

Each of them focuses on a different facet of explicit knowledge of grammar and grammatical terminology. The first is concerned with recognition of grammatical categories such as preposition, noun and verb. The second is concerned with production of appropriate metalinguistic terms involving the ability to provide grammatical terms of a given word / phrase. The third is concerned with identification and creation of error involving the ability to identify and correct faulty sentences or parts of sentences. The final type is concerned with explanation of grammatical rules which deals with the ability to explain grammatical rules which have been broken.

Instrument

To elicit data from respondents, the study employs a test and a focus group interview. The test was adapted from Andrews (1999) which has been adapted from Bloor (1986)

who designed a test called Students' Prior Awareness of Metalinguistics (SPAM). The adapted test comprises four tasks. Task 1 tests respondents' ability to recognise metalanguage. Task 2 tests their ability to produce appropriate metalanguage terms. Task 3 tests their ability to identify and correct errors whereas task 4 tests their ability to explain grammatical rules.

Task I consists of 18 items in two components. The first provides respondents with a sentence and fourteen different grammatical categories (for instance, countable noun, preposition, finite verb). The sentence given is:

Materials are delivered to the factory by a supplier, who usually has no technical knowledge, but who happens to have the right contacts.

Respondents had to select one example of each grammatical item from the sentence.

The second comprises four items, each consisting of a sentence and a grammatical function (for example, direct object). Respondents had to underline the word(s) in the sentence which performed the particular function.

For instance:

Joe has nowhere to shelter. (PREDICATE)

For this item, the respondents must underline *has nowhere to shelter* to give the correct answer.

Task 2 focuses on the respondents' ability to produce appropriate metalinguistic terms. This task consists of twelve items. Each item consists of a sentence in which a word or phrase is underlined. Respondents were asked to provide a grammatical term which would precisely describe each of the underlined words/phrases. For instance:

Alice fell asleep during the lecture.

The correct response for this item is 'preposition'. Other responses would be considered incorrect.

Task 3 tests respondents' ability to identify and correct errors, while Task 4 examines their ability to explain grammatical rules. Tasks 3 and 4 each consists of 15 items. These two tasks were combined in the actual test, so that for each of 15 sentences respondents were asked (a) to rewrite the faulty part of the sentences correctly, and (b) to explain the grammatical rule thought to be broken.

For example:

I walk to work very quick

For this item, the respondents must (a) rewrite it as *I walk to work very quickly* and then (b) explain the error such as ‘the verb in the sentence must be modified by an adverb, not adjective’.

In addition to the test, an interview was also administered to consolidate the questionnaire results and to gauge possible factors that may have influenced their (or lack of) grammatical awareness. The interview involved ten respondents chosen randomly from the sample.

Questions asked during the interview include:

- Respondents’ perception of their understanding of grammar
- Respondents’ views about aspects of grammar which pose difficulty to them, and
- Respondents’ perceptions of possible causes of the difficulty

General Findings

To highlight the average score of the test, mean scores of the respondents were calculated. As displayed in table 5, the mean score for the overall test is 39.53. This shows that on the whole the respondents in this study did not perform well in the test reflecting a low level of awareness of grammatical knowledge. Their performance may be said to be only moderate.

Table 5: Mean score for overall test

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Overall	71	6.70	69.50	39.53	10.75

However, it should be pointed out that the variation of scores between the respondents is quite large (minimum: 6.7, maximum: 69.5). Nevertheless, the majority of the respondents (63.4 %) are in the range of between 31-50, as can be seen in Table 6. This shows that despite the large variation of scores, most are at a moderate level. Those who scored above 50 constitute 15.5 % of the total, whereas those who scored less than 30 constitute 22.1% of the sample. Clearly, although not the majority, the number of respondents who scored low is quite considerable. It would not be unreasonable to conclude that this group of respondents lack grammatical awareness. If this could be considered a true picture of today’s situation as far as many primary school teachers’ grammatical awareness is concerned, then appropriate efforts must be carried out to address the issue. Having teachers with very little or grammatical awareness will certainly hinder students’ understanding and use of English grammar.

Table 6: Range of mean scores for overall test

Range	Frequency	Percentage
0 -10	1	1.4
11 - 20	0	0
21 - 30	14	19.7
31 - 40	21	29.6
41 - 50	24	33.8
51 - 60	10	14.1
61 - 70	1	1.4
Total	71	100

There is also a clear variation in the mean scores among the four tasks given. As displayed in table 7, the mean score for metalanguage recognition is 61.43, the mean score for metalanguage production is 33.62, error correction 52.96 and rules and explanations 10.75. Evidently, metalanguage recognition proved to be the easiest task for the respondents followed by error correction and metalanguage production. Rules and explanation proved to be most difficult task for the respondents.

Table 7: Mean scores for each task

Tasks	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Metalanguage recognition (18 items)	11.10	94.40	61.43	16.07
Metalanguage production (12 items)	0.00	66.70	33.62	17.34
Error correction (15 items)	6.70	93.30	52.96	20.37
Rules and explanations (15 items)	0.00	40.00	10.75	9.97

According to Andrews (1999:152), the metalanguage recognition task is cognitively less demanding than metalanguage production task and rules and explanations task. The latter is especially cognitively demanding as it requires respondents to “(1) reflect upon a grammatical error which they have corrected, (2) make explicit the rule which has been broken, and (3) employ appropriate metalanguage in order to explain the rule”. The findings demonstrate that most of the items in the rules and explanation task were left unanswered by the respondents. Even when the answers were provided, majority of them

were incorrect. For instance, for one of the items (item 15) in which the subjects were asked to correct and explain the error in “She has phoned a few minutes ago”, almost all of the respondents either provided a blank response or gave incorrect explanations.

Metalinguage production, is also cognitively burdening, albeit to a lesser extent, as it requires respondents to “look within their own mental store of explicit knowledge about language in order to seek the appropriate metalinguistic terms to describe a language item”. Similar to the rules and explanation task, many respondents either did not answer or provided incorrect answer for this task. For example, for item 3 in which the respondents were asked to name the grammatical term for the word ‘driving’, 68% either gave the wrong answer or did not answer at all.

Why then did the Error correction task not present as much difficulty to the respondents? Andrews (1999) explains that this task is primarily a test of language proficiency rather than of explicit knowledge about language. It has to be noted however, that although this task ranks second in terms of order of difficulty, the number of respondents who performed well in this task is not high (mean: 52.96). This suggests that many of the teachers, though not the majority, may not be sufficiently proficient in English grammatically.

As discussed earlier, English language students require a good grasp of grammatical knowledge to help them develop the target language. English teachers act as language models for students. In order to expose students to the correct use of forms and functions of English, they themselves have to have a certain degree of proficiency; one that is at the very least comprehensible and meaningful. Further, to help students acquire the target language successfully in the classroom there must be sufficient input by the teachers and sufficient opportunity for the students to listen to the language and use it productively. Quality input in the classroom demands a strong command of English on the part of the teachers (Munir Shuib, 2008).

This study, however, found many of the respondents scored what may be termed ‘below the passing mark’, suggesting that their English may well lack both fluency and accuracy. This may have an adverse effect on their students in terms of not just the students’ acquisition of the target language but also their motivation to learn the language. As Hamidah et al. (2005) points out, the ability to use language effectively in teaching will not only help students understand the subject better but will also lead to many other positive traits such as higher interest and motivation.

Responses from the interview of the 10 selected respondents supported the quantitative findings. Most admitted that they found the rules and explanation task as the most difficult whereas metalinguage recognition task as the easiest. They pointed out that complexity and multiplicity of rules as a major factor for their lacks. Other factors mentioned included insufficient exposure to grammar during teacher training and lack of interest to improve grammar knowledge.

It is interesting to note that the findings are consistent with those obtained by Nurazila Abd Aziz (2007) on Malaysian English language trainee teachers. Similar to the present study, her respondents did not perform well overall, albeit slightly higher (overall mean score: 44.57). She also obtained the same order of difficulty, beginning with metalanguage recognition being the easiest whereas rules and explanation being the hardest.

Such resemblance of findings is significant because it shows that regardless of whether the teachers are prospective or practising, the same pattern emerges. In other words, it appears that trainee teachers as well as practising teachers tend to have only a moderate level of grammatical awareness. Further, while it may be easy for them to recognise grammatical terms and, to some extent, correct errors, it may present a great challenge for them to explain grammatical rules and grammatical errors in classroom.

Conclusions and Implications

The general findings in the present study indicate that the primary school teachers have gaps in their knowledge of grammar and these gaps may have serious effects on their teaching considering that the majority of them claimed that they taught grammar to their students. Although it is not denied here that there may be individual respondents who performed well in the test, on the whole considering what various scholars have said about effective language teaching as mentioned earlier, they may be said to be somewhat ill-equipped to deal with grammar in their lessons at school.

The fact that they scored poorly in the rules and explanation task may be understandable and perhaps excusable as being teachers of primary school level, they may not need to draw on this explicit knowledge from their mental store so often compared to teachers teaching at higher levels. However, what should be cause for concern is their performance in the metalanguage production task and error correction task. These are activities that can be said to be reasonably common even at primary school level. Therefore teachers should be able to show appropriate understanding of grammatical concepts and correct students' errors in the classroom. As pointed out by Andrews (2005) a teacher with a good grasp of grammatical construction will be in a better position to help students.

From the findings, two major implications may be discerned, firstly in the context of their teaching and secondly in the context of their training.

In terms of teaching, their rather limited grammatical awareness may affect the accuracy of their teaching and indirectly the accuracy of what is learnt by their students from them. It is not impossible that their students' grammatical competence may have been influenced by the input received from these teachers. The danger with this is that they may in practice be compounding their pupils' language problems instead of relieving them.

The importance of teaching grammar effectively has been noted by various scholars. Spada and Lightbown (1993), for instance, argued that “form focused instruction and corrective feedback provided within the context of communicative interaction can contribute positively to second language development in both the short and long term” (p. 205). For Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thurrell (1997: 146), “explicit, direct elements are gaining significance in teaching communicative abilities and skills”. Similarly, Musumeci (1997) noted connecting form and meaning in grammar teaching has become a developing trend in proficiency oriented curriculum. She also pointed out that students should be able to learn explicit grammar rules as well as have a chance to practice them in communication.

In terms of training, the findings in the present study suggest that more efforts need to be made at teacher training institutions to promote grammatical awareness among aspiring teachers. This is especially important as it was found that the majority of student teachers of TESL in teacher training institutions had low proficiency in English despite being provided with proficiency classes during training (Gaudart, 1988; Lim, Sarata and Fatimah, 1990).

In conclusion, it would seem imperative that appropriate measures be taken to improve English teachers’ linguistics competence. The measures, among others, could be in the form greater emphasis on grammar exposure in teacher training institutions as well remedial language strategies for practising teachers. These would help to improve teachers’ grammatical proficiency as well as avert sub-standard grammar teaching in the classroom. As Gaudart (1988) succinctly puts it “it is sufficient for just a few teachers to lack the competence for the rest of TESL teachers to be tarnished with the same brush”.

Undoubtedly further larger scale studies need to be carried before any comprehensive measure can be confidently proposed. Future studies should also consider needs analysis which takes into account views and input from various relevant parties and sources as a way to gauge aspects that need to be emphasised to enhance English language teachers’ grammatical awareness.

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