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### Teaching Grammar: A Survey of Teacher's Beliefs and Attitudes in Bhutan

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#### Introduction

Canh and Barnard (2009, p. 246) state that the teaching of grammar continues to be a matter of controversy in the field of applied linguistics and second language teaching. Shavelson and Stern (1981) and Tillema (2000) hold the general view that there is now agreement in general education studies that teaching is a cognitive activity and that teachers' beliefs greatly impact their instructional decisions in the classroom. Moreover, in the last 15 years, educational research has claimed that teachers' classroom practices are determined to an extensive degree by their personal pedagogical belief systems (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992). So, while it is generally agreed that some consideration to grammatical form is useful, and perhaps necessary, many issues pertaining to the teaching of grammar still need further research, especially into the fundamental social factors that are an inevitable element of classroom learning. The principal among these social factors are the personalities of the teachers and learners – and their individual and collective constructions of classroom reality. The beliefs and attitudes of practising teachers are increasingly being sought to illuminate 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, and the role of practice. Zhen and Murphy (2007, p. 2) have pointed out that there are fewer studies in pertinent research domains of non-native speaking EFL teachers compared to the amount of literature about native speaking ESL teachers' beliefs. This indicates that there is a serious gap in practical research that needs to be bridged in countries like Bhutan, and this study is a maiden attempt toward that goal.

The study reported here took its inspiration from a study conducted in 2009 (Canh & Barnard, 2009) with a view to exploring the attitudes of a group of teachers in Bhutan towards the teaching of grammar, and to make comparisons with the New Zealand EAP teachers surveyed in 2008 (Barnard & Scampton, 2008) and with the Vietnamese teachers surveyed in 2009 (Canh & Barnard, 2009).

#### Literature Review

##### The Teaching of Grammar

As Canh and Barnard (2009) wrote, “the consensus among applied linguists is that language learning should have a primary focus on meaning within an overall communicative framework” (p. 247). However,

as Fotos (1998) discussed, “the inability of communicating ESL teaching to promote high levels of accuracy is now clear” (p. 303). Therefore, there is current theoretical debate, even sharp controversy, between linguists (e.g., Sheen 2003; Sheen & O’Neil, 2005) over focus on forms (FonFS) and focus on form (FonF).

In the former (FonFS), teachers plan lessons about specific grammar points to promote an explicit understanding of grammar by various means, provide written and oral drills to practise the target forms, and allow numerous opportunities for the communicative use of the target forms. FonFS is generally exemplified by the Presentation, Practice, Production (PPP) model. Moreover, grammar can also be taught explicitly and inductively through activities such as ‘dictogloss’ (Wajnryb, 1990).

Focus on form, on the other hand, assumes an indirect, context-based focus on grammar, rather than overt, teacher-led instruction (Doughty & Williams, 1998). Based on communicative tasks, the attention on form is paid only when grammatical difficulties arise, resulting in a communicative breakdown. Several studies have been conducted investigating FonF in some ESL contexts, notably by Ellis and his associates (Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2004; Ellis, 2002; Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2002).

Although Ellis (2006) agrees that grammar has a central place in language teaching, the following statement about Knowledge About Learning (KAL) still applies today about the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and grammar and theories of grammar:

Theoretical debates and popular discussions of rationales and models for KAL in the classroom have been informed by little empirical evidence regarding teachers’ current beliefs and classroom practices in the area. (Brumfit, Mitchell, & Hooper, 1996, p. 70)

Therefore, it is now to this issue of teachers’ beliefs and attitude of teaching grammar that attention is turned.

## **The Attitudes of Second Language Teachers to the Teaching of Grammar**

Johnson (1994) states that 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. Despite the increased levels of interest in the area of language teachers’ beliefs, there have not been many investigations that have focused on the beliefs of experienced language teachers (Farrell & Lim, 2005, p. 3). It was not until recently that understanding how the cognitive processes of second language teachers impact their classroom instruction began to draw the attention of researchers (Borg, 1998; Freeman, 1989; Richards & Nunan, 1990; Woods, 1996).

Borg (2003) reviewed 64 studies of language teacher cognition out of which 38 focused on grammar teaching. The majority of these studies were conducted in Europe, Britain, or North America. As such, the need for research in a greater variety of contexts was reiterated.

Yet, a notable number of studies into Asian teachers’ beliefs about grammar have been conducted. Patricia (2003), for example, studied two English teachers of a primary school in Singapore and the data showed that their actual instructional decisions and practices were influenced by factors other than their personal beliefs, some of which were uncontrollable. Somewhat similar to this was a study conducted by Zhen and Murphy (2007) with six EFL university teachers in China.

Three surveys are of particular relevance to the present study. The first one, carried out by Burgess and Etherington (2002), identified 48 British EAP teachers in UK universities and investigated their attitudes towards the topic under study. The responding teachers appeared to consider grammar as important for their students and they had a sophisticated understanding of the problems and issues involved in teaching. With an inclination towards the use of authentic, full texts and real-life tasks for practice, the teachers favoured discourse-based approaches to decontextualized presentation of grammar items.

The second study was conducted by Barnard and Scampton (2008), who surveyed 32 EAP teachers in New Zealand. The findings stated that, like the British teachers in the 2002 survey, the New Zealand

teachers favoured the treatment of grammatical features in complete texts rather than in isolation.

A recent survey was conducted by Canh and Barnard (2009) to study teachers' attitudes in Vietnam. Out of 29 teachers who taught in universities and other institutes of higher education, all of whom taught EAP courses as part of their teaching duties, the majority of the respondents (53.6%) agreed on grammar being a framework and that it is central for language teaching.

The central idea that emerges from all the above-mentioned studies is that teachers hold very strong beliefs about various aspects of teaching, including the place of grammar in language teaching, and that these beliefs impact what they do in their classrooms. Canh and Barnard (2009, p. 254) mention that their belief systems are affected by other factors, some of which relate to their background experience. These beliefs are said to form a structured set of principles and are derived from a teacher's prior experiences, school practices, and a teacher's individual personality (Borg, 2003). The beliefs of several teachers, for instance, may be influenced by the imposition of the principal and department heads. In addition, their perceptions may be shaped by the influence of colleagues, social acquaintances and their personal lives, and their understanding that "the needs, interests and abilities of their students, will colour their judgements and possibly lead to long-term changes in their belief system" (Canh & Barnard, 2009, p. 254). Language teaching, therefore, can be seen as a process which is defined by dynamic interactions among cognition, context, and experience (Borg, 2006, p. 275). Yet, to further develop their knowledge and pedagogy, language teachers may take into account insights drawn from theoretical insights and empirical research studies.

Tensions between what teachers say and do are a reflection of their belief sub-system, and of the different forces which influence their thinking and behaviour. Studying the underlying reasons behind such tensions can enable both researchers and teacher educators to better understand the process of teaching (Phipps & Borg, 2009, p. 381).

Moreover, to date, no studies have been identified that have specifically investigated the beliefs and attitudes of Bhutanese teachers in regard to grammar teaching. Thus, it was felt that a survey of a group of these teachers' attitudes would complement previous studies, and add to the academic and professional understanding about what teachers believe about basic aspects of grammar and grammar teaching.

## Method

### Research Questions

This study adapts the research questions used by Canh and Barnard (2009), which are as follows:

Which attitudes about grammar and grammar teaching are most widely held by EAP teachers (in Bhutan)?

Is there a bias towards decontextualized presentation of grammar and away from discourse-based, unified approaches?

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

### Participants and Settings

The participants of this study were 15 Bhutanese teachers who are currently teaching English as second language in different schools in Bhutan. All the participants have been teaching for more than 5 years, and 4 participants have taught for more than 10 years. Bhutanese teachers have completed their Bachelors in Education, either with English as a major or one of the major subjects, while the Vietnamese teachers

were a cohort of graduate students following an M.A. programme in Applied Linguistics, and all but one of the New Zealand teachers held an M.A. and/or Doctorate in Applied Linguistics.

## Data Collection Procedures

With prior permission from Le Van Canh and Roger Barnard, a questionnaire that was used in a 2009 survey of Vietnamese teachers was used in this study. The version used in this survey solicited four Likert scale responses: strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree.

All participants were contacted through Facebook Messenger, and before questionnaires were sent, they were informed about the scope and purpose of the study and their willingness and formal consent to participants was solicited. Thirty questionnaires were sent through their personal emails, but questionnaires were completed and returned by only 15 teachers (a return rate of 50%) working at different schools in Bhutan.

## Results and Discussion

### Results

The survey results focus only on the items of the questionnaire that were considered the most central to the two research questions. It should be noted that the responses ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4). The results are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1  
*The Centrality of Grammar in Language Teaching*

No	Questionnaire Item	1	2	3	4
1	As a framework of a language, i.e. a basic system on which other aspects are build.	1	1	10	3
2	Learners study grammar by their experience to the environment of using the language naturally	1	7	6	1
3	Teaching linguistic forms helps learners produce right grammar.	0	8	6	1
6	Learners can improve their grammar accuracy through regular structure drills.	1	6	7	1
10	Excluding grammar from the language teaching program is beneficial to the learners.	3	5	4	3
20	Explicit discussion of grammar rules is beneficial to learners.	1	2	5	7
23	My learners want the teacher to explain grammar clearly/explicitly.	0	3	8	4
33	Not teaching grammar explicitly worries my learners.	0	3	6	6

On one hand, there is widespread agreement among the Bhutanese teachers on the centrality of grammar *as a framework of a language* (1) and of belief in their students' wish for grammar to be explicitly explained (20 and 23). On the other hand, the two conceptions that *learners study grammar by their exposure to the environment of using the language naturally* (2) and that learners would benefit if grammar were excluded from the programme (10) were both rejected by 7 respondents and 5 respondents respectively. It is obvious that "some of the above attitudes – while ostensibly focusing on the learners' needs and wishes – may actually reflect the pedagogical preferences of the learners" (Burgess & Etherington, 2002).

TABLE 2  
*The Role of Practice*

No	Questionnaire Item	1	2	3	4
5	Learners can improve their grammatical accuracy through regular structure drills.	1	2	8	4
11	Non-contextual structure drills play a certain role in the language learning process.	2	3	6	4
12	Structure drills for generative purpose play an essential role in the learning process.	1	4	8	2
22	Problem-solving techniques in learning grammar increase my learners' motivation	0	2	9	4
40	My learners find it demotivating to use problem-solving techniques to study grammar.	3	10	2	0

Eight respondents agreed with the statement that their *learners can improve their grammatical accuracy through regular structure drills* (5) and *structure drills for generative purpose play an essential role in the learning process* (12). It can therefore be deduced that Bhutanese teachers have positive attitudes towards the role of practice. There has been a long stretching and cantankerous argument about the effectiveness of teaching grammar concepts explicitly to students (Hartwell, 1985; Myhill, 2005; van Gelderen, 2006). However, 10 respondents disagree on statement 40 in this study, so it is evident that the Bhutanese teachers consider that their learners benefit from problem-solving grammar practices of one sort or the other. Overall, there is a perception that Bhutanese teachers uphold the efficacy of explicit teaching of grammar through regular structural drills (5).

TABLE 3  
*The Correction of Errors*

No	Questionnaire Item	1	2	3	4
16	Teachers should only correct language forms which hinder communication.	1	6	5	3
18	Correction focussing on language forms helps learners improve their grammar usage.	1	2	5	7
35	Teachers find it difficult to correct learners' mistakes in communicative writing	2	5	5	3
36	Teachers find it difficult to correct learners' speaking mistakes	3	6	5	1

There is a split over the issue response to statement 16, *teachers should only correct language forms which hinder communication*, but there is strong agreement with statement 18, *correction focusing on language forms helps learners improve their grammar usage*. While there is general agreement with statement 35, *teachers find it difficult to correct learner's mistakes in communicative writing*, Bhutanese teachers found it difficult to correct learner's speaking mistakes (36). Therefore, "it could be concluded that teachers experience more difficulty in correction during students' spoken rather than written communication" (Burgess & Etherington, 2002).

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 vigorous attitude towards errors. Clearly, this is an issue that warrants further investigation (Canh & Barnard, 2009, p. 259).

TABLE 4  
*The Use of Arithmetic Texts*

No	Questionnaire Item	1	2	3	4
15	Learners study grammar more effectively if grammar is introduced in a full text.	0	5	6	4
26	My learners find it difficult to deal with grammar introduced in real-life materials.	2	4	6	3
29	My learners find real-life materials difficult because of the vocabulary used in these materials.	0	3	8	4
30	My learners cannot find the relations between forms and functions in real-life materials without teachers' help.	0	4	8	3
31	Teachers find it time-consuming to use real-life materials.	1	6	7	1

Six teachers agreed and 4 teachers strongly agreed that their *learners study grammar more effectively if grammar is introduced in a full text* (15). However, 8 teachers are in agreement that their *learners find it difficult to deal with grammar introduced in real-life material* (26). Therefore, 8 teachers agreed that their *learners cannot find the relations between forms and functions in real-life materials without teachers' clear explanation* (30). Although 6 teachers disagreed, 7 teachers agreed that *they find it time-consuming to use real-life materials* (31). In general, Bhutanese teachers' opinions about the use of authentic texts are in line with the findings of the 2002 survey that there is "no general feeling that authentic texts take more time in the classroom or in preparation" (Burgess & Etherington, 2002, p. 446).

## Discussion

Swales (1990) has made the distinction between speech and discourse communities which are useful in this study; the former is said to be locally based groups who speak the same academic language face-to-face while discourse communities comprise dispersed academic groups who communicate through texts. Thus, the Bhutanese teachers, like the Vietnamese teachers, form part of a local speech community of practice by regularly meeting together.

### Which Attitudes about Grammar and Grammar Teaching are Most Widely Held by the Teachers in Bhutan?

The results of this study strongly indicate that Bhutanese teachers consider grammar to be a central feature of language and a crucial element in their pedagogy. There is a similar agreement of views regarding the need for explicit grammar instruction, the usefulness of explaining rules, the importance attached to appropriate error corrections, and the need for practice of various kinds. Like the Vietnamese teachers, Bhutanese teachers have some issues which distinguish them from the New Zealand EAP teachers. One of these is that they rejected 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 (Canh & Barnard, 2009, p. 262).

Similarly, the Bhutanese students must be far less accessible to an English-speaking environment due to which they would need to learn grammar more consciously with the help of teachers.

### Is there a Bias towards Decontextualized Presentation of Grammar and Away from Discourse-Based, Unified Approaches?

The findings from this survey concur with the findings from the New Zealand and the Vietnamese

studies. They agreed that their learners learn if grammar is introduced and presented in full texts. The percentage of positive responses in Bhutan (40%) was lesser though in comparison to Vietnam (44.8%), and the responses in New Zealand which were even higher than in Vietnam. Teachers from all three of these studies (New Zealand, Vietnam, and Bhutan) felt that the use of authentic texts and materials were excessively time-consuming.

As put forth by Canh and Barnard (2009, p. 262), the respondents in this study preferred to introduce grammatical items through texts rather than in a decontextualized presentation, as may be dealt with in an approach based on PPP methods.

Referring to their respondents' lack of technical language, such as focus on forms, despite their generally high level of qualifications, Borg and Burns (2008, p. 479) went on to say that the largely experimental nature of teachers' evidence base in justifying their work, and this raises the questions about whether their judgements about its effectiveness could be reliable. This also, thus, raises questions about the role of theory in second language teacher development and practice (Canh & Barnard, 2009). The implication here, therefore, is that the professional experience of teachers may be unreliable (Sheen & O'Neil, 2005). Thus, it is pivotal to thoroughly investigate the relationship between explicit theories as published in academic works, and the implicit theories developed from teachers' professional practices (Canh & Barnard, 2009, p. 263).

## Conclusion

The present study provides some insights into the beliefs of a particular group of teachers in relation to the current theoretical practices regarding the role of grammar. The Bhutanese teachers in this study, like the EAP teachers in New Zealand and the teachers in Vietnam, favoured the treatment of grammatical features in complete texts rather than in isolation. The findings of the present study also aligned with the picture of grammar teaching reported in the 2008 New Zealand EAP teachers' survey as being one "characterized 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" (Borg & Burns, 2008, p. 477).

However, with regard to the design and implementation of textbooks and the curriculum, more attention needs to be paid to the contextual knowledge and understandings that teachers bring to the task and to the beliefs that they hold as a result of their experiences. Therefore, professional development programmes for teachers should have a fitting balance between what is argued from hypothetical positions and indicated from practical studies, and the development of language teachers should be a locally co-constructed and shared endeavour, and not a process of top-down obligation of ideas drawn from somewhere else (Canh & Barnard, 2009).

Borg (2003, p. 105) has questioned as to whether language teachers' cognition could be usefully studied without reference to what happens in the classroom. Therefore, further research is needed in more contexts, not only about what teachers' beliefs and attitudes are, but also to what extent they really exhibit their language in the real classroom situations. Similarly, the best way of knowing how teachers go about their tasks in the classroom is to observe them directly (Fossum, 2015, p. 11). Hence, classroom observations, and qualitative interviews involving more teachers could be conducted to get a more in-depth understanding of teachers' beliefs and attitudes. There is also a need to explore the beliefs of students in order to see the extent to which their respective views coincide with the beliefs of their teachers. Finally, as Canh and Barnard (2009) concluded, "given the increasing importance of English Language Teaching in all its aspect 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" (p. 256).

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## Appendix

### Survey Questionnaire

#### Teaching Grammar: A Survey of Teachers' Beliefs and Attitudes as Perceived by Teachers of Phuentsholing Higher Secondary School, Bhutan

Dear participant,

Thank you for agreeing to complete this survey. You will not be asked to provide your name so your identity will be completely anonymous to the researcher.

#### 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.**

	Items	Disagree		Agree	
		1	2	3	4
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.

	Items	Disagree		Agree	
21.	My learners find it difficult to apply grammatical knowledge to communicate.	1	2	3	4
22.	Problem-solving techniques in learning grammar increase my learners' motivation.	1	2	3	4
23.	My learners want the teacher to explain grammar clearly/ explicitly.	1	2	3	4
24.	My learners find it more interesting to learn grammar through an example of a sentence.	1	2	3	4
25.	My learners like combining meanings and structures better by themselves.	1	2	3	4
26.	My learners find it difficult to deal with grammar introduced in real-life materials.	1	2	3	4
27.	My learners find real-life materials difficult because there are a variety of structures in these materials.	1	2	3	4
28.	My learners find real-life materials difficult because these materials are closely related to culture.	1	2	3	4
29.	My learners find real-life materials difficult because of the vocabulary used in these materials.	1	2	3	4
30.	My learners cannot find the relations between forms and functions in real-life materials without teachers' clear explanation.	1	2	3	4
31.	Teachers find it time-consuming to use real-life materials.	1	2	3	4
32.	Teachers find it difficult to introduce suitable tasks on the basis of real-life materials.	1	2	3	4
33.	Not teaching grammar explicitly worries my learners.	1	2	3	4
34.	My learners find grammar terms beneficial.	1	2	3	4
35.	Teachers find it difficult to correct learners' mistakes in communicative writing.	1	2	3	4
36.	Teachers find it difficult to correct learners' speaking mistakes.	1	2	3	4

37.	My learners find it difficult to improve grammar accuracy in a communicative writing activity.	1	2	3	4
38.	My learners find it difficult to improve grammatical accuracy in a communicative speaking activity.	1	2	3	4
39.	My learners find it difficult to use grammatical terms.	1	2	3	4
40.	My learners find it demotivating to use problem-solving techniques to study grammar.	1	2	3	4

*Thank you for your cooperation!*