



Grammar in the Contemporary L2 Classroom: Teachers’ Beliefs and its Relationship with Teachers’ Grammar Competencies

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Abstract

Grammar competency in teachers had never been given a more thorough study in recent literature. While much has been assessed in students’ linguistic capabilities, more so in L2 classrooms, the teachers’ linguistic capabilities themselves had not yet been assessed in recent studies. This study aims to look into not only teachers’ grammar proficiency rates but also to look at the relationship between that proficiency and their beliefs on the place of grammar in their classrooms. An English proficiency test was administered to assess the teachers’ grammar proficiency, while another survey questionnaire was conducted to assess their beliefs on grammar competency. The results show that while teachers display an above-average grammar proficiency, it does not necessarily relate to their beliefs on grammar in their classrooms. Recommendations have also been included considering the findings of the study.

Keywords: teachers’ grammar competency; L2 classroom; teachers’ beliefs; communicative competence.

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1. Introduction

The literature on teacher grammar competency is very sparse. There is not much to go on, besides the numerous studies citing teacher cognition and teacher beliefs first published by linguistic scholar Michael Borg in the late 90's. Also, the focus on grammar of this study comes as an outdated model, only to be replaced with the preference of current pedagogy on communicative language teaching (CLT), which stems from linguist M.A.K. Halliday's principles on systemic-functional linguistics (SFL). However, a peek at what teacher-education studies have produced brings better light to the necessity of this study.

Grammar Skills Training and Teacher Education

However, teacher education studies themselves validate a number of methods to instill grammatical competence within pre-service teachers. The author in [1] found out that pre-service English teachers "regard grammatical knowledge as important and useful especially for fostering students' English writing and reading abilities". Another study in [7] mentions that pre-service teachers saw a potential within games to enhance learning grammatical abilities. While according to [4] in their formative years, student-teachers' cognitions are trained more on content rather than context. For instance, a study by [13] underlined various errors in student-teacher writing and cited mechanical/ grammatical errors were prevalent in their writings. Future research would benefit well from studying beyond the content but with contexts and processes [4]. Considering these findings, it is only logical and imperative that linguistic/ grammatical competence be reviewed beyond the teacher education classroom and what has become of their grammatical abilities within or beyond their novice years in the teaching service.

Studies in Teacher Beliefs/Cognition

How teachers perceive or believe what role the grammar plays in the classroom is more of the concern in recent studies. Linguistic scholar Michael Borg has explored the concept of teachers' beliefs or "pedagogical systems". In his definition, these pedagogical systems are the "beliefs, knowledge, theories, assumptions and attitudes that teachers hold about all their aspects of their work" [3]. Studies in teachers' beliefs in grammar competence primarily locates the teacher within his/her pedagogical system and investigate the teachers' considerations, even personal or psychological ones, when integrating lessons, i.e., grammar lessons. This later on evolved to be collectively called "teacher cognition" [3]. Figure 1 shows his framework for teacher cognition.

A similar paradigm from Borg's pedagogical systems is Johnson & Laird's "mental models" [10]. Mental models (MM) "are powerful cognitive entities that organize how people interpret their world and how they act on it". As such, educational MM's work for teachers to situate where their students are coming from and build from that knowledge. This has clear theoretical roots from psychologist Lev Vygotsky's principles of scaffolding and zone of proximal development. Argyis and Schon has differentiated MM's into three: *espoused* (a teacher's previously held knowledge), *in-action* (actual practice), and *on-action* (referring to actual practices) [10].

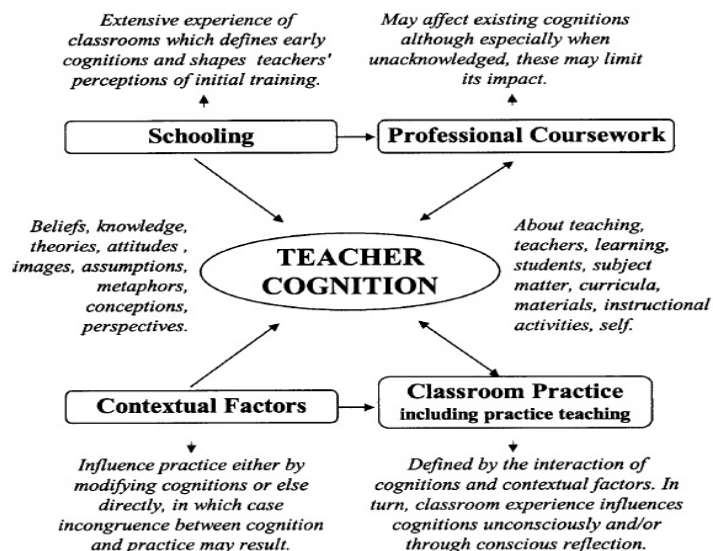


Figure 1: Teacher cognition framework (Borg, 2003)

Teaching Grammar in the L2 Classroom

Discussing grammar capability within teachers would eventually tackle how teachers teach grammar in the second-language (L2) classroom, however biased this becomes for English course instructors. The authors in [11] found out that Persian teachers still emphasize grammar instruction within their lessons, and in fact they prefer grammar discussions utilizing the deductive method of teaching. For instance, one study confirms that teachers of English for Foreign Language (EFL) would most likely utilize a “focus-on-formS” approach. This approach entails a discussion of grammatical structure complementing with drills and supplementary exercises for improvement [20]. However, discussions like these are often to the detriment of curriculum goals, like communicative competence, for instance [20]. Teachers of writing, on the other hand, admittedly use grammar-translation method (GTM) or its variants when undertaking a writing lesson. Teachers also cite the length of syllabus and classroom management conditions as critical factors that impact writing lessons [2].

Even with the current persistence of communicative competence and the training for “real-world” scenarios, studies still validate how teachers prefer teaching grammatical lessons on varying degrees [7]. While some teachers view it positively to the extent of integrating it within their lessons, some teachers are changing paradigms into more relevant pedagogies. However, even the very study of [7] had verified that most teachers prefer communicative competence-oriented lessons. This disparity in the literature has been identified by a meta-analysis of the literature by [4]. He has found that more experienced teachers discuss grammar lessons explicitly while younger teachers make implicit grammar teaching references. The author in [20] saw this compromise as another approach to grammar teaching, which is the “focus-on-form” approach which is any activity which intends the learners to focus on grammatical forms [20]. This compromise is clearly observed by researchers in actual teaching processes, where linguistic caveats are unfolded gradually within communication-oriented lessons [9].

Going back to the teacher's own competence in grammatical ability, much is still to be desired in terms of improving their own linguistic skills. A study with Thai teachers revealed that even though demands for professional development is at a moderate level, teachers are very welcoming with the concept [14]. Studies on linguistic professional development must still be continued to address the linguistic skills of teachers.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to investigate the grammar competency of basic education (K-10) teachers by answering the following questions:

- What is the rate of grammar proficiency in BED teachers in terms of the following:
 - General assessment rate;
 - Subject area handled;
 - Length of service; and
 - Per grammar area/ topic
- How do teachers perceive the use of grammar and its prevalence in their classrooms?
- Do the rate of grammar proficiency in BED teachers significantly relate to their beliefs in the use of grammar in their classrooms?

The study desires to contribute to the literature by sharing insights to the product of teacher-education trainings that has been highlighted earlier. It continues existing findings by presenting a validation of their skills, and even exploring interdisciplinary study by investigating the linguistic capabilities of teachers beyond the language areas. The study can also form as basis to grammar/ linguistic professional development trainings and programs aimed at improving their use of the language, and considering that English, as a medium of instruction, is also a tool subject encompassing most subject areas.

Significance of the Study

The results and implications drawn from this study serve to a number of issues relevant to the field of language education and teacher education. For one, the study desires to contribute to the literature by sharing insights to the product of teacher-education trainings that has been highlighted earlier. It continues existing findings by presenting a validation of their skills, and even exploring interdisciplinary study by investigating the linguistic capabilities of teachers beyond the language areas.

The study can also form as basis to grammar/ linguistic professional development trainings and programs aimed at improving their use of the language, and considering that English, as a medium of instruction, is also a tool subject encompassing most subject areas. Teachers are also expected to be communicatively competent. This entails that teachers themselves, to be fully competent in expressing themselves, must be able to recognize basic grammar caveats.

Moreover, this study also breaks ground in some respects. While learner grammar competence is an often explored avenue in language education, the linguistic competence of educators themselves also deserve an equal

amount of scrutiny.

2. Method

While most of the studies earlier were mostly qualitative, if not mixed-methods, this would be basically a quantitative study utilizing descriptive investigation to determine the grammar competency rate of basic education (K-10) teachers. Thirty eight (38) teachers were selected as respondents for this study, all belonging to the Basic Education Department (BED) of La Consolacion University Philippines (LCUP). The BED of LCUP covers schooling levels from the Early Childhood Education (ECE) to Grades 1 through 10. The teacher-respondents took a 75-item English Proficiency test, from which the data was utilized for this study. Each item in the test target a specific grammar/ linguistic caveat, and as such would be itemized later on in the analysis of the data. After the exams, the teacher will then be served with a 15-item survey questionnaire inquiring about their beliefs in the uses of grammar in the classroom. For the survey, the respondents would be asked to choose a response from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree”. To properly indicate their responses the study would utilize the following descriptive equivalents as shown in Table 1 for its interpretation hereafter.

Table 1: Descriptive Equivalents for the Survey Results Interpretation

Descriptive Equivalent	Score	Range Scale
Strongly Disagree	1	1.00-1.49
Disagree	2	1.50-2.49
I don't know	3	2.50-3.49
Agree	4	3.50-4.49
Strongly Agree	5	4.50-5.00

The results would be analysed via mean and standard deviation values, and a t-test to compare the means of the ratings between subject areas. In aid of computation, the study will utilize the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software Version 23 to analyse the data following the test and the survey.

3. Results and Discussion

Performance of Teachers According to Subject Area

Figure 2 illustrates the results from the English Proficiency Test as administered to the basic education department teachers of La Consolacion University Philippines. The Science area gathered the highest average rating for the exam with 57.86 points succeeded by the English area with 57.33, only slighted by a mere .53 margin. The Math area follows with 56.67 points, MAPEH area with 54.33 points, Filipino area with 52.67 points, Araling Panlipunan (AP) area with 47.25 points; Early Childhood Education area with 45.88 points, and the Technology and Livelihood Education (TLE) area with 45.25 points.

In general, the entire BED gathered a cumulative 52.15 points. The highest score was 69 points and the lowest score was 36 points.

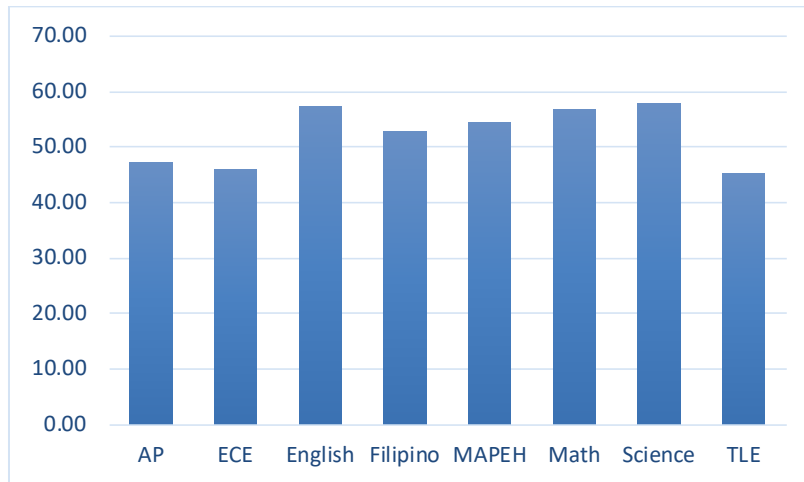


Figure 2: Performance of BED Teachers According to Subject Area

It is evident in the findings that, even with the English area coming in a close second, the level of their grammar proficiency is above average as expected within their area. The Filipino area, although working with a different language, follows a similar linguistic framework as language subjects. As such, their results were also well expected within their performance. With the Science area coming in first, the factors that contribute to their proficiency is yet unclear. All of these results open the possibilities of future interdisciplinary studies as to how linguistic competence affects, in any way, the teaching-learning processes in different fields. Language courses like English and Filipino may already have their fair share of literature, but areas in STEM and Vocational Education may be explored.

Performance of BED Teachers According to Length of Service

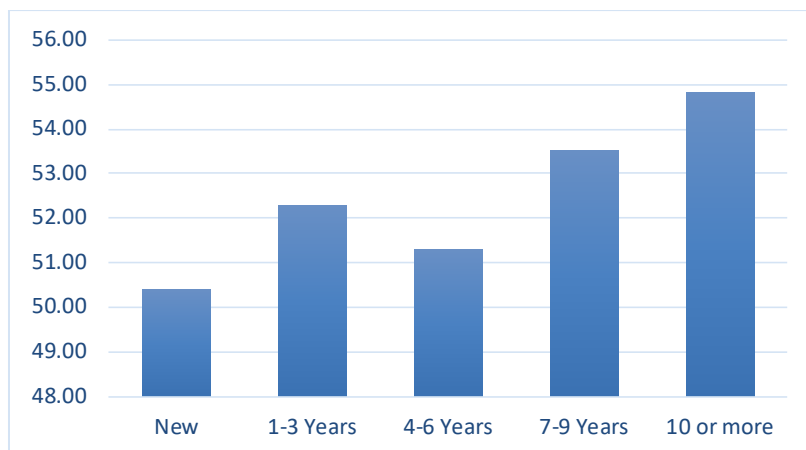
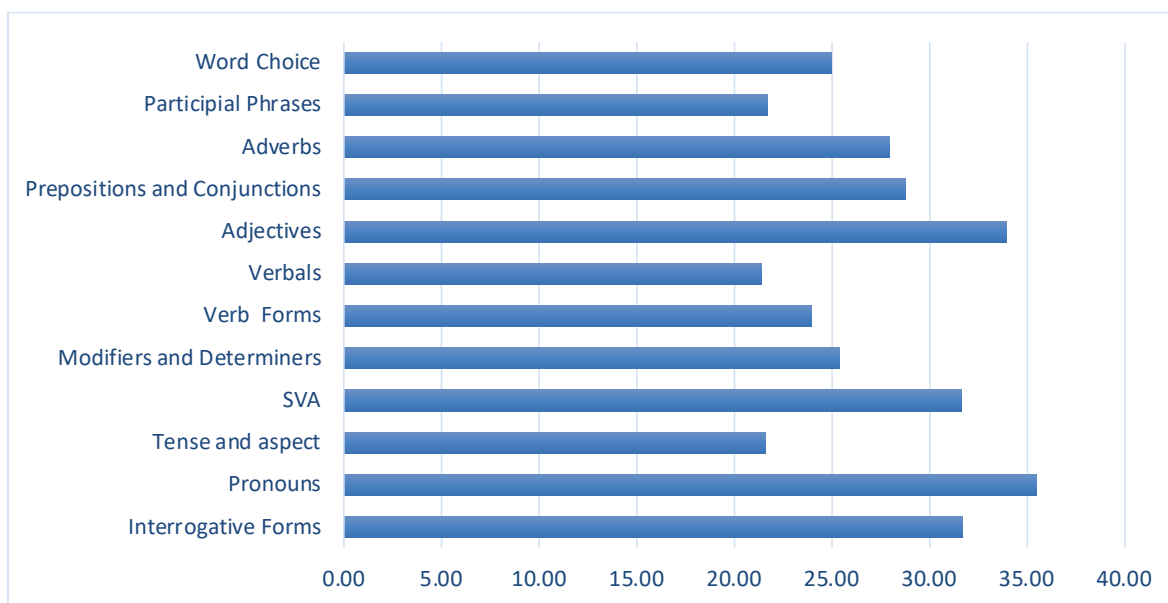


Figure 3: Performance of BED Teachers According to Length of Service

For this study, the range of service rendered to teaching was considered by threes. There were five ranges considered: New Teachers, 1-3 Years, 4-6 Years, 7-9 Years and 10 or more. Figure 3 illustrates the results. The highest cumulative score comes from those who had rendered service for 4-6 years with 65 points. Next highest cumulative score comes from those that had rendered 10 years or more with 54.25 points. Teachers who had rendered 7-9 years in the teaching profession gathered 53.50 points. Teachers who had rendered 1-3 years in the profession gathered 51.63 points, and then by those who are new in the profession by 50.38 cumulative points. It is interesting to note that the graph in Figure 3 presents an upward trend only to be broken in the middle where it represents teachers who had served 4-6 years in the teaching profession. There are twelve grammar areas/ topic identified and assessed out of the 75 items, as shown in Figure Figure 4. The teachers proved to be strongest at Pronouns, Adjectives and Interrogative Forms with the average correct responses (ACR) of 35.50, 34, and 31.71, respectively. This is followed by Subject and Verb Agreement (SVA) with an ACR of 31.67, Prepositions and Conjunctions with 28.80 ACR, Adverbs with 28, Modifiers and Determiners with 25.40, Word Choice with 25, and Verb Forms with 24. The three areas with the least ACR are on Participial phrases, Tense and Aspect, and Verbals with 21.75, 21.63, and 21.40 ACR's.



Performance of BED Teachers In Different Grammar Areas

Figure 4: Performance of BED Teachers in Different Grammar Areas/ Topics

With the least amount of correct responses being at 21.40, it can be deduced that more than half of the teachers in the BED of LCUP have a better proficiency in English grammar.

They display a strong proficiency in using pronouns, adjectives and syntactic manipulation of interrogative forms (tag questions, yes/no questions and responses). On the other hand, much can still be desired to improve their skills in participial phrases, tense and aspect, and use of verbals (infinitives and gerunds).

Teachers’ Beliefs in Grammar Competency in the L2 Classroom

Table 2: Teachers’ Beliefs in Grammar Competency within their classrooms

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
For adolescent or adults, the formal study of grammar is essential to the eventual mastery of the English language when language learning is limited to the classroom.	4.32	0.525	Agree
Generally speaking, students’ English improves most quickly if they study and practice the grammar.	4.63	0.489	Strongly Agree
The study of grammar helps in learning English.	4.61	0.495	Strongly Agree
Generally, there should be more formal study of grammar than is presently the case.	4.32	0.525	Agree
Students usually keep grammar rules in mind when they write in English or read what they have written.	3.95	0.928	Agree
It is generally more important to practice in English in situations simulating real-life than to analyze and practice grammatical patterns.	4.58	0.552	Strongly Agree
Most students dislike it when the teacher or the classmates correct them in class.	3.53	1.006	Agree
Most students feel cheated if the teacher does not correct the written work they hand in.	3.68	0.962	Agree
Teachers should not correct students’ pronunciation or grammatical errors in class unless these errors interfere with comprehensibility.	2.50	1.225	I don’t know
Generally, when students make errors in speaking English, they should be corrected.	4.32	0.842	Agree
Generally, when students make errors in writing English, they should be corrected.	4.39	0.887	Agree
Grammar helps students write more accurate sentences.	4.66	0.481	Strongly Agree
Learning grammatical terminology is helpful in learning English.	4.39	0.679	Agree
My students mostly ask me grammar questions.	3.92	1.050	Agree
Grammar helps students understand complicated sentences better.	4.11	1.03	Agree

The data on Table 2 displays the mean values of the collective responses of the teachers and the standard

deviation of the items therein. The teachers responded with “Agree” on most of the items, but they felt more strongly in agreement with several items. The item “Grammar helps students write more accurate sentences” gathered a response of 4.66, the highest rated in the survey. It is succeeded by the item, “Generally speaking, students’ English improves most quickly if they study and practice the grammar” with an average response of 4.63. Considering the two other strongly-agreed upon items in the list, it can be deduced that teachers believe grammar competency can be improved by constant practice and study. Writing is also associated strongly with grammar, thus gathering that high response rate. The lowest rated item on the survey was the item, “Teachers should not correct students’ pronunciation or grammatical errors in class unless these errors interfere with comprehensibility”, with an average response of 2.50 or an “I don’t know”. Further strengthening the case on this issue is the item’s standard deviation of 1.225 points. It can be deduced that the teachers are divided on their opinions regarding error correction inside the classroom.

Relationship between Teachers’ Grammar Performance and Teachers’ Beliefs in Grammar Competency

Table 3: Pearson-r Correlation Computation

		TeachBeliefs	ELPTestScores
TeachBeliefs	Pearson Correlation	1	-.044
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.794
	N	38	38
ELPTestScores	Pearson Correlation	-.044	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.794	
	N	38	38

Using SPSS 23, the computation as shown in Table 3 labels the teachers’ grammar fluency and performance as “ELPTestScores” and the teachers’ beliefs in grammar competency as “TeachBeliefs”. Based from the results of the correlation, it has been found that the teachers’ grammar fluency and performance is not significantly correlated with the teachers’ beliefs in grammar competency ($r=-.044$; $N=38$, $p=.794$). Considering this finding, it may mean that regardless of grammatical aptitude teachers display, it does not signify that their beliefs in the use of grammar in the L2 classroom would be as favorable. The teachers’ beliefs on the use of grammar and student grammar competency as it is used in their classrooms still remain to be an unique perception within teachers, and do not affect their grammar performance in any way.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

To recap, this study aims to investigate the teachers’ grammatical/ linguistic competence and their beliefs on grammar competence in the classroom. The study found out that:

- Basic education teachers perform beyond the average grammar competency standards. While this

performance has been expected on English teachers, the results show that Science teachers ranked higher than English teachers, followed by Math teachers. Teachers of Technical and Livelihood Education (TLE) may benefit from additional language coaching. Also, it has been found that the more years of service a teacher has on the profession, the better they perform. Although the data shows some prospects, this finding can also benefit from further investigation.

- A closer look on the teachers' grammatical competency show that teachers are linguistically able to determine pronoun-antecedent relationships in English, but need some more coaching on participial phrases and tense-and-aspect English lessons.
- Most teachers agree on the prevalence of grammar in their classrooms, particularly on how students should study and practice more to improve their grammatical competence. On the other hand, the teachers are not clear on what ramifications would it possess to correct students' grammar in class.
- In exploring a relationship between teachers' grammar proficiency and teachers' beliefs on grammar competency, it has been found that the two variables do not have any significant correlation at all. Thus, a teacher's grammatical aptitude may not necessarily identify their beliefs in grammar.

In lieu of these findings, the study opens up several insights to recommend for further investigation and discussion into classroom grammar competency.

- Future studies may want to look deeper on language training for teachers. While the study's respondents displayed above average performance, several contexts warrant different investigations especially if it affects policy. This study suggests communicative-oriented language training, but with a particular focus on several linguistic caveats.
- Future studies may also want to utilize a survey questionnaire that questions the teachers' use of the language itself on the classroom. While the survey questionnaire reflected enough of how teachers see grammar competency, the future prospect of this study is aimed at looking how English is used by teachers as a tool for instruction.

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