

**FROM THEORETICAL TO PEDAGOGICAL  
GRAMMAR: REINTERPRETING THE ROLE OF  
GRAMMAR IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE  
TEACHING**

PhD theses

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## **1. The topic and the aim of the dissertation**

The history of language teaching is essentially the history of the claims and counterclaims for and against the teaching of grammar. It has always been the central debate in foreign language teaching. The choice of grammar as the focus of investigation in this dissertation is triggered by the controversies and paradoxes that surround it. Therefore, the dissertation attempts to reinterpret the process of grammar teaching and learning from an English teacher's point of view and find relationships between teachers' beliefs in grammar teaching and their practice. The theoretical background gives a comprehensive picture of grammar teaching approaches, influential grammatical paradigms in second and foreign English language teaching, and cognitive theories underlying the processes of grammar acquisition. The research component explores patterns of teachers' belief systems that consciously or uncsciously influence teachers' pedagogical practice.

The necessity of redefining our approach to grammar is justified by the shift towards a more communicative approach to language teaching which should bring about changes both at theoretical and practical level. Although grammar is central to the development of communicative competence, its teaching and learning has to be balanced by the teaching and learning of other domains to achieve appropriate language use. The investigation of the topic and the results gained should contribute to a better understanding of grammar teaching approaches and to improving current practices.

The aim of the dissertation is twofold. On the one hand, it aims to redefine the term *pedagogical grammar* in the light of the latest developments. On the other hand, the influence of English language teachers' belief systems on grammar teaching is explored as a relatively new field of investigation which has attracted a number of researchers during the last 15 years. The research attempts to reveal how English language teachers' beliefs influence their instructional practice, and how these relate to the relative unsuccessfulness or successfulness of foreign language learning. As a result of the investigation, the dissertation concludes with the reinterpretation of the role of grammar in English language teaching in the Hungarian context.

The research investigates the hypothesis that it is possible to access the patterns of knowledge about grammar teaching and learning (teachers' pedagogical knowledge) that experienced teachers utilize while they teach grammar. The underlying assumption of the research is that English teachers are guided by mental acts that have been shaped by the knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learning grammar that they have accumulated through the years. This pedagogical knowledge operates as part of the teachers' pedagogical grammar. By investigating the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their effect on everyday practice the hypothesis has been made that there is discrepancy between what teachers believe and what they actually do in their classes when teaching grammar. This clash of individuals' beliefs and perceived practices is an under-researched area in the Hungarian context, and is thus the focus of the dissertation.

The following questions have been set for the dissertation to address:

1. Is there any relationship between teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning grammar and their background context (age, sex, gender, teaching experience, school type and academic qualification)?
2. What kind of beliefs do practicing teachers actually possess and utilize when teaching grammar?
3. Are there any general patterns in teachers' personal pedagogical knowledge about grammar teaching?
4. Are there any patterns of association between teachers' pedagogical knowledge about grammar teaching and their perceived pedagogical practice?
5. What does all this imply for foreign language grammar instruction and for teacher training?

In seeking to answer these questions the following hypotheses have been formulated:

- A. Teachers of English as a foreign language in the western part of Hungary are strongly influenced by traditions and their own experience as language learners when teaching grammar.
- B. Teachers' beliefs about grammar teaching consciously or unconsciously influence their classroom practice.

- C. At the level of beliefs teachers are influenced by the principles of the communicative approach.
- D. English teachers are not consciously aware of the ways their learners learn or acquire grammar as a result of their teaching.
- E. The typical grammar teaching applied by the majority of teachers is still characterized by traditional form-focussed and grammar practice activities.

The dissertation was conceived of and realised in the hope of contributing to a better understanding of how teachers' beliefs in grammar teaching influence their way of teaching grammar and how the change of these beliefs might contribute to teacher development. Thus, teacher education programmes might benefit from the insights of the research into English teachers' beliefs in grammar teaching and contribute to improving current grammar teaching practices.

## **2. The structure of the dissertation**

The dissertation consists of four chapters (*Chapter 1: Setting the context; Chapter 2: The theoretical background to grammar teaching and learning; Chapter 3: Grammar and grammars; Chapter 4: Teachers' personal pedagogical knowledge and grammar teaching*), References and Appendices. Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 provide the theoretical background and Chapter 4 focuses on the research.

**Chapter 1** is a short introduction to the topic of the dissertation. It defines the topic, clears the terminology used and offers an overview of the different interpretations of grammar. Finally, the chapter outlines the research questions on teachers' belief systems in grammar teaching.

**Chapter 2** gives a brief historical review of grammar teaching and discusses the place of grammar in communicative language teaching. Grammar teaching in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was preoccupied with the notion of correctness, centred around sentence-level explicit grammatical analysis and instruction (Brumfit et.al., 1996). Language learning theories, such as those of Krashen (1988) and Pienemann (1998), and the communicative language-teaching movement (Brumfit

and Johnson, 1979) have been encouraged to promote more meaning-oriented use of the foreign language and de-emphasize formal grammar instruction. Although the 1970s and 80s saw a decline of formal grammar teaching, nowadays there are a great deal of studies that prove the paramount importance of grammar instruction in the classroom.

After having established the importance of grammar teaching in second language acquisition (SLA), the second part of the chapter looks at the psycholinguistic dimension of grammar teaching and learning. Grammar acquisition is seen as a complex cognitive skill and a number processes are explored which lead to a better understanding of how grammar learning takes place. Therefore, different ways of acquiring knowledge and their role in the process of learning grammar are discussed: declarative versus procedural and explicit versus implicit. Although the discussion of these cognitive processes is heavily loaded with terminology problems and characterized by a lack of clarity as far as the explanations are concerned, recent research suggests that some attention to form is necessary for learners to acquire the language.

The attention to form manifests itself in the *focus on form* paradigm consisting of three distinct approaches: *focus on formS*, *focus on meaning*, and *focus on form* (Long, 1991). *Focus on formS* is the structuralist approach to language which focuses exclusively on linguistic forms neglecting the meanings they convey. Focus on Meaning represents the other extreme where the form is not important at all, the main concern is to convey meaning. *Focus on form*, on the other hand, represents a clear middle path. In this approach teachers attempt to draw learners' attention to linguistic forms as they arise incidentally in activities whose primary focus is on meaning. The spreading of communicative principles in the Hungarian context both in official documents and in teacher training during the last two decades is observable. Therefore, the *focus on form* approach in grammar teaching with a focus on meaning and contextualized language use should gain more emphasis not only in theory but in the classroom context as well.

Related to the notion of *focus of form* is the notion of *consciousness-raising*. If we agree that acquisition involves conscious processes, of which the most fundamental

is attention, it follows that helping learners to attend to language items may help them acquire them. Pointing out features of the grammatical system is thus a form of *consciousness-raising*. Rutherford and Sharwood-Smith (1985) underline the significance of *consciousness-raising* tasks. Their complexity is reflected by how well elaborated the task itself is. The teacher might ask the learners to observe the underlined surface structure or might give examples and ask the learners to induce the rules. The process of *consciousness-raising* does not necessarily entail production: it may simply exist at the level of understanding and remembering. Therefore, if the teacher uses techniques that direct the learners' attention to form and if the teacher provides activities that promote awareness of grammar, learning seems to result.

Research in second language acquisition has proved that the acquisition of grammar is not likely to be accounted for by one type of learning process. Regardless of which type of process is responsible for learning, it is clear, that learners must first notice what it is they are to learn. Then, even when they are able to produce grammatical structures accurately, learners still need to learn what these structures mean and how they are used. In sum, what needs to be learnt about grammar can be characterized by the three interconnected dimensions: form, meaning, and use, however, they can be described discretely as well.

**Chapter 3** continues with the history of the most influential grammatical paradigms as they emerged chronologically and discusses their influence on grammar instruction. The *traditional* and the *structural paradigms* have focused teachers' attention on the role of knowledge about the language, mainly grammar in foreign language teaching. As a result, the formal teaching of second languages has historically centred on the study of grammar. The emergence of the *generative* and the *functional paradigms* has led to the rise of experiential theories of language learning, taking the view that we learn primarily by using the language. Parallel to this the formal teaching of grammar was abandoned for a while.

The presentation of the four most influential grammatical paradigms in chronological order does not imply that each has in turn fallen from use. Moreover, they have influenced the different types of grammars used in linguistics and grammar teaching.

Therefore, as a next logical step, the discussion of different types of grammar follows. Two main areas of grammar are distinguished: linguistic and didactic grammars, the latter including *pedagogical grammar*. From the point of view of the topic of the dissertation the focus is on defining and redefining *pedagogical grammar* and finding its place among other grammars creating the link between theory and pedagogical practice.

*Pedagogical grammar* relies on the one hand on material extracted from one or more linguistic grammars, on the other hand, uses foreign language teaching methodology as a basis. Therefore, *pedagogical grammar* functions as a filter between theoretical language descriptions provided by linguistics, foreign language pedagogy principles and practical applications at classroom level. The following figure highlights the filtering function of *pedagogical grammar*.

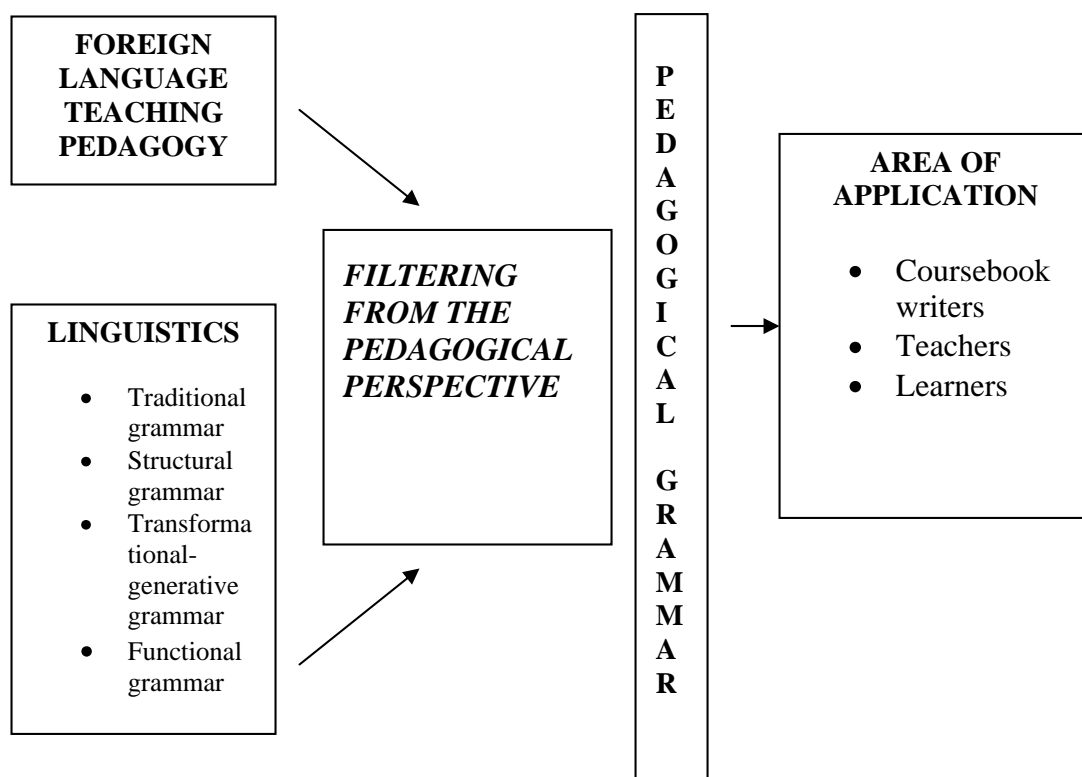


Figure 1 *Pedagogical grammar as a filter model*

The meaning of *pedagogical grammar* is redefined in this dissertation in order to be able to better serve a more functional and meaning-based teaching of grammar.

Drawing on work in several fields such as linguistics, psychology and second language acquisition theory, *pedagogical grammar* is of hybrid nature. It usually denotes grammatical analysis and instruction designed for the needs of second language students. In its expanded view it involves decision making processes on behalf of the teacher which require careful and time-consuming interdisciplinary work. This process is influenced by the teachers' cognition, beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes about the teaching of grammar. In sum, *pedagogical grammar* is part of the content (sources and materials) and part of the process (including teachers' belief systems) of grammar teaching and learning.

**Chapter 4** investigates the area of *teachers' belief* systems in grammar teaching outlining the scope of research in this field. In order to understand how experienced teachers deal with the complexities of grammar teaching in the language classroom, it is necessary to examine the beliefs that underlie teachers' instructional practices. Despite the increased interest in the area of *teacher beliefs* and the influence of such on the teachers' classroom practices, the area seems to be relatively unexplored in connection with grammar teaching in the school context. The investigation of *teachers' beliefs* is important for two reasons. First, they influence pedagogical practice, second, changing existing beliefs are essential for professional development. Therefore, the research in the dissertation focuses on the examination of teachers' beliefs in connection with grammar teaching as part of their *pedagogical grammar*.

### **3. Description of the research**

The assumption behind the investigation was that effective teachers of English would have a coherent set of *beliefs* about the nature of grammar and the teaching of grammar which played an important role in their selection of teaching approaches.

### 3.1 The research method

In the design of the research, elements of qualitative and quantitative approaches were combined. When selecting methods for data analysis, a variety of techniques were applied. Statistical data analysis within the researcher's control, further, observations and interviews were conducted, thus triangulation was realized in collecting as well as analysing data. Following Pajares'(1992) argument that belief inventories need to be supplemented by additional measures such as interviews and observation of behaviour, the research attempted to follow these guidelines.

A total of 63 teachers teaching in secondary and primary schools in the western part of Hungary were involved in the questionnaire study. The questionnaire data provided the first set of data.

As regards selecting teachers for participation in the observation and in the interview study, the intention was to approach ones with whom the researcher had been on friendly terms, so that it would not be embarrassing to ask them to contribute to the research. Altogether four experienced English language teachers agreed to participate in the observation part of this study. Passages involving grammatical explanations were selected from every lesson for analysis which formed the second set of data for the study.

Shortly following the observations, the teachers were provided with a list of interview questions and they were then interviewed individually for approximately 10-15 minutes each. They were asked to reflect on the specific explanations observed in their classes as well as on their general approach to explanations of grammatical and other linguistic issues. The interviews formed the third set of data.

The research aimed to profile a range of different *teacher beliefs* connected to grammar teaching, and in so doing, it has needed to include a large sample of teachers. The choice of participants was motivated, not by a concern for representativeness, but by a conceptual question of understanding *teachers' beliefs* and see different instances of these *beliefs* with different individuals.

### 3.2 The questionnaire

The questionnaire for this study was designed to assist teachers in revealing implicitly their personal *beliefs* about the teaching of grammar. The questionnaire consists of four sections. Section one provides information about participants background, for example, age, gender, teaching experience, type of degree, time spent in an English-speaking country, level at which they are teaching and the type of school they work for. Section two focuses on what participants think about their own knowledge of grammar and approaches to grammar. Section three is a 35-item *belief inventory questionnaire* designed to elicit responses to different statements on teaching grammar. Section four is a 15-item additional part asking for reflection on actual grammar teaching practices. Sections three and four of the questionnaire use a Likert-type scale which is the most widely used method of scale construction because it is a simple, versatile, and reliable method and no judges are required

From the 110 questionnaires distributed to primary and secondary school English teachers 63 were returned representing a 57,2% response rate. This sample size exceeds the number of 30 which Cohen and Manion (1994) describe as the minimum for useful statistical analysis. The distribution of the questionnaires according to the type of school is the following: 17 primary school teachers, 40 secondary school teachers and 6 teaching at both types returned the questionnaires.

The majority of the statements in Sections three and four of the questionnaire can be grouped into six thematic categories which emerged as important issues in the second and third chapters of the dissertation when investigating the theoretical background of teaching grammar. These are the following:

1. belief in a *deductive approach* to the teaching of grammar;
2. belief in an *inductive approach* to the teaching of grammar;
3. belief in a *focus on formS* approach;
4. belief in a *focus on form* approach;
5. belief in using grammatical *terminology*;
6. belief in *correcting* grammatical errors.

Within these groups many statements overlap in content, but their wording is different. The items were placed in random order in the final questionnaire to avoid

choices which might make a favourable impression. With the random order of the statements the aim was to see whether respondents gave consistent answers to the above 6 categories of *belief*.

### **3.3 The observations**

The aim of the observation was to identify key instructional episodes in the teachers' approach to grammar teaching based on the six categories used in the third section of the questionnaire study. The use of a particular grammar teaching activity or approach, the type of the explanation of a grammar rule used and the use of terminology or error correction were seen to be key episodes. Identifying the rationale behind these key episodes was expected to lead to insights into the teachers' behaviour. The researcher's role was that of a non-participant observer during the observation.

### **3.4 The interviews**

For the purposes of this study it was decided to use semi-structured interviews to support the questionnaire and the observation findings. The interviews were conducted in Hungarian to avoid a large degree of communicative stress, which might have influenced the respondents in expressing their ideas clearly. The aim of the interviews was to gain insight into the factors which influenced teachers' instructional decisions in teaching grammar, through a discussion of classroom practices.

## **4. The results of the research**

Since the analysis of the questionnaire data revealed no consistent associations between teacher *beliefs* and aspects of teacher background such as age, sex, type of school and type of degree, we can assume that the answer for the first research question is no.

The second and the third questions focused on revealing patterns of beliefs teachers hold and utilize when they teach grammar. The analysis revealed the following patterns:

- they have a preference for a rather inductive approach;
- they do not believe that correcting errors immediately is useful;
- they do not find the knowledge of terminology important;
- they are clearly against a focus on formS approach.

However, the observation and the interviews showed a different picture. In actual practice there is a strong focus on formS with mechanical practice activities which outnumber the discovery type activities. Although teachers think that errors should not be corrected immediately, in the interviews they expressed their natural inclination towards correcting all the errors and this is what could be observed in their lessons as well. In the use of terminology they are more divided, except one teacher there is a tendency to avoid complicated and unnecessary terminology.

In sum, considerable mismatch between *teachers' beliefs* and their perceived pedagogical practice and actual practice. This indicates that theoretical principles become blurred in practice. Although the teachers all share the understanding that language is above all a means of communication, as opposed to an object of linguistic study, their teaching is still characterized by accuracy- rather than fluency activities. The majority of them believe in the usefulness of an inductive approach, however, their style of presentation is typically though not exclusively deductive, their practice activities are mechanical and form-focused rather than message-focused. The area of error correction is the best example of how principles become blurred in the course of practice. There is the commonly held belief that errors should not be corrected all the time, however in practice teachers more often interfere than not. The incongruence between belief and practice is an issue which should be addressed by teacher educators, so that teachers become better equipped to reconcile *beliefs* and practice in order to provide more effective grammar instruction.

The findings presented provide a substantial support for the hypotheses set for the research. Now we will examine to what extent the hypotheses have been confirmed or disconfirmed by the results. From the 5 hypotheses two (Hypothesis B and D)

have been confirmed, and three disconfirmed. The interviews and the observations revealed that practicing teachers are strongly influenced by traditional approaches and by their own experience as learners and so so much by their beliefs. They apply techniques randomly which are not supported by theories of language learning. However, at the level of their beliefs they accept the principles of the communicative approach, but fail to apply them in everyday practice. This gap between their beliefs and perceived pedagogical practice was clear in questions of error correction and focus on form. The data gained through the analysis of the questionnaire showed that teachers are not consciously aware of the different processes involved in grammar acquisition. As a result, classroom reality is still characterized by traditional activities as formulated in hypothesis five. Undoubtedly, more and a different kind of research would be needed to confirm or reject for sure the extent to which teachers' beliefs are responsible for learning outcomes in grammar acquisition. However, their influence cannot be questioned.

In sum the assumption has been made that teachers are not consciously aware of the ways their learners learn or acquire grammar as a result of their teaching. Their approach being fairly traditional in the classroom context implies that they cannot address the question of how to change their approach to grammar teaching. This has at least two reasons. On the one hand, the curricular requirements compel them to focus on form and content rather than on methods of learning and teaching. The approach required by the needs of communicative language teaching (e.g. more awareness raising and focus on function) are time consuming and they believe that giving sound knowledge about grammar in a controlled environment brings about the same results in a short time. On the other hand, most teachers are not prepared methodologically for implementing the required changes in their classrooms. Therefore, introducing a course on *Pedagogical grammar* in foreign language teacher education would be necessary to bridge the existing gap between theory and practice.

The results suggest that teachers' personal pedagogical knowledge of grammar teaching is highly influenced by their *belief systems* and it is not always consistent with theoretically grounded knowledge. Therefore, teacher education programmes must attempt to link trainee teachers' personal pedagogical knowledge with

empirical knowledge generally presented in teacher education programmes. A course in *Pedagogical grammar* in teacher education programmes could provide trainee teachers with opportunities to make sense of the theory of grammar and grammar teaching by filtering it through experiential knowledge gained as teachers and learners. By connecting their personal pedagogical knowledge influenced by their *beliefs* and theoretical knowledge gained in their formal training would enable trainee teachers to develop alternative conceptions of grammar teaching and make it more effective.

I argue that a course entitled *Pedagogical Grammar*, which is fully integrated with regular language development and teaching-related subjects like methodology or applied linguistics in teacher training programmes should become a regular part of foreign language teacher education. It would empower trainee teachers through an exploration of their perceptions about grammar and grammar teaching and bridge the gap between theoretical principles and pedagogical practice influenced by teachers' belief systems. The *Pedagogical Grammar course* would aim to encourage trainee teachers to identify and interpret their attitudes and *beliefs* about grammar and grammar teaching in different contexts and help them gain new insights into ways of talking about grammar. It would serve teachers' immediate as well as long-term interests, and the long-term interests of all the learners by improving grammar teaching and learning.

## **5. Summary of the results of the dissertation**

The changed curricular requirements make it necessary to reinterpret the role of grammar in English language teaching. Considering this, the results of the dissertation are the following:

1. The dissertation has explored the psychological processes connected to grammar teaching and learning and has given an overview of the grammatical paradigms, that have directly or indirectly influenced grammar instruction in English language teaching.
2. The scope of pedagogical grammar has been defined and reinterpreted. In its expanded view it does not only include teaching materials and explanations

but decision making processes which are influenced by the teachers' belief systems about grammar teaching.

3. The research focuses the attention on the importance of teachers' beliefs, as an influential factor in grammar teaching, which is a relatively new field in language pedagogy in Hungary.
4. The results of the research point out the necessity of a *pedagogical grammar* course in teacher training programmes. This course could provide trainee teachers with opportunities to make sense of the theory of grammar and grammar teaching by filtering it through experiential knowledge gained as teachers and learners. By connecting their personal pedagogical knowledge influenced by their beliefs and theoretical knowledge gained in their formal training would enable trainee teachers to develop alternative conceptions of grammar teaching and make it more effective.

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