INSIGHTS INTO TEACHER TRAINEES' GRAMMAR TEACHING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Relatively little research has studied the impact and influence of Language Teacher Education (LTE) on teacher trainees' classroom practices and in particular on grammar teaching. The literature suggests that teacher trainees' classroom practices are very much influenced by diverse factors like teacher cognition, education experience and social contexts. Therefore, there is a crucial need for teacher educators to be aware of and sensitive to all these factors when designing LTE programmes. This research adopts the qualitative approach to examine the influence of language courses in LTE by tracking the experience of teacher trainees during their practicum and to evaluate how prior grammar courses influenced teacher trainees' teaching of grammar in the classrooms. It employs observations, interviews and teaching journals as the research instruments which are considered most appropriate for the purpose of the research. Data are obtained from a natural setting with the researcher observing the teacher trainees in the classrooms during their teaching practice are triangulated with interviews and teaching journals. This does not only address the purpose of the research but also allows the researcher to have a better understanding and insight into the actual experiences of the teacher trainees.

1.0   Introduction

The issue of grammar teaching in Language Teacher Education (LTE) needs to take into account the factors that can influence teacher trainees' pedagogical choices and decision-making when teaching grammar in the classrooms. Language researchers (Ellis, 1998; Borg, 1998, 1999 & 2006; Burgess, 2002) have investigated how language teachers' cognition, education experience and second language (L2) competence can influence their teaching of grammar. These researchers explored how language teachers approach the teaching of grammar in their classes and the rationale behind their decisions. However, little research has been carried out on the factors that influence how teacher trainees approach the teaching of grammar during their practicum. Exploring teacher trainees' pedagogical systems, grammar teaching and the reasons that underpin their pedagogical choices and decision-making can provide insights into the factors that underlie teacher trainees' behavior. This kind of research can provide answers to what extent pre-LTE, formal training in LTE and teacher trainees' cognition, beliefs and values shape their grammar teaching and classroom practices.

This paper presents the qualitative approach of data collection on how or the way teacher trainees conduct grammar teaching in their classrooms and what or the reasons that underpin their pedagogical choices and decisions in teaching grammar. It discusses how the research is grounded in the realities of classroom practice and highlights the strength of adopting a qualitative approach in exploring how teacher trainees approach the teaching of grammar in their classrooms and an understanding, from their perspective, of the factors behind their instructional decisions.

2.0   Literature Review

Grammar teaching in LTE has been and continues to be debated. Literature on grammar teaching discusses crucial questions and issues pose on grammar teaching in LTE programmes and in language classrooms. Questions of whether teaching and

learning grammar is necessary in LTE, whether grammar must be explicitly or implicitly taught in LTE and whether teacher trainees must be equipped with extensive or intensive grammar knowledge through their LTE are seriously discussed among teacher educators. There are also issues raised on whether teacher trainees should be taught grammar deductively or inductively, and whether the grammar teaching in LTE should focus on meaning (as opposed to focus) on form are also raised (Burgess, 2002, Ellis, 1998, Doughty & Williams, 1998). The difficult decision that teacher educators face is how grammar should be taught in LTE. Thus, both issues of the place of grammar in LTE curriculum and the nature of grammar teaching do not only raise many controversial questions but will continue to be hotly debated in future.

Language researchers (Ellis, 1998; Borg, 1998 & 2006); Burgess, 2002) have conducted research into grammar teaching among teachers and teacher trainees. They believe that research on how language teachers and teacher trainees teach grammar will provide teacher educators insights on whether prior grammar coursework on English grammar influences teacher trainees' teaching of grammar in the classroom. The findings can also indicate to teacher educators where to place grammar in LTE. Besides that, findings from research on teacher trainees' grammar teaching and classroom practices can help teacher educators to illustrate to teacher trainees the pedagogical options in grammar teaching. Issues like when, how and why teacher trainees draw upon the options in real classrooms can increase their understanding of the pedagogical choices and instructional decisions that they make.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research objectives

The objectives of the research are as follows:

a) To study how trainee teachers teach grammar in their classrooms.

b) To examine the impact and influence of grammar courses taught in LTE on teacher trainees' grammar teaching.

c) To identify the factors that influence teacher trainees' grammar teaching in the classrooms.

d) To explore the challenges experienced by teacher trainees in teaching grammar during their classroom practices.

3.2 Research questions

The research aims to answer the following research questions.

a) What actual grammar teaching practices do teacher trainees implement in their classrooms?

  i.   Do grammar courses taught in LTE have an impact on teacher trainees' grammar teaching during their teaching practice?

  ii. What factors influence teacher trainees' grammar teaching in the classrooms?

b)   What challenges do teacher trainees face in teaching grammar during their classroom practices?

3.3   Qualitative approach in data collection

This research is qualitative in nature and adopts multiple qualitative data collection methods. It is an interactive approach to data collection process which involves discussions between the researcher and teacher trainees, for example in the use of the semi-structured interviews conducted in the data collection process. This research also is rather humanistic in its data collection approach because teacher trainees' actual teaching behaviour in the classrooms are studied and explored. The data collection instruments involve classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, teaching reflection using teaching journal and self-report inventory as a checklist of teacher trainees' grammar teaching. Table 1 shows the research instruments employed in the study.

Table 1 Research instrument

No.	Instrument	Sources/References
1.	Self-Report Inventory On Grammar Lesson (SRI)	Adopted from Nunan, 2005
2.	Teaching Journal/Reflection With Guided Questions (TJ)	Richards & Farrell, 2005 Yu, 2000 Halbach, 1999 Woodfield & Lazarus, 1998
3.	Observation Checklist (OC)	Nunan, 2005 Benke & Medgyes, 2005 (cited in Borg, 2006)
4.	Semi-Structured Interview Questions (SSI)	Benke & Medgyes, 2005 (cited in Borg, 2006) LLurda, 2005

Observation is the primary data collection method used in this research. The classroom observations of the teacher trainees' teaching are audio taped and the teaching is transcribed. At the same time, observation checklists are also used when the researcher is conducting observations. Observations are used as means of data collection because they can provide direct evidence of teaching behaviours of teachers (Borg, 2006). In this research, observations are considered valuable strategy in a natural environment because they provide evidence of what happens in the classrooms and the grammar teaching practices that teacher trainees implement in the classrooms. Nunan (1997) claims observations allow researchers to experience direct contact with classroom realities. He argues this data collection strategy can serve as a bridge between the activity of research and the activity of teaching. Richards (2005) and Glesne (2006) state that observation is a data collecting strategy that has ecological validity because it involves a study of actual classroom practices not teachers' perceptions of their classroom practices. Thus, observation permits legitimate claims to be made about the relationship between

teacher trainees' classroom practices and their instructional decisions with reference to grammar teaching (Borg, 2003a).

Ellis (1998) has highlighted that observations on language teachers' grammar teaching will help teacher educators to understand how language teachers transform their technical knowledge about the teaching of grammar through their actions. With a similar concern on the issue, the researcher believes that by observing teacher trainees' grammar teaching in the classrooms and exploring the reasons that underpin their grammar teaching will shed some light whether the choices made by teacher trainees in their individual contexts play a large part in determining the kind of teaching which takes place in their classrooms.

Observations and transcripts from the observations will provide evidence on how teacher trainees approach grammar teaching in their classrooms. The observations provide evidence on teacher trainees' teaching behaviour in terms of their actual approach to grammar teaching and not as claimed or perceived by them. The teacher trainees' instructional strategies can be identified through the classroom observations. Besides audio taping and transcribing the teacher trainees' grammar teaching, an observation checklist is also used to identify the teacher trainees' teaching behaviours. The items in the checklist are used as a guide to identify teacher trainees' teaching behaviours related to certain aspects of grammar teaching practices such as the methods adopted by teacher trainees and grammar activities used in their lessons.

The other qualitative data collection strategy employed in this research is semi-structured interview. It has been used in educational research in qualitative studies of educational issues. Interview is used as data collection tool in this research in order to obtain the teacher trainees' inner perspective about their outward teaching behaviours. Patton (1987) argues interviews enable researchers to "enter the other person's perspective" .The advantage of adopting semi-structured interview as a means of data collection is much qualitative data that develop in the course of the interviews can be gained. Borg (2006), Cohen, Manion & Morrison (cited in Borg, 2006) argue that semi-structured interviews would result in unexpected discoveries by the researcher. Through the semi-structured interviews a two-way conversations rather than a researcher-dominated activity can be established. This data collection strategy permits flexibility and a degree of freedom in terms of the direction of the interviews but the main issues of concern in the research are still addressed.

Questions in the semi-structured interviews are based on a list of topics, issues and abstracts from the observations transcripts which serve as a checklist in order to ensure that all the interviews conducted seek the same information from the teacher trainees. This type of interview "increases the comprehensiveness of the data and makes the data collection technique more systematic as compared to the informal conversational approach" (Puvenesvary et. al, 2008:19). As a result, rich information on the factors that influence teacher trainees' grammar teaching and the extent grammar courses in their LTE influence the way they teach grammar can be gathered. The issues of whether teacher trainees' pedagogical choices and decisions shape the way they treat grammar teaching in their classrooms can also be explored through the semi-structured interviews.

To triangulate the findings from observations and views expressed by teacher trainees on the way they approach grammar teaching gathered from semi-structured interviews, teaching journals are also utilised in the research. Rich literature on the use of journal in educational research claims that teachers' thoughts, beliefs and attitudes that underpin their pedagogical choices can be drawn from their written reflections. Borg writes "journals are flexible research tools, enabling researchers to study respondents' personal accounts of their thinking and practices over a period of

time" (2006:256). In this study, the teaching journal is used as a data collection tool that enables teacher trainees to question, explore and analyse how they teach. Besides that, written reflections in teaching journal will help to sensitize teacher trainees to the approach they adopt in their classroom practices and bring to their attention the pedagogical decisions that they make in their classrooms.

The teaching journals written by the teacher trainees can provide insights into how teacher trainees teach grammar; document teacher trainees' classroom events, provide firsthand accounts of teacher trainees' teaching experience and act as a tool for reflection on teacher trainees' classroom practices (Noor Fadhilah, 2008). This method of using teaching journal to collect data is very useful for a qualitative research because it provides a rich source of information from the participants as well as encourages teacher trainees to be actively involved in the data collection process.

Due to the nature of a qualitative research that employs multiple data collection methods and this study also utilises a self-report inventory on grammar teaching to complement observations, semi-structured interviews and teaching journals which are used as data collection techniques. The self-report inventory is used as a data collection strategy in this research in order to identify teacher trainees' theoretical orientations and practices of grammar teaching; and it also acts as a checklist on the manner teacher trainees conduct grammar teaching in their classrooms.

Nunan (2005) uses self-report inventory to evaluate how language teachers present grammar points and the frequency they implement inductive and deductive or mixed approach in teaching grammar. With a similar aim, this research adopts the self-report inventory of grammar teaching by Nunan (2005) as a data collection tool. The inventory allows teacher trainees to identify their grammar teaching practices based on concrete examples of instructions in their classrooms. Even though the responses in self-report instruments may not reflect what language teachers do in the classrooms as noted by Borg (2006), the observations and observation checklists used in this research can triangulate the data gathered from the self-report inventory. However, Borg (2006) also argues in favour of using self-report instruments like self-report inventories in collecting data. He claims research participants are provided with stimulus that draws their attention to the aspects that are studied. In the context of this research, the items in the self-report inventory draw teacher trainees' attention to the grammar practices that they adopt in their classrooms.

4.0 Strength of the Research

The qualitative nature of the research which employs multiple data collection methods can yield descriptive, exploratory and explanatory data which can be used to generate theory on grammar teaching. The data gathered from observations, semi-structured interviews, teaching journals and self-report inventories can provide insights into the issue of how and why on the nature of teacher trainees' grammar teaching. The findings do not only address the research questions of this research but they can also be put to effective use in language teacher education and development programmes. As suggested by literature in LTE, there is a lack of information on teacher trainees' practices and cognitions in second language (L2) grammar teaching currently (Burgess, 2002). Therefore, this qualitative study can fill in the gaps in investigating the impact of pre-LTE, LTE and teacher cognitions such as beliefs, attitudes, theories and assumptions on teacher trainees' classroom

practices. The exploratory and interpretative nature of this study focuses on interpreting teacher trainees' action in the classrooms by understanding why teacher trainees behave in the way they do. This study explores how teacher trainees approach grammar teaching and the data are drawn from actual classroom practices. The data collection techniques used in this study will yield rich descriptive data about what teacher trainees actually do when teaching grammar and clarify the pedagogical choices and decisions they make as well as the process that involves in their grammar teaching.

4.0 Conclusion

The instruments and triangulation method discussed in this paper are summarised in Figure 1.
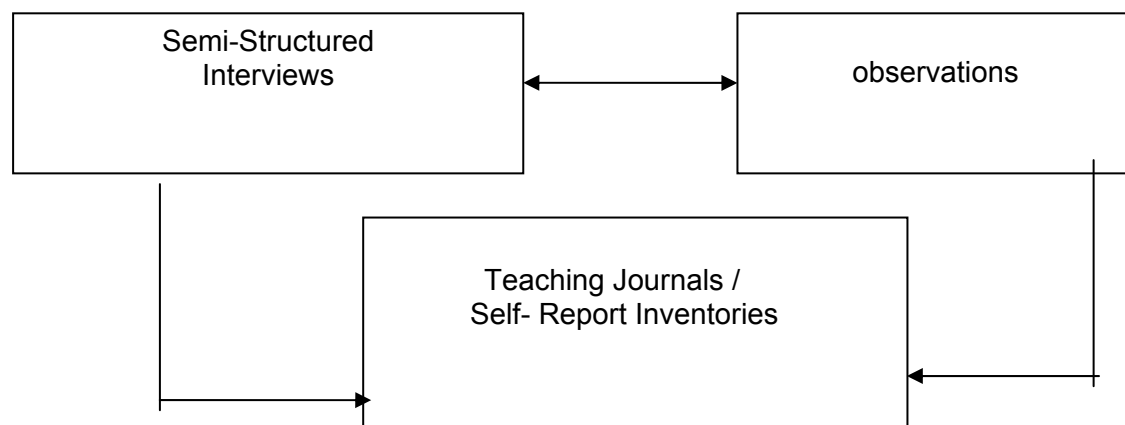
Figure 1   Research triangulation by method

Data gathered from observations and semi-structured interviews are triangulated with the responses indicated in the teaching journals and self-report inventories. Richards writes "it is common for qualitative project design to include the use of multiple sources of data or views, with aim of bringing many perspectives to bear on the question" (2005:21). With this in mind, this research uses different means of collecting data in order to maximise the possibility of getting credible findings as well as ensuring the issues addressed in the research are looked from more than one standpoint. Glesne points out "the use of multiple data collection methods contributes to the trustworthiness of the data" (2006: 36). She further argues research data drawn from multiple data collection methods will indicate richer data and more believable findings as more sources are sought to tap understanding of the issues investigated the more valid and credible the findings will be. Therefore, the multiple data collection methods of this study can help to increase confidence in the research findings of this qualitative study.

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