

An Exploratory Study of EFL Teachers' Perceptions on Grammar Terminology Use in Kosova

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Abstract

This exploratory study aims to find out perceptions of EFL teachers on grammar terminology use in Kosova in the light of recent national curriculum change in language teaching. Data was collected through semi-structured questionnaires administered to EFL teachers teaching in primary and lower secondary schools in Prizren. Data was analysed using frequency count and percentage distribution. Findings of the study revealed that teachers show superiority of communication competence over grammar competence in thought and the opposite in practice.

Keywords: EFL teaching, grammar terminology, primary school, school curriculum

Introduction

This study aims to collect feedback from EFL teachers about their views on use of grammar terminology in primary classrooms. The traditional structural syllabuses had quite a few grammar terminologies; however with new alterations in educational policy, imminent changes needed to follow in everyday teaching across Kosova. Even two decades later after the 1999 war, there is still very little research done to give voice to Kosovar teachers' perceptions and views (Turtulla, 2017) about education-related topics and almost none about teaching practices in Kosova. This is the first research of its kind and also one of the first independent studies to venture into aftermaths of new curricula implementation in Kosovar education. Some of the questions that this study aims to answer are looking at how EFL teachers view grammar instructions and which specific grammar terminology is used in primary grades. Two prevailing social concerns spurred this research on. First, education is still undermined in Kosovar society because of the public perception that the quality of teaching is low (MEST, 2016b) and second, there is general indecisiveness about grammar instructions in EFL context (Borg, 1999; Ellis, 2006; Swan, 1985; Wang, 2010).

Efforts of the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MEST) in Kosova for fundamental transformations in education are underpinned by the recent curricular changes in its schooling system (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MEST], 2016a). The new Curricula Framework, which

was approved in 2011, made a leap from goal-based teaching into result-based learning expressed through competences (MEST, 2016a; MEST, 2016b). Competences are used as an umbrella for integrated systems of knowledge and skills including communication and expression competences that children need to acquire in order to succeed in the new digital era (MEST, 2016a). The national curriculum has created novel possibilities and gave freedom for teachers to develop personalized lesson plans, choose teaching materials, and adapt teaching methods in order to teach core competencies to learners (MEST, 2016b). It presented a novelty in the school syllabus also by adding English language as a compulsory subject for first graders. But, its most important change was the emphasis put on developing competences, in particular, the communicative competence.

However, improving the quality in teaching and building a society of knowledge remain a challenge for the national educational system which still needs to struggle with imbalanced student/teacher ratio, unflagging large classes, inadequate teaching aids, and two-shift school hours (MEST, 2016a). These challenges are evident in many instances including international achievement tests (PISA) and widespread copying phenomena (MEST, 2016b). In order to address this issue and implement the new curricula, the ministry of education approved the Action Plan of Kosovo Education Strategic Plan 2017-2021. This is the second plan in a row which aims to develop the national education thanks to its seven strategic

priorities including learner participation and inclusion; the education system management; quality assurance; teacher development; teaching and learning; vocational education, training, and adult education; and higher education (MEST, 2016b). These strategic goals of Kosovar education as part of improvement processes in education reflect also the Kosovar National Development Strategy and the European strategic cooperation framework in education and training (MEST, 2016b). Consequently, both the new curriculum and its implementation plan form a theoretical framework for this research. These changes in the curricula and priorities in the implementation stage are discussed in this study through the lens of EFL grammar significance in language teaching/learning.

This topic is closely linked to the tradition in EFL teaching which fluctuated between structural, functional, semantic and communicative syllabuses, each having a share in development of EFL (Swan, 1985). However, language experts suggest that using only one kind of syllabus can be insufficient for language teaching because the language itself has many structures, functions and semantics that cannot be taught using only one teaching method, or one syllabus (Swan, 1985). Due to this multidimensional quality, language needs to be taught in its whole, as a system, not as lists of grammar rules (Swan, 1985). In addition, it is also known that languages are learned best when they are acquired. The term "acquire" described by Jerome Bruner (1983) covers three language capacities of a native speaker including "well-formedness" which shows how well we can apply grammar structures, "capacity to refer and to mean", how well we can convey relevant meaning, and capacity to communicate, how well we can effectively interact with others (p. 17). It is evident that in order to learn a language we need to know its grammatical structure, meaning of its words, and how to use it to communicate with others. Research reveals that some of these language aspects are perceived as more important than the others. For instance, in a study about the importance of grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary in communication, Dutch university students ranked vocabulary at the top of the list although, classroom exercises were considered to be as helpful for all three aspects regardless of the level of education (Simon & Taverniers, 2011). In the same study, vocabulary was seen as easier to learn than grammar and also could be learned independently as opposed to grammar. Still, studies show that learners can learn language better by being exposed to language than by using analytical methods of analysing sentences linguistically (Bruner, 1983). Scholars are still at their wits' end when it comes to grammar's significance in language learning, without any rational solution at sight. Despite arguments against, teaching grammar rules cannot be left out altogether from lessons because it might leave learners linguistically disabled to communicate in a foreign language (Wang, 2010), just as pointed out by Swan (1985) that when "the theoretical pendulum swings from one extreme to the other, each exaggeration is followed by its opposite" (p. 86).

In the similar fashion, the new national program on education moves away from grammar-based learning by fostering interaction, topic-based lessons, and concept-related themes instead (MEST, 2018a). Grammar receives very little attention in the new curricula, but it is not entirely left out. It is mentioned only after children reach the sixth grade (MEST, 2018b). A single page of it raises concerns about methods that need to be used in order to put the "knowledge of grammar into use and communicate effectively" rather than teach grammar terms and terminology (MEST, 2018b, p. 34). Thus, teachers are explicitly suggested not to teach grammar i.e. grammar terminology and rules, but "demonstrate grammarthrough communicative activities" (MEST, 2018b, p. 35).

Demonstrating grammar might just be a compromise that is needed in this unproductive linguistic dispute. A concise summarized paper given by Rod Ellis (2006) poses valuable questions that have significance to language teachers when it comes to assisting learners in their communicative competences. The questions raise some of the grammar-related issues such as what should be taught, when should it be taught, and how much of it should be taught. Answers to these questions can help teachers demonstrate grammar through meaningful and situation-relevant activities. As teachers are given freedom to choose their own teaching strategies and techniques, taking decisions on how to approach grammar instructions might not be easy as it entails compromise. The first compromise is to decide what to teach. In order to address this need, there is a wide variety of language choices that teachers can choose as their teaching aims including functions (ordering food, expressing gratitude), notions (time, space), situations (at dinner party, in the theatre), topics (sports, professions), language structures (3rd person singular, comparative of adjectives), phonological item (the schwa sound, minimal pairs), lexical items (word collocations, connotations), or language skills (skimming, scanning) (Swan, 1985). However, since grammar instructions are only one part of teacher repertoire, and not everything can be taught at the same time, deciding which topics to cover and which ones not to cover might not be an easy task (Ellis, 2006). Just like it is not an easy task to use grammar instructions or present grammar structures clearly, simply, distinctively, truly and relevantly

to learners (Swan, 1994). Anyhow, most of the times, grammar terminology is not meant for learners, but for grammarians and linguists to distinguish or debate about their field of study. So, grammar terminology needs to be distinguished which one is meant for teachers and which for learners, as they are not the same (Swan, 1994). If this is accomplished successfully, teachers will have more success in teaching learners how to use language alongside appropriate grammar, if any, while using their own knowledge of grammar rules and grammar terminology (Berry, 2008; Bruner, 1983), thus, bridge the gap between EFL classrooms and real-life situations (Swan, 1985).

It's not only choosing topics, the compromise lies also in the manner how one organizes grammar instructions and when one teaches grammatical terms (Ellis, 2006; Swan, 1985; Swan, 1994). Grammar structures used in specific real-life situations should be divided in smaller parts and taught in an organized manner, especially those which students find difficult to understand (Swan, 1985). Depending on the structure taught, some structures need more focus on form, others more on meaning. However, teaching should not lean only towards one aspect, because the other will suffer. It shouldn't also remove one or the other, but it should organize the two in a way that is comprehensible, logical, and accessible to all types of learner styles (Swan, 1985). These two diverse language priorities need to form a unified language competence (Ellis, 2006) and need to be integrated into "a sensible teaching programme" (Swan, 1985, p.80). Such integration can be achieved through organized single-aim lessons (Swan, 1985).

The third decision is when to refer to grammar terms. Based on the new curricula, English is introduced early on from the first grade and continues to be learned through primary, lower secondary and secondary school years. The first two years children are exposed to language "through game, drawing, and songs" (p.40) in order to create a foundation for their oral skills first, then, continue with literacy skills in later grades expanding those skills in verbal and written communication (MEST, 2016a). Exposing children to communicative input before working with explicit grammar instruction is in line with one part of second language studies which advocate meaning before grammar teaching (Ellis, 2006). It also matters how much of this organized information is presented to learners. Too much of new information can be too confusing and too difficult to remember, too little can decrease motivation (Swan, 1985). It is widely accepted that the increased exposure to language helps in acquisition; however, there is also a need to recognize that in the process of learning a language learners accomplish other "non-linguistic functions" before the linguistic ones (Bruner, 1983, p. 31). Anyhow, most of this knowledge does not need to be taught because this is what they bring with themselves to the classroom as background knowledge, so this is what teachers need to establish first (Swan, 1985) before they decide on their teaching aim.

Methods

The methodology of this exploratory case study is grounded on inductive methods of accumulating data to enable the researcher identify new avenues for future research (Reiter, 2017). In order to avoid possible drawbacks of case studies, this research is focused on single case of EFL teachers acting as mentors hence smaller sample of participants (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). It is exploratory in nature because it hopes to gather initial information about teaching practice of a particular group of EFL teachers in relation to grammar use within the context of EFL and demands of the new national curricula (Zainal, 2007). The study tried to gather information about teaching in primary level in Kosovar education up to the fourth grade. Primary level includes grades 1 through 5 with children from six to ten years of age which also corresponds to ISCED 1 of the UN International Standard Classification of Education (MEST, 2016b). The participants in this study are 32 EFL teachers who act as mentors for English language university students during their teaching practice at primary and lower secondary schools in Prizren municipality as part of their methodology courses. Participants were selected through purposive sampling making results non-generalizable to larger population of EFL teachers (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). In order to follow the ethical aspect of educational research, prior approval was sought from the Municipal Directory of Education in addition to the description and purpose of the research which was part of the questionnaire itself. Data was collected using semi-structured questionnaire designed by the researcher which fitted the purpose of the research. In case study type of research data are collected mostly through observation, interview and document review (Boudah, 2011); however, as this is exploratory in nature aiming to provide insights for clearer research themes to be used in consecutive research, the author has decided to focus on administering semi-structured questionnaires instead of interview questions. This change in methodology was made in order to protect the confidentiality of participants (Boudah, 2011) and allow for freer response to questions which is possible through questionnaires rather than through direct interview with the researcher. The questionnaire used in this study consisted of two parts: demographic-related questions and questions related to the subject-content of the research. Demographic questions included gender, marital status, and years of experience. Second part included total of five questions, three of which were close-ended and other two open-ended in

order to generate personalized perceptions (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). The first question “do you think that teachers should use grammatical terms (verb, present tense, pronoun, subject and alike) in ELT from first through fourth grade of primary school?” offered three possible answers “yes, no, depends”; second open-ended question “which grammar terms do you usually use in classes one through four of primary school?” required a written response; third close-ended question “how many classes do you need to teach present simple tense?” included four possible choices 1-2 classes, 2-3 classes, more than 4 classes, and depending of the coursebook; the fourth close-ended question “in which area do children which you teach show most of the success?” offered two choices: knowing grammar terms and communicating successfully in a foreign language; the last fifth open-ended questions asked from respondents to “describe your teaching techniques that you would recommend to other teachers?”. The questionnaire was written in Albanian language to allow participants to express their ideas freely and confidently.

There are several limitations to this study such as the small sample size which cannot allow for generalizability of results at this stage; there is only one group of participants and one form of data collection (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

Results

Based on research data, the results are presented according to the order they appeared on the questionnaire. According to participant demographic data, the study included 78% (N=25) female and 22% (N=7) male teachers; 97% married and 3% single; 53% (N=17) belong to the group which has 11-20 years of experience in teaching, groups of 1-10 and 31-40 years make of 19% (N=6) each, and 9% (N=3) belongs to the group with 21-30 years of experience (Fig. 1).

As regards questions related to grammar terminology use, to the first question “do you think that teachers should use grammatical terms (verb, present tense, pronoun, subject and alike) in ELT from first through fourth grade of primary school?” over 80% of teachers moved away from using grammar terms, where 44% (N = 14) stated that grammar terms should not be used in primary levels, while 38% (N = 12) took a more considerate stance stating that it depends, and only 19% (N = 6) said grammar terms should be used. Out of the those who chose the depend possibility, 46% said that using grammar terminology depends on the lesson, while the rest gave other factors such as age of students, level of knowledge, development, size of class, and curricula needs. To the second question “which grammar terms do you usually use in classes one through four of primary school?” all the participants gave a total of 44 items in their responses. Out of all the participants, only 31% (N=10) of them reported of not using grammar terms as opposed to 63% (N=20) who reported using at least some kind of grammar terminology, while 6% (N=2) gave unspecified responses where one of teachers stated that grammar is not divided from other instructions and the other one wrote that word sentence roles are not mentioned (Fig. 2). The rest of 63% (N=20) who reported of using some kind of terminology including the answer “simple terms” gave a total of 32 items, out of which parts of speech make up 50%, tenses 22%, singular/plural 13% and other terms make up 16% of all the responses (Fig. 3). From total responses to the third question “how many classes do you need to teach present simple tense?”, 41% (N=13) of respondents said they need 2-3 classes, 34% (N=11) 1-2 classes, 16% (N=5) said it depends on the book, and only 9% (N=3) needed more than 4 classes to teach present simple tense. The fourth question “in which area do children which you teach show most of the success?” gave a remarkable 72% (N=23) responses on communication-competence area, followed by 16% (N=5) grammar-competence area, and 13% (N=4) who said that children they teach show success in both competence areas. The last question “describe your teaching techniques that you would recommend to other teachers?” generated a total of 49 recommendations including 18% brainstorming activities, 14% individual/pair/groupworks, 14% activities including games, 12% illustrations including photos, 8% examples, 6% roleplay including presentations, and 27% other specific ones including, demonstrations, DRTA, DLTA, speaking/listening activities, ERR, deductive and inductive techniques.

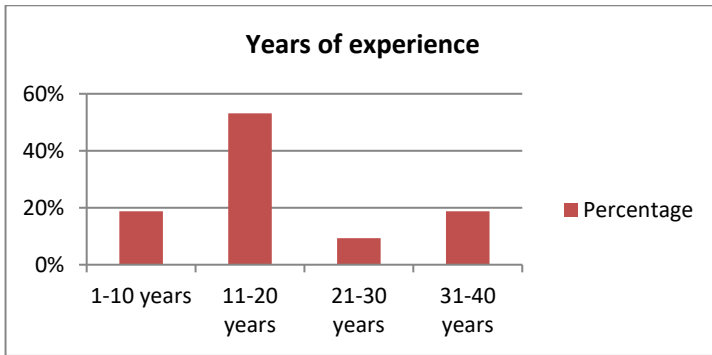


Fig. 1 Percentage of years of experience in teaching

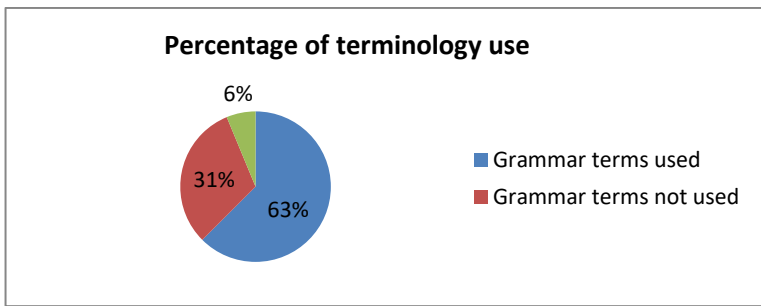


Fig. 2 Percentage of grammar terminology use

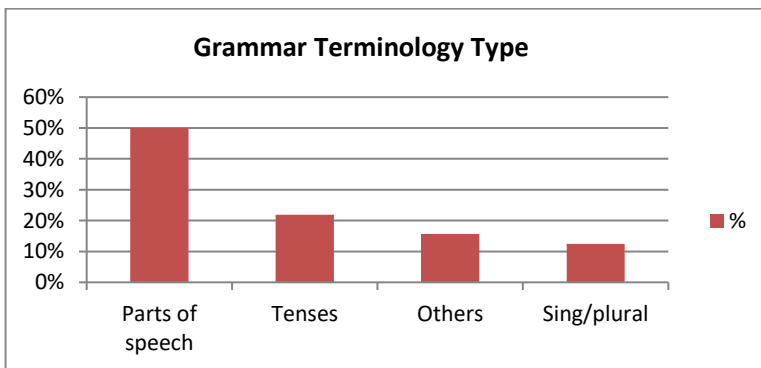


Fig. 3 Percentage of grammar terminology types used by teachers

Discussion

This study gave some valuable insights into EFL teacher perceptions about grammar terminology. Two distinctive comprehensions come forth. First, results show that EFL teachers try to accommodate to learners needs according to the first principle of the national curricula, communicative competence, (MEST, 2016a); and "join[ing] good teaching standards with practice in teacher development" (MEST, 2016b, p.25) according to challenges of the national strategy plan on education. Results of this study reveal that EFL teachers are conscious that knowing grammar terms will not help in using the language communicatively (Swan, 1994), so majority of them stated they don't use grammar terminology. However, more specific inquiry revealed that little more than 30% of them admitted of not using grammar terms (Berry, 2008). This

contradictory result shows that while EFL teachers perceive that grammar terminology does little for communication skills and communication skills are important for language learners, when it comes to practice it is difficult to change the traditional habit (Nazari & Allahyar, 2012). Realistically, as pointed by Swan (1994), while it isn't easy for the linguists to comply with difficult criteria for giving grammar rules, it is immoral to hope teachers achieve this and teach it successfully to learners. It is also inhumane to expect teachers to tackle these difficult issues of clarity and simplicity in grammar instruction (Swan, 1994) and ask them to discontinue their transition without offering them something in return. Teachers need professional resources and technical means in order to cope with demands of the curricular changes. It is this something in return that will help teachers make a smooth change from their traditional teaching to new methods laid out clearly in the national curricula and increase the quality in education which is also one of the main objectives in the national planning strategy for education (MEST, 2016b). This is precisely what the second insight points at. Results show that teachers have abundance of knowledge with all the teaching techniques and strategies they need in order to address the second challenge identified in our national strategy plan on education "having limited capacities to implement the new curriculum" (MEST, 2016b, p.26). Teachers in this study expressed their ideas on grammar terminology and offered valuable insights for future research which is based on real-life experience in classrooms. With sustainable professional support, teachers can facilitate a better fulfillment of new curricula's requirements within their copious duties and responsibilities (Nazari & Allahyar, 2012) encumbered with the new curricula and increase their professional capacities. Results of this exploratory study form a good foundation for future research in Kosovar education as they reflect the initial steps in collecting field information to make decisions related to new policies in improving education (MEST, 2016b). We hope that these results will improve the teaching/learning process and ease decision-making based on statistical information, both identified as challenges in objectives of the national strategic planning 2017-2021. Future research should focus on clarifying further the role of grammar instructor in EFL context.

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