

Teaching Grammar: A Survey of Teachers' Attitudes in Vietnam*

Le Van Canh

Hanoi University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam

Roger Barnard

University of Waikato, New Zealand

Although it is now generally agreed that grammar should be an integral element of second language programmes, there is still a diversity of opinions about how it should be taught. In this paper, attention is first drawn to relevant issues raised in reviews of the teaching of grammar derived from SLA research and teacher cognition. This paper then reports a survey of Vietnamese teachers' attitudes towards grammar and grammar teaching in their own particular teaching contexts. It uses a questionnaire adapted from that used in a 2002 survey of teachers of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in British universities and in a 2008 parallel survey of EAP teachers in New Zealand. The key findings of the present study are presented and then discussed in relation to those of the other two surveys. They indicate that these EAP teachers in Vietnam, like those in Britain and New Zealand, appreciate the centrality of grammar in their language teaching and have a critical awareness of many of the problems and issues involved. The findings suggest that the teachers favour a discourse, rather than a decontextualised approach to the presentation of grammar and there is an emphasis on systematic practice of grammatical forms and the correction of grammatical errors.

* An earlier version of this article was presented at the 13th International Conference on English in South East Asia, Singapore 4-6 December, 2008.

Key words: Grammar, Vietnam, teacher attitudes, survey, EAP

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of grammar continues to be a matter of controversy in the field of applied linguistics and second language teaching. It is generally agreed that some attention to grammatical form is useful, perhaps necessary, but many issues related to the teaching of grammar still need further research, especially into the key social factors that are an inescapable element of classroom learning. Chief among these social factors are the personalities of the teachers and learners – and their individual and collective constructions of classroom reality. Increasingly, the beliefs and attitudes of practising teachers are being sought to shed light on theoretical concerns in the teaching of grammar, such as the nature of implicit/explicit learning, the way that grammar is best presented, the need for various types of evaluative feedback, the role of practice, etc. Zhen & Murphy (2007) have pointed out that “compared to the amount of literature about native speaking ESL teachers’ beliefs...in western countries, there are fewer studies in pertinent research domains of nonnative speaking EFL teachers” (p. 2). This means that there is a serious gap in empirical research that needs to be narrowed in countries like Vietnam, and this study is a modest and tentative attempt toward that goal.

The study reported here took not only its inspiration, but also very largely the research design, from a study conducted a few years ago (Burgess & Etherington, 2002) with a view to exploring the attitudes of a group of Vietnamese EAP teachers to the role of grammar teaching in their courses, and to make comparisons with the British teachers reported by Burgess & Etherington (2002) and with New Zealand EAP teachers surveyed in 2008 (Barnard & Scampton, 2009).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Teaching of Grammar

The consensus among applied linguists is that language learning should have a primary focus on meaning within an overall communicative framework. However, “the inability of communicative ESL teaching to promote high levels of accuracy is now clear” (Fotos, 1998). Hence, over the past decade there has been a re-focus on grammar teaching (see Nassaji & Fotos, 2004). There is current theoretical debate between applied linguists - even sharp controversy (for example, Sheen 2003; Sheen & O’Neill, 2005) - who argue for a focus on forms (FonfS), and those who propose a focus on form (FonF).

In the former, the teacher plans a series of lessons around specific grammar points in order to: promote an explicit understanding of grammar by a variety of means; provide written & oral exercises to practise the target form; and allow frequent opportunities for the (communicative) use of the target form. FonfS is most obviously exemplified by the Presentation, Practice, Production (PPP) model, although grammar can also be taught explicitly and inductively through activities such as ‘dictogloss’ (Wajnryb, 1990) consciousness-raising activities based on input texts (Ellis, 1992; Ellis & Gaies, 1999).

Focus on form, on the other hand, assumes an indirect, context-based focus on grammar, rather than overt, teacher-led instruction. Ellis (2001a) has distinguished two types within this category: incidental and planned. Proponents of *incidental* FonF (for example, Doughty & Williams, 1998, p. 23) assume that classroom activity is based on communicative tasks and that attention to form should be paid only when grammatical difficulties arise which lead to (or are anticipated to lead to) a communicative breakdown. At this point, remedial treatment is effected by transitory corrective feedback, and when more extended grammar treatment is needed, this should be based on grammar problem-solving tasks, rather than formg-focussed instruction. *Planned* FonF, on the other hand, involves the treatment of pre-determined

grammatical features but differs from FonFs because it occurs when the learners' attention is primarily engaged in processing meaning (Ellis, 2002). It may thus be seen as an intervening point in a continuum between the other two approaches. Various empirical studies investigating FonF in some English as a Second Language contexts have been recently conducted, notably by Ellis and his associates (Basturkmen, Loewen & Ellis, 2004; Ellis, 2001a and b; 2002; Ellis, Basturkmen & Loewen, 2001; Ellis, Basturkmen & Loewen, 2002).

In his review of current issues in the teaching of grammar from the perspective of mainstream SLA (second language acquisition) research, Ellis (2006) reinforces the point made above that, for all but a few researchers following the 'no-interface' line taken by Krashen (1981), there is now general agreement that grammar has a central place in language teaching. However, he also points to the lack of empirical evidence within SLA research to provide clear answers about when and how grammar should be taught, and indeed what grammatical features should be included in a language syllabus. Ellis concludes his review with statement of ten personal beliefs he holds based upon his interpretation of what the research has shown, and admits that they are open to challenge, not least because he is hedging his bets in a number of cases. Typically, both of Ellis and the genre of article he has written, the review concludes with suggestions for further research; these include the need to study learners' implicit knowledge and use of grammar, longitudinal studies investigating the effects of instruction over time, and further research into the effects of corrective feedback. Interestingly, he does not suggest that language teachers' beliefs about grammar teaching should be investigated, nor does he refer in his review to the work carried out in this area over the previous decade. This omission is not surprising, since mainstream SLA research tends to discount the personal values of teachers (and students) as uncontrollable - and inconvenient - variables in the experimental type of study which still tends to dominate the field.

The Importance of Teachers' Beliefs

The whole issue of second language instruction (as opposed to natural, untutored acquisition) depends crucially on understanding the role of the teacher vis-à-vis the learners. Unless the view is taken of teachers as unmotivated mechanisms, it is necessary to enter their minds if one wishes to really understand the effect on instruction on learning. Research on teachers' beliefs or thought processes and the relationship of these beliefs and pedagogical practice originated in America in the early 1970s. Following the publication of *Life in Classrooms* (Jackson, 1968), the National Institute of Education of America (1975) published a report which enunciated the need for research on teachers' thought processes (instructional beliefs) more deeply. The report stated that:

It is obvious that what teachers do is directed in no small measure by what they think. Moreover, it will be necessary for any innovations in the context, practices, and technology of teaching to be mediated through the minds and motives of teachers...[If] teaching is done ... by human teachers, the question of the relationships between thought and action becomes crucial. (p. 1)

Since then, the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their instructional practices has increasingly attracted educational researchers' attention. In general, research on teachers' thought processes is based on the three major assumptions: (i) teaching is largely influenced by teacher cognition, (ii) teaching is guided by teachers' thoughts and judgments, and (iii) teaching constitutes a high-level decision-making process (Isenberg, 1990). As Clark & Peterson (1986) have claimed, teaching is "substantially influenced and even determined by teachers' underlying thinking" (p. 255). However, it has long been recognised that individuals' thinking processes and belief systems cannot merely be observed or measured, but instead must be inferred from what individuals say - and this has conventionally been investigated by attitude measurement techniques, often via questionnaires.

Over the years, surveys within mainstream educational research have been carried out to identify teachers' beliefs, employing a wide range of cognitive constructs and diverse operational definitions of attitudes, knowledge, thinking, conceptions, assumptions, values, principles, decision-making, and so on. Borg (2006, p. 272) has argued that in order to ensure inter-study reliability, there is a need for a shared terminological framework. In the current absence of such, the view will be taken in this paper that *attitudes* are the surface expression of underlying values, beliefs and knowledge. However, such attitudes may not fully represent the deeper constructs for various reasons such as: an individual's lack of explicit awareness of the underlying conceptual framework; an internal contradiction between and within belief categories; and/or a simple inability, or unwillingness, to convey these to another person. Thus, at best, eliciting teachers' attitudes through a questionnaire is barely scratching the surface of much deeper cognitive processes, but one which – it may be argued – is a necessary first step towards more fully exploring cognitive processing. It is also evident that what a teacher believes or knows may not always correlate highly with his or her professional practice. Thus, investigations into teachers' beliefs should be balanced by consideration of their actual behavior in planning and executing classroom activities, and the extent of the convergence or divergence between beliefs and practice explored by both researchers and participant teachers. It is important to acknowledge this as a further limitation to the issues raised by the study reported in this paper, and in other reports of survey studies.

The Attitudes of Second Language Teachers to the Teaching of Grammar

The field of Second Language Teacher Education has tended to lag behind mainstream educational research in its attempt to understand the cognitive dimensions of second language teaching (Johnson, 1994), and it was not until recently that understanding how second language teachers' cognitive processes influence their classroom instruction began to draw the attention of second

language teacher education researchers (Borg, 1998a and b; 1999 a, b and c; 2001; 2003a and b; 2005; 2006; Freeman, 1989; Johnson, 1992a, 1992b; Richards, Li & Tang 1998; Richards & Nunan, 1990; Woods, 1996).

Borg (2003a and b; 2006) reviewed 64 studies of language teacher cognition, 38 of which focused on grammar teaching. The overwhelming majority of studies he reviewed were conducted in Europe, Britain or North America, mostly in second rather than foreign language contexts, and with 'native-speaking' teachers working with adult learners in universities or private institutions. Only ten studies involving Asian teachers were reported: four in Singapore (Chia, 2003; Farrell, 1999; Ng & Farrell, 2003; Farrell & Lim, 2005) and six in Hong Kong (Andrews, 1997; 1999a and b; 2001; Andrews & McNeil, 2005). Borg (2006, p. 133) emphasized the need for research in a greater variety of contexts.

Apart from those reviewed by Borg, very few other studies into Asian teachers' beliefs about grammar have been identified. Richards, Gallo & Renandya (2001) surveyed 112 Asian EFL teachers in an in-service training course, and found that "many of the respondents still hold firmly to the belief that grammar is central to language learning and that direct grammar teaching is needed by their EFL/ESL students" (p. 54). Patricia (2003) studied two experienced English teachers in a Singaporean primary school and the various data collected revealed that, although their beliefs about grammar teaching did influence their classroom activity, these teachers' actual instructional decisions and practices were often influenced by factors other than their personal beliefs, some of which were beyond their control. Similar findings emerged from Zhen & Murphy's (2007) study of 6 EFL university teachers in China. With specific regard to teachers' attitudes in Vietnam, although some unpublished theses relating to Vietnamese teachers' beliefs have been reported (for example, Ellis, 1994; McCook, 1998), apparently only one study has been published internationally. This was a small-scale report (Lewis & McCook, 2002) of reflective journals written by 14 Vietnamese high school teachers during an in-service course. Although the focus of this study was not directly concerned with the teaching of grammar,

the teachers often made comments which suggested, for example, that both fluency and accuracy were foci of their teaching, and that the traditional role of the teacher in explaining grammar was important (Lewis & McCook, 2002, p. 149).

Of particular relevance to the present study are three surveys. The first of these was carried out by Burgess & Etherington (2002) to identify the attitudes of 48 British teachers of EAP in UK universities. The findings from this survey indicated that the responding teachers “appear to see grammar as important for their students and to have a sophisticated understanding of the problems and issues involved in its teaching” (Burgess & Etherington, 2002, p. 450). The teachers favoured discourse-based approaches, rather than decontextualised presentation of grammar items, with an inclination towards the use of authentic, full texts and real-life tasks for practice. The authors then claim (p. 450) that the use of texts, rather than isolated structures, to introduce grammatical features suggests a tendency for these teachers to adopt an approach based on FonF principles. However, the emphasis placed by the British teachers on the systematic practice of grammatical features and the correction of errors suggests that there is also a clear attention to the explicit and detailed treatment of forms rather than strict adherence to FonF, as expounded by Long (1991) and Long & Robinson (1998).

The second is a study by Barnard & Scampton (2009) which adapted Burgess & Etherington's questionnaire to survey 32 EAP teachers in New Zealand; in this case, the questionnaire was followed up with email interviews of a sample of the respondents. The New Zealand teachers, like those of the British teachers in the 2002 survey, favoured the treatment of grammatical features in complete texts, rather than in isolation. Consistent with this view, the New Zealand EAP teachers rejected a strictly forms-focussed (FonFS) strategy with a pre-determined grammatical syllabus and emphatically preferred to deal with grammatical issues as they arose from the texts used to develop generic EAP skills. To this extent, their approach may be regarded as generally reactive, although there were some instances where they adopted proactive (planned) forms-focussed strategies – for example, by

devising grammar worksheets for systematic treatment in subsequent classes. However, it is clear that their treatment of the emerging grammatical issues was generally far from the 'transitory' remediation suggested by many proponents of a FonF strategy (e.g. Long & Robinson, 1998). Like the British teachers in the 2002 survey, they paid much attention to extensive practice (both structural and otherwise) and both they and their students attached importance to the explicit correction of formal errors, for example by the use of correcting codes.

The third is a recent survey (Borg & Burns, 2008) of beliefs about the integration of grammar and skills teaching. A questionnaire comprising both open- and close ended items was completed by 231 teachers of English from South America (2.5%), Asia (23.2%), Europe (25.7%) and Australia and New Zealand (46%). In this survey, the number of respondents from South America was very small (n=6) and the authors (Borg & Burns, 2008, p. 461) decided to exclude their responses from their analysis of the findings. Although 76% of the remaining respondents worked in universities and other Adult Education Centres, there is no indication that EAP was in focus either in the questionnaire items or in the responses. While some of the respondents were reported to be from Vietnam, it is not clear how many there were, nor were any explicit statements from Vietnamese teachers reported in the article. Much of the authors' discussion of their findings (Borg & Burns, 2008, pp. 476-480) was taken with considering how their respondents perceived the relationship between grammar and the teaching of language skills in apparently General English (rather than specifically EAP) classes, but they also discussed their teachers' beliefs about the centrality of grammar to language instruction, and some of the points they raised will be considered in the final section of the present paper.

What emerges from all the studies considered above is that teachers do hold sometimes very firm beliefs about various aspects of teaching - including the place of grammar in language teaching - and that these influence what they do in their classrooms. There is also reported to be a wide range of factors which give rise to classroom beliefs and practice.

Language teachers, acting as reflective professional practitioners, may well take into account insights derived from theoretical insights and empirical research studies to facilitate the development of their knowledge and pedagogy. However, their belief systems are affected by other factors, some of which relate to their background experience as language learners and/or their specialised professional development as language teachers – but others which do not. For example, the beliefs of many teachers may be influenced by the imposition of authoritarian standards, either directly by inspectors, principals and heads of department, or indirectly by prescribed textbooks which often constitute the entire curriculum. Their professional perceptions may also be shaped by the influence of colleagues, social acquaintances or even ‘significant others’ in their personal lives, as well as their own individual (meta) cognitive schemata, processes and strategies. More immediately, and more importantly, the specific context in which they carry out their teaching and especially perhaps, their understanding of the needs, interests and abilities of their students, will colour their value judgments and possibly lead to long-term changes in their belief systems. In short, “Language teaching, then, can be seen as a process which is defined by dynamic interactions among cognition, context and experience” (Borg, 2006, p. 275).

So far, no studies have been identified that have specifically investigated the attitudes of Vietnamese teachers regarding form-focussed instruction. Thus it was decided that a survey of a group of these teachers’ attitudes would complement previous studies, and add to academic and professional understanding about what teachers believe about key aspects of grammar teaching.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Research Questions

It was decided that the same research questions used by Burgess &

Etherington (2002, p. 437) would guide the present study:

- Which attitudes about grammar and grammar teaching are most widely held by EAP teachers (in Vietnam)?
- Is there a bias towards decontextualised presentation of grammar and away from discourse-based, unified approaches?

Thus, the present study sought to ascertain whether EAP teachers in Vietnam held similar views to those in Britain and New Zealand about the importance of grammar and the use of discourse-based approaches.

Participants and Setting

The participants were 29 teachers in Vietnamese universities and other institutes of higher education, all of whom taught EAP courses as all or part of their teaching duties. There were two main differences – apart, of course, from nationality, language background and context – between the British and New Zealand participants and those in the present study. Firstly, the Vietnamese teachers were a cohort of graduate students following an MA programme in Applied Linguistics, which was not the case in either Britain or New Zealand; some of the latter, therefore, might have been more highly qualified than the Vietnamese teachers, although the respective length of teaching experience between the three groups was comparable. The second point is that the British teachers were all teaching pre-sessional EAP courses, while those in Vietnam (like those in New Zealand) were teaching on a range of EAP programmes, most of which operated alongside the content area undergraduate courses (for example in Business, or Tourism) rather than in preparation for them.

Data Collection Procedures

With the permission of Sian Etherington, a somewhat modified version of

the 2002 questionnaire was used. Burgess & Etherington used a five-point response scale; however, the version used in Vietnam (see Appendix) – like that in Barnard & Scampton (2009) - solicited only four responses: strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree. The reason for this was that there is a tendency for many responses to regress to the central point (#3 – no opinion) in a five-point scale; moreover, the four-point scale facilitated a straightforward descriptive analysis of positive and negative responses, something which led to some uncertainty in interpreting and discussions of the findings in Burgess & Etherington' study.

The forty statements in the 2002 questionnaire were translated into Vietnamese, and back-translated into English by a recognised bilingual translator, and then piloted with a small group of EAP teachers working in a local university; minor adjustments to the wording were made in the light of comments by these respondents. The participants of the main study were advised in writing of the scope and purpose of the survey and their formal consent to participate was sought and granted. They were shown the Vietnamese version and also the English version, which they completed; this was done to ensure that, when considering their responses, they as fully as possible understood the conceptual meaning of the propositions. The questionnaires were administered in class to the participants by the second author of this article, who was not at that time known to the participants; this administration ensured that there was a 100% return rate. although the possibility of a number of socially acceptable responses cannot be altogether dismissed.

SURVEY RESULTS

The presentation which follows focuses only on some of the questionnaire items – those most central to the two research questions – and it should be recalled that the responses ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4). The percentages indicated have been rounded to the nearest tenth of a

percentile.

The Centrality of Grammar in Language Teaching

TABLE 1
Questionnaire Items on Grammar in Language Teaching

Questionnaire Item	1 %	2 %	3 %	4 %
<i>1.1 The role of grammar... is as a framework for the rest of language.</i>	3.6	32.1	53.6	10.7
<i>1.2 Learners study grammar by their exposure to the environment of using the language naturally.</i>	6.9	55.2	34.5	3.4
<i>1.3 Teaching linguistic forms helps learners produce right grammar.</i>	0	27.6	55.2	17.2
<i>1.6 Learners need a conscious knowledge of grammar to improve their language.</i>	3.4	20.7	65.5	10.3
<i>1.10 Excluding grammar from the language teaching program is beneficial to the learners.</i>	27.6	34.5	31.0	6.9
<i>2.0 Explicit discussion of grammar rules is beneficial to learners.</i>	10.3	17.2	62.1	19.3
<i>2.3 My students expect teachers to present grammar points clearly/ explicitly.</i>	0	7.1	46.4	46.4
<i>2.13 Not teaching grammar explicitly worries my students.</i>	0	20.7	44.8	34.5

From the above, it can be seen that there is substantial agreement among the Vietnamese teachers on the centrality of grammar (1.1), of its benefit to the learners (1.3) and, especially, of the students' wish for grammar to be explicitly explained (2.0 and 2.3), as well as their apparent concern if it is not (2.13). Moreover, the two notions that grammar can be learned through exposure to language in natural use (1.2) and that learners would benefit if grammar were excluded from the programme (1.10) were each rejected by 62.1% of the respondents. It is important to note, as did Burgess & Etherington (2002, p. 441), that some of the above attitudes - while ostensibly focussing on the learners' needs and wishes - may actually reflect the pedagogical preferences of the teachers.

The Role of Practice

TABLE 2
Questionnaire Items on the Role of Practice

Questionnaire Item	1	2	3	4
	%	%	%	%
<i>1.5 Learners can improve their grammatical accuracy through regular structure drills.</i>	6.9	6.9	72.4	13.8
<i>1.11 Non-contextual structural drills play a certain role in the language learning process.</i>	13.8	34.5	44.8	6.9
<i>1.12 Structure drills for generative purposes play an essential role in the learning process.</i>	3.4	20.7	69.0	6.9
<i>2.2 Problem-solving techniques in learning grammar increase my learners' motivation.</i>	0	24.1	58.6	17.2
<i>2.20 My learners find it demotivating to use problem-solving techniques to study grammar.</i>	20.7	48.3	27.6	3.4

As can be seen from the 86.2% responses agreeing with statement 1.5 and 75.9% to statement 1.12, very positive attitudes towards the role of practice were reported in this study. Interestingly, half of the Vietnamese teachers felt that decontextualised practice of structures has a place in language learning. Less ambiguous are the teachers' responses to statement 2.2 and the contrasting statement 2.20, which indicate that students found problem-solving tasks motivating rather than frustrating. On the whole, it is evident that the Vietnamese teachers consider that their learners benefit from grammar practice of one sort or another. Much, perhaps, may depend on the interpretation of 'practice'; probably given the prevalence of traditional styles of teaching in Vietnam (Howe, 1993; Ellis, 1994; 1996; Le, 2007; Lewis & McCook, 2002), the translators of the questionnaire used the word 'drills' in these statements in contrast to the use of 'practice' and 'productive practice' in the equivalent statements in the original questionnaire used by Burgess & Etherington (2002).

The Correction of Errors

TABLE 3
Questionnaire Items on the Correction of Errors

Questionnaire Item	1	2	3	4
	%	%	%	%
<i>1.16 Teachers should only correct language forms which hinder communication.</i>	3.4	48.3	37.9	10.3
<i>1.18 Correction focussing on language forms helps learners improve their grammatical usage.</i>	0	28.6	60.7	10.7
<i>2.15 Teachers find it difficult to correct learners' mistakes in communicative writing.</i>	17.2	55.2	24.1	3.4
<i>2.16 Teachers find it difficult to correct learners' speaking mistakes.</i>	13.8	62.1	17.2	6.9

The responses to statement 1.16 are interesting as the teachers in this study were fairly evenly split over the issue, but there is clear evidence that these EAP teachers agreed with statement 1.18 that correction of language forms helped their learners. The majority of teachers did not find it difficult to correct students' written errors (2.15), whereas more than half found oral errors more problematic (2.16). As Burgess & Etherington say (2002, p. 445), "it could be concluded that teachers experience more difficulty in correction during students' spoken rather than written communication". One implication that can be drawn is that many teachers correct their students even when there is no communication breakdown. If this assumption is correct, then it would seem that these teachers take a more rigorous attitude towards errors than is consistent with a FonF approach to the treatment of grammar. Clearly, this is an issue that warrants further investigation.

The Use of Authentic Texts

TABLE 4
Questionnaire Items on the Use of Authentic Texts

Questionnaire Item	1	2	3	4
	%	%	%	%
<i>1.15 Students study grammar more effectively if</i>	0	31.0	44.8	24.1

<i>grammar is introduced in a full text.</i>				
2.6 My learners find it difficult to deal with grammar introduced in real-life materials	10.7	32.1	32.1	25.0
2.9 My learners find real-life materials difficult because of the vocabulary used in these materials.	0	20.7	58.6	20.7
2.10 My learners cannot find the relation between form and functions in real-life materials without teachers' clear explanation.	0	27.6	55.2	17.1
2.11 Teachers find it time-consuming to use real-life materials.	24.1	44.8	24.1	6.9

69% of the teachers showed their agreement or strong agreement that grammar is more effectively learnt if it is introduced in a full text (1.15) – and only just over half of them reported that their students found grammatical difficulties in authentic materials (2.6). On the other hand, an overwhelming majority - 89.3% - agreed with statement 2.9 that such texts did present lexical problems. This may have led 72% of the them to point to the need for the teacher to clearly explain form and function relationship in authentic materials (2.10). However, over two thirds - 69% - of the teachers *disagreed* that they find real-life materials (2.11) too time-consuming to use. On the whole, responses to a range of issues relating to the use of authentic materials indicate echo the point made in the 2002 survey: “no general feeling that authentic texts take too much time in the classroom or in preparation” (Burgess & Etherington, 2002, p. 446).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AS THEY RELATE TO THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The above findings facilitate a tentative positioning of the Vietnamese teachers within both a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) and a discourse community of EAP practitioners, as represented by their British and New Zealand counterparts. Swales (1990) has made the useful distinction between speech and discourse communities; the former may be said to be locally-

based groups who ‘speak the same (academic) language’ face-to-face, whereas discourse communities comprise dispersed academic groups who communicate through texts. Thus, the Vietnamese teachers form part of a local speech community of practice by regularly meeting together, such as in the MA course they are following, to directly share their experiences, ideas and reflections on practice. At the same time, although separated by distance, there is a sense in which they are members of the wider discourse community of EAP practitioners by virtue of having encountered, indirectly through reading a common stock of academic works, similar constructs relating to their academic development and pedagogic practice. Thus, despite specific contextual differences between the three groups of EAP teachers, notably the first language background and the very different environments in which they teach, the Vietnamese teachers share with their discourse community a commonality of views regarding their work.

Which Attitudes about Grammar and Grammar Teaching are Most Widely Held by the EAP Teachers in Vietnam?

The survey responses strongly indicate that these Vietnamese teachers, like their British and New Zealand counterparts, consider grammar to be a central feature of language and a crucial element in their pedagogy. There is also strong correspondence of views regarding the need for explicit grammar instruction, the usefulness of explaining rules, the need for practice of various kinds, and the importance attached to appropriate error correction. Evidently, how these views are carried out in EAP classes will vary not only between the groups, but within each community, and this is probably most evidently the case as regards notions of ‘practice’, and no doubt a wide range of correction strategies are employed. There are, of course, some issues which distinguish the views of Vietnamese from those of the other groups. Notable among these is their rejection of the notion that grammar can be learned through exposure to language in natural environments. The disparity in views may well be due to the simple fact that, in a *foreign* language learning context,

the Vietnamese students are much less able to access an English-speaking environment, and therefore need to learn grammar more consciously than their British or New Zealand counterparts.

Is there a Bias Towards Decontextualised Presentation of Grammar and away from Discourse-Based, Unified Approaches?

The findings of all three surveys strongly reject this bias. The Vietnamese, British and New Zealand teachers agreed with the introduction of grammar in complete texts; interestingly, the percentage of positive responses in Vietnam was higher than in the British study, and rather lower than in the New Zealand survey. None of the groups felt that the use of authentic materials was excessively time-consuming, or thought these materials presented their students with particular grammatical problems, although many more Vietnamese than British or New Zealand respondents pointed to the difficulties authentic materials presented in terms of vocabulary, and a very high proportion – almost nine out of ten - felt that their students needed clear instruction in form-function mapping when using authentic materials. In summary, all three groups of teachers have “an inclination towards the use of authentic texts and real-life tasks for practice” (Burgess & Etherington, 2002, p. 450), although there are likely to be varying interpretations of what exactly is meant by ‘authentic’ or ‘real life’.

Burgess & Etherington say that their findings indicate that their respondents were “well-disposed to a Focus-on-Form approach” rather than one which focusses on forms (2002, p. 450). This view may be given support by the clear preference of the teachers in all three surveys to introduce grammatical items through texts rather than in a decontextualised presentation, as may be dealt with in approach based on PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production). However, the strong endorsement by British – and New Zealand - teachers of explicit attention to grammar and the agreement among more than two-thirds of them that explicit discussion of grammar rules is beneficial to learners, is quite inconsistent with focus on form as is currently advocated (Long 1991;

Long & Robinson, 1998) and the empirical studies carried out by Ellis and his associates). The clear preference of Vietnamese teachers in the present study for explicit grammatical instruction and controlled forms-focused practice also disconfirm basic tenets of focus on form.

The findings of the present study also broadly align with the portrait of grammar teaching reported in the 2008 international survey (Borg & Burns, 2008), as being one “characterised by regular phases of explicit work, a desire to encourage students to discover rules (without discounting the use of direct explanation), and regular opportunities for grammar practice” (p. 477). Referring to their respondents’ lack of technical language (such as ‘focus on form’) despite their generally high level of qualifications, Borg & Burns (2008, p. 479) go on to say: “The largely experiential nature of teachers’ evidence base in justifying their work... raises questions about the reliability of their judgements about its effectiveness. These are issues which merit continuing study”. This also raises interesting questions about the role of theory in second language teacher development and practice. The implication here is that professional experience may be unreliable; it may also be the case that some SLA theoretical positions may be invalid – a point very sharply made by Sheen & O’Neill (2005). Certainly, it is necessary to thoroughly investigate the relationship between explicit theories as published in academic works, and the implicit theories developed from teachers’ professional practice.

CONCLUSION

The present study represents merely a one-off snapshot of the views of a small number of Vietnamese EAP teachers, and no firm generalizations from the survey can be inferred. As with the 2002 and 2008 studies, there was no opportunity to use a split-half method to check reliability, although certain statements were paired to check the consistency of responses. Moreover, unlike the 2002 survey of British teachers, the Vietnamese teachers were not asked for qualitative comments, which would have fleshed out the summary

responses. Burgess & Etherington (2002, p. 449) made the point that follow-up interviews with at least a sample of their teachers would have been helpful, and this was in fact done in the New Zealand study (Barnard & Scampton, 2009). It was hoped to interview some of the Vietnamese teachers, but constraints of time and access did not permit it. Such interviews would have been extremely valuable to gain deeper insights into what teachers believed, but the point remains that there is an inevitable gap between espoused beliefs and actual practice (and, of course, the findings from this study would have carried more weight if it had been possible to observe the teachers in their classrooms).

Despite these limitations, the present study has provided some useful insights into the attitudes of a particular group of teachers in relation to current theoretical positions regarding the role of grammar. It has been useful to compare the attitudes of three groups of teachers working within the same broad field of endeavour - Swales' (1990) 'discourse community' - and to note that the Vietnamese responses are not substantially dissimilar either from their British and New Zealand counterparts or from those reported in the few studies that have been carried out with other Asian teachers of English. This has implications for methodologists of language teaching, and also those responsible for the professional development of language teachers. With regard to the former, the study gives weight, albeit perhaps slight, to the increasing calls (eg., Brown, 2002; Kumaravadivelu, 2003) for context-sensitive pedagogy - one in which approaches and methods are tailored to, if not actually shaped by, the actual local conditions in which teaching and learning occur and the constraints and opportunities which each situation affords. Thus, in the design and implementation of curricula and textbooks, greater attention needs to be paid to the contextual knowledge and understanding that teachers bring to the task - and to the beliefs they hold as a result of their experience. This in turn suggests that professional development programmes for language teachers should find an appropriate balance between what is argued from theoretical positions and indicated from empirical studies in other contexts with the accrued wisdom of teachers who

actually have to make executive decisions in their classrooms. In short, teacher development should be a locally co-constructed collegial endeavour, and not a process of top-down imposition of 'expert' ideas drawn from elsewhere.

Evidently, further empirical research needs to be carried out in more contexts - not only into what teachers believe about grammar teaching - among other things - but also into the extent to which such beliefs are manifest in their classroom activity. This is a point acknowledged by Burgess & Etherington (2002, p. 449) and others (for example, Borg, 2006; Farrell & Lim, 2005; Zhen & Murphy, 2007). As Borg has asked (2003b, p. 105), "can language teacher cognition be usefully studied without reference to what happens in classrooms?" Human nature being what it is, it would not be surprising to find that there are both convergences and divergences between belief and action, but the important thing would be for both teachers, researchers and teacher educators to gain insights as to *why* there should be any disparities, and what effects these might have on language teaching and learning. Therefore, in addition to surveys, (in-depth) interviews and narrative accounts, research needs to be conducted through ethnographic studies of classroom interaction and by post-observation discussion, the latter facilitated, for example, by stimulated recall strategies (Gass & Mackey, 2000). There is also a need to explore the beliefs of students as well as their teachers in order to see the extent to which their respective views coincide, and the pedagogical implications of any dissonance. Given the increasing importance of English Language Teaching in all its aspects throughout Asian countries, and the relative lack of studies into teacher cognition in these contexts, the need for systematic research is both necessary and urgent.

THE AUTHORS

Le Van Canh is Director of the International Cooperation Office of Hanoi University of Languages and International Studies. He is also a senior

lecturer and teacher educator in the Department of Applied Linguistics. He frequently makes international conference presentations and publishes on issues relating to the history and current state of language teaching in Vietnam, and on aspects of curriculum design and the professional development of teachers. He has recently been an invited Academic Visitor at the University of Waikato and Visiting Professor at Nakhon Ratchasima Rajabhat University, Bangkok, and is currently involved in an in-depth research project investigating the beliefs and practices of Vietnamese school teachers of English regarding the teaching of grammar.

Email: levancanhvnu@gmail.com

Roger Barnard is a senior lecturer in the Department of General and Applied Linguistics at the University of Waikato, New Zealand. His research interests include language policy and planning at all levels from national policies to micro-planning in language classrooms. He travels frequently to Asian countries, and has recently accepted Visiting Professorships in Japan, Vietnam and Korea. His most recent book is Barnard & Torres-Guzman (Eds.) (2008) *Creating classroom communities of learning*, published by Multilingual Matters.

Email: rbarnard@waikato.ac.nz

REFERENCES

- Andrews, S. (1997). Metalinguistic knowledge and teacher explanation. *Language Awareness, 6*, 147-161.
- Andrews, S. (1999a). 'All these like little name things': A comparative study of language teachers' explicit knowledge of grammar and grammatical terminology. *Language Awareness, 8*, 143-159.
- Andrews, S. (1999b). Why do L2 teachers need to 'know about language'? Teacher metalinguistic awareness and input for learning. *Language and Education, 13* (3), 161-177.
- Andrews, S. (2001). The language awareness of the L2 teacher: Its impact upon pedagogical practice. *Language Awareness, 10*, 75-90.

- Andrews, S., & McNeil, A. (2005). Knowledge about language and the 'good language teacher'. In N. Bartels (Ed.), *Applied linguistics and language teacher education* (pp. 159-178). New York: Springer.
- Barnard, R., & Scampton, D. (2009). Teaching grammar: A survey of EAP teachers in New Zealand. *New Zealand Studies in Applied Linguistics*, 14, 59-82.
- Basturkmen, H., Loewen, S., & Ellis, R. (2004). Teachers' stated beliefs about incidental focus on form and their classroom practices. *Applied Linguistics*, 25 (2), 243-272.
- Borg, M. (2001). Key concepts in ELT: Teachers' beliefs. *ELT Journal*, 55(2), 186-187.
- Borg, S. (1998a). Talking about grammar in the foreign language classroom. *Language Awareness*, 7, 159-175.
- Borg, S. (1998b). Teachers' pedagogical systems and grammar teaching: A qualitative study. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(1), 9-38.
- Borg, S. (1999a). Studying teacher cognition in second language grammar teaching. *System* 27, 19-31.
- Borg, S. (1999b). The use of grammatical terminology in the second language classroom: A qualitative study of teachers' practices and cognitions. *Applied Linguistics*, 20(1), 95-126.
- Borg, S. (1999c). Teachers' theories in grammar teaching. *ELT Journal*, 53(3), 157-167.
- Borg, S. (2001). Self-perception and practice in teaching grammar. *ELT Journal*, 55 (1), 21-29.
- Borg, S. (2003a). Teacher cognition in language teaching: A review of research on what language teachers think, know, believe and do. *Language Teaching*, 36, 81-109.
- Borg, S. (2003b.) Teacher cognition in grammar teaching: A literature review. *Language Awareness*, 12(2), 96-108.
- Borg, S. (2005). Experience, knowledge about language, and classroom experience in teaching grammar. In N. Bartels (Ed.), *Applied linguistics and language teacher education* (pp. 325-340). New York: Springer.
- Borg, S. (2006). *Teacher cognition and language education: Research and practice*. London: Continuum.
- Borg, S., & Burns, A. (2008). Integrating grammar in Adult TESOL classrooms. *Applied Linguistics*, 29(3), 456-482.
- Brown, H.D. (2002). English language teaching in the "Post-Method: era: Towards better diagnosis, treatment and assessment. In J. C. Richards & W.A. Renandya (Eds.), *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current*

- practice* (pp. 19-26). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Burgess, J., & Etherington, S. (2002). Focus on grammatical form: Explicit or implicit? *System*, 30, 433-458.
- Chia, S. C. C. (2003). Singapore primary teachers' beliefs in grammar teaching and learning. In D. Deterding, A. S. Brown & E. L. Low (Eds.), *English in Singapore: Research on grammar* (pp. 117-127). Singapore: McGraw-Hill.
- Clark, C. M., & Peterson, P. L. (1986). Teachers' thought processes. In M. C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research and teaching* (3rd ed., pp. 255-296). New York: Macmillan.
- Doughty, C., & Williams, J. (1998). Issues and terminology. In C. Doughty & J. Williams (Eds.), *Focus on form in classroom second language acquisition* (pp. 1-12). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ellis, G. (1996). How culturally appropriate is the communicative approach? *ELT Journal* 50(3), 213-218.
- Ellis, G. (1994). *The appropriateness of the communicative approach in Vietnam: An interview study in intercultural communication*. Unpublished MA thesis. Faculty of Education, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia.
- Ellis, R. (1992). *Second language acquisition and pedagogy*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Ellis, R. (2001a). Investigating form-focused instruction. *Language Learning* 51, Supplement 1, 1-46.
- Ellis, R. (2001b). *Form-focused instruction and second language learning*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Ellis, R. (2002). Does form-focused instruction affect the acquisition of implicit knowledge? A review of the research. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 24 (2), 223-236.
- Ellis, R. (2006). Current issues in the teaching of grammar: An SLA perspective. *TESOL Quarterly* 40(1), 83-108.
- Ellis, R., Basturkmen, H., & Loewen, S. (2001). Learner uptake in communicative ESL lessons. *Language Learning*, 51, 281-318.
- Ellis, R., Basturkmen, H., & Loewen, S. (2002). Doing focus on form. *System*, 34, 419-432.
- Ellis, R., & Gaies, S. (1999). *Impact grammar: Grammar through listening*. Hong Kong: Addison Wesley.
- Farrell, T. S. C. (1999). The reflective assignment: Unlocking pre-service teachers' beliefs on grammar teaching. *RELC Journal*, 30, 1-17.
- Farrell, T. S. C., & Lim P. C. P. (2005). Conceptions of grammar teaching: A case study of teachers' beliefs and classroom practices. *TESL-EJ*, 9, 1-13.

- Fotos, S. (1998). Shifting the focus from forms to form in the EFL Classroom. *ELT Journal* 52 (4), 301-307.
- Freeman, D. (1989). Teacher training, development and decision making model: A model of teaching and related strategies for language teacher education. *TESOL Quarterly*, 23(1), 27-45.
- Gass, S., & Mackey, A. (2000). *Stimulated recall methodology in second language research*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Howe, S. (1993). Teaching in Vietnam. *Interchange*, 22, 29-32
- Isenberg, J. P. (1990). Teachers' thinking and beliefs and classroom practice. *Childhood Education*, 66, 322-327.
- Jackson, P.W. (1968). *Life in classrooms*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Johnson, K. E. (1992a). The relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices during literacy instruction for non-native speakers of English. *Journal of Reading Behavior*, 24(1), 83-108.
- Johnson, K. E. (1992b). Learning to teach: Instructional actions and decisions of preservice ESL teachers. *TESOL Quarterly*, 26(3), 507-535.
- Johnson, K. E. (1994). The emerging beliefs and instructional practices of preservice English as second language teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 10(4), 439-452.
- Krashen, S. (1981). *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Kumaravivelu, B. (2003). *Beyond methods: Macrostrategies for language teaching*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Le, V. C. (2007). A historical review of English language education in Vietnam. In Y. H. Choi & B. Spolsky (Eds.), *English education in Asia: History and policies* (pp.168-180). Seoul: Asia TEFL.
- Lewis, M., & McCook, F. (2002). Cultures of teaching: Voices from Vietnam. *ELT Journal*, 56(2), 146-153.
- Long, M. H. (1991). Focus on form: A design feature in language teaching methodology. In K. de Bot, R. Ginsberg, & C. Kramsch (Eds.), *Foreign language research in cross-cultural perspective* (pp. 39-52). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Long, H., & Robinson, P. (1998). Focus on form: Theory, research and practice. In C. Doughty, & J. Williams (Eds.), *Focus on form in classroom second language acquisition* (pp. 15-41). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McCook, F. (1998). *A longitudinal study of responses to in-service teacher education by Vietnamese English language teachers*. Unpublished MA thesis. Massey University, New Zealand.

- Nassaji, H., & Fotos, S. (2004). Current developments in research in the teaching of grammar. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 24, 126-145.
- National Institute of Education of America (1975). *Teaching as clinical information processing [microform] : NIE Conference on Studies in Teaching : panel 6* [N.L. Gage, editor; Kent Viehoever, coordinating editor]. Washington, DC.: National Conference on Studies in Teaching 1974.
- Ng, J., & Farrell, T. S. C. (2003). Do teachers' beliefs of grammar teaching match their classroom practices? A Singapore case study. In D. Deterding, A. S. Brown & E.L. Low (Eds.), *English in Singapore: Research on grammar* (pp. 128-137). Singapore: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Patricia, L. P. C. (2003). Primary school teachers' beliefs about effective grammar teaching and their actual classroom practices: A Singapore case study. Retrieved December 27, 2006 from the World Wide Web <http://davidd.myplace.nie.edu.sg>.
- Richards, J. C., Li, B., & Tang, A. (1998). Exploring pedagogical reasoning skills. In J. C. Richards (Ed.), *Beyond Training* (pp. 86-102). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J. C., & Nunan, D. (1990). *Second language teacher education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J. C., Gallo, P. B., & Renandya, W.A. (2001). Exploring teachers' beliefs and the processes of change. *The PAC Journal*, 1(1), 41-62.
- Sheen, R., (2003). Focus on form: A myth in the making? *ELT Journal*, 57(3), 225-233.
- Sheen, R., & O'Neill, R. (2005). Tangled up in form: Critical comments on 'Teachers' stated beliefs about incidental focus on form and their classroom practices' by Basturkmen, Loewen, and Ellis. *Applied Linguistics*, 26(2), 268-274.
- Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wajnryb, R. (1990). *Resource books for teachers: Grammar dictation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Woods, D. (1996). *Teacher cognition in language teaching: Beliefs, decision-making and classroom practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Zhen, Z., & Murphy, E. (2007). Tensions in the language learning experiences and beliefs of Chinese teachers of English as a foreign language. *TESL-EJ*, 10(4), 1-19.

APPENDIX: THE VIETNAM QUESTIONNAIRE

Part I: Grammar Approach

Please specify the degree you agree or disagree with the statements on the roles of grammar and grammar teaching methods for an English preparatory class to serve academic purposes. If you strongly agree, please tick 4 in the table. If you agree, please tick 3. If you disagree, please tick 2. If you strongly disagree, please tick 1 in the table. Choose one option.

	Disagree		Agree
1. The role of grammar in a language can be seen:			
a) As a framework of a language, i.e. a basic system on which other aspects are build.	1	2	3 4
b) As blocks of language combined to create the whole.	1	2	3 4
c) As a supplement for sufficient linguistic competence: a refinement for a more basic linguistic knowledge.	1	2	3 4
d) As an equal backbone for sufficient linguistic competence. (Other backbones can be knowledge of phonetics, appropriate and cultivated language command, etc.)	1	2	3 4
2. Learners study grammar by their exposure to the environment of using the language naturally.	1	2	3 4
3. Teaching linguistic forms helps learners produce right grammar.	1	2	3 4
4. Learners' using the language is unrelated to the conscious knowledge of the grammar system and its functions.	1	2	3 4
5. Learners can improve their grammatical accuracy through regular structure drills.	1	2	3 4
6. Learners need conscious knowledge of grammar to improve their language.	1	2	3 4
7. Structure drills are always in a complete communicative context.	1	2	3 4
8. Separate treatment of grammar cannot bring linguistic knowledge for students to use in natural communication.	1	2	3 4
9. Learners should be consciously aware of the forms and functions of structures before using them sufficiently.	1	2	3 4
10. Excluding grammar from the language teaching program is beneficial to the learners.	1	2	3 4

11. Non-contextual structure drills play a certain role in the language learning process.	1	2	3	4
12. Structure drills for generative purpose play an essential role in the learning process.	1	2	3	4
13. Grammar is best taught through communicative activities.	1	2	3	4
14. Participating in language activities in real life is the best way for learners to develop their grammatical knowledge.	1	2	3	4
15. Learners study grammar more effectively if grammar is introduced in a full text.	1	2	3	4
16. Teachers should only correct language forms which hinder communication.	1	2	3	4
17. Comparison and contrast of individual structures is beneficial to learners' grammar learning.	1	2	3	4
18. Correction focussing on language forms helps learners improve their grammar usage.	1	2	3	4
19. Grammar is best taught through individual structures.	1	2	3	4
20. Explicit discussion of grammar rules is beneficial to learners.	1	2	3	4

Part II. Learners' and teachers' difficulties with grammar

Following are the issues on learners' and teachers' way of dealing with grammar in the classroom. Please specify your agreement or disagreement on the following statements as in the previous part.

	Disagree		Agree	
1. My learners find it difficult to apply grammatical knowledge to communicate.	1	2	3	4
2. Problem-solving techniques in learning grammar increase my learners' motivation.	1	2	3	4
3. My learners want the teacher to explain grammar clearly/ explicitly.	1	2	3	4
4. My learners find it more interesting to learn grammar through an example of a sentence.	1	2	3	4
5. My learners like combining meanings and structures better by themselves.	1	2	3	4
6. My learners find it difficult to deal with grammar introduced in real-life materials.	1	2	3	4
7. My learners find real-life materials difficult because there are a variety of structures in these materials.	1	2	3	4

8. My learners find real-life materials difficult because these materials are closely related to culture.	1	2	3	4
9. My learners find real-life materials difficult because of the vocabulary used in these materials.	1	2	3	4
10. My learners cannot find the relations between forms and functions in real-life materials without teachers' clear explanation.	1	2	3	4
11. Teachers find it time-consuming to use real-life materials.	1	2	3	4
12. Teachers find it difficult to introduce suitable tasks on the basis of real-life materials.	1	2	3	4
13. Not teaching grammar explicitly worries my learners.	1	2	3	4
14. My learners find grammar terms beneficial.	1	2	3	4
15. Teachers find it difficult to correct learners' mistakes in communicative writing.	1	2	3	4
16. Teachers find it difficult to correct learners' speaking mistakes.	1	2	3	4
17. My learners find it difficult to improve grammar accuracy in a communicative writing activity.	1	2	3	4
18. My learners find it difficult to improve grammatical accuracy in a communicative speaking activity.	1	2	3	4
19. My learners find it difficult to use grammatical terms.	1	2	3	4
20. My learners find it demotivating to use problem-solving techniques to study grammar.	1	2	3	4
