SECOND LANGUAGE GRAMMAR TEACHING: PRACTICES AND RATIONALES

Simon Borg

Abstract

This paper draws on a qualitative study of second language (L2) classrooms to provide a comparative analysis of five teachers' practices in teaching grammar and of the rationales underlying the teachers' instructional decisions during such work. The database for the study consisted of 75 hours of classroom observation and 15 hours of interviews. The analysis presented here highlights the range of decisions teachers are faced with in L2 grammar teaching and sheds light on the personal understandings of L2 learning and teaching which influence how teachers make these decisions.

Keywords: grammar teaching; teachers' cognitions; second language classroom research.

Resumo

Este trabalho apresenta um estudo qualitativo do ensino de segunda língua em salas-de-aula para fornecer uma análise comparativa das práticas de ensino de gramática de cinco professores e dos princípios que norteiam suas decisões instrucionais durante tal trabalho. A base de dados para o estudo consistiu em 75 horas de observação em sala-de-aula e 15 horas de entrevistas. A análise aqui apresentada destaca a gama de decisões que os professores enfrentam no ensino de gramática e lança luz sobre as compreensões pessoais do ensino e aprendizagem que influenciam os professores a tomar tais decisões.

1. Introduction

Understanding what happens in real classrooms and making sense of participants' perceptions of these events have become central themes in contemporary educational research. Thus, in the study of teaching, research in recent years has paid increasingly more attention to describing classroom events as they unfold in real, as opposed to experimental, settings, and to attempting to access the cognitions - the beliefs, knowledge, theories, assumptions, and attitudes about all aspects of their work which teachers have – which underlie teachers' instructional decisions. This trend has also been reflected in research on L2 teaching (e.g., Burns, 1996; Smith, 1996; Ulichny, 1996; Woods, 1996). However, as I have argued in detail elsewhere (Borg, 1999a), few investigations of L2 teachers' practices and cognitions in grammar teaching have been conducted, and hence our understanding of how teachers teach grammar and of the thinking informing their instructional decisions is still quite undeveloped. In response to this gap in the research agenda for L2 teaching, I conducted a study of practice and cognition in L2 grammar teaching, aspects of which have been reported in several articles (Borg 1998a, 1998b, 1999b) In these papers, I have focused on specific areas of grammar teaching (e.g., the use of terminology) by presenting and discussing detailed extracts of classroom data with reference to individuals or subsets of the five teachers in the study. Although occasional illustrative samples of primary data are presented here, the focus is not on the discussion of qualitative data, nor is there any attempt to examine specific teachers' individual practices and cognitions. In this paper I aim to present a broader view of the study as a whole by comparing how the five teachers approached grammar work and the reasons they provided for doing so in particular ways.

2. The Study

Detailed accounts of the methodology of the study have been published elsewhere (Borg, 1998b) and the brief account provided below should suffice for the purposes of the current paper to indicate how data were collected and analysed during this project.

3. Key Themes

I began the study with very broad questions about what teachers do in grammar work, such as 'how do teachers approach grammar?'. However, as the study progressed and I analysed more and more data, I began to define more specific questions which focused my attention on teachers' instructional decisions in grammar teaching. By the end of the study I had generated the following list of descriptive questions, and these provide the structure for the rest of this paper:
- Did the teachers teach grammar?
- What language points did the teachers focus on in grammar work?
- How were grammar lessons structured?
- What strategies did the teachers use in presenting grammar?
- What strategies did the teachers use in analysing grammar?
- What kinds of grammar practice activities did the teachers utilise?
- How did the teachers deal with students' grammatical errors?

In addition to discussing teachers' observable classroom behaviours with reference to each of these questions, I will also comment on the immediate reasons the teachers provided for their decisions. By immediate I mean that I will focus on the teachers' responses to the 'why?' questions about each of the issues listed above (e.g., 'why do you teach grammar?') without going into a deeper analysis of the influences and factors (e.g., teacher education and experience) which had led them to assume the views expressed in their answers.

The five teachers in this study taught English as a foreign language in Malta and are referred to throughout using the pseudonyms Martha, Eric, Tina, Hanna, and Dave.

• Did the teachers teach grammar?

The first question I address here concerns the extent to which the teachers did actually teach grammar and the reasons they provided for doing so. Grammar teaching was a central aspect of the work of four of the five teachers whose work I studied. In the one case where formal instruction was infrequent (Dave), this had nothing to do with the teacher's beliefs about the desirability or otherwise of teaching grammar – Dave did feel that formal instruction was important in L2 teaching, but minimised grammar work because of his lack of confidence in his own knowledge of grammar. The first point to make here then is that all five teachers perceived formal instruction to be an important - though by no means sufficient - part of L2 teaching. The teachers, though, did explain their views in a range of ways. These are listed in Table 1 under headings which reflect the functions which formal instruction played in the eyes of these teachers.

Table 1: Reasons for teaching grammar.

1. <u>Acquisition</u>
• It enhances the accuracy of students' communicative ability.
• It enhances students' fluency.
• It enables students to communicate with greater economy of expression.
• It enables students to discern, remember and use generative patterns in the language.

2. <u>Awareness-Raising</u>

•   It deepens students' explicit understanding of the rules underlying language they use naturally.

3.   <u>Diagnostic</u>
•   It makes students aware of language areas they need to work on.
•   It provides teachers with indications of students' linguistic needs.

4.   <u>Psychological</u>
•   It fulfils students' expectations about L2 learning.
•   When based on errors students make during fluency work, it validates the latter in the students' eyes.
•   It provides concrete evidence of instruction which is reassuring to both the teacher and the students.

5.   <u>Classroom Management</u>
•   Within the context of high-energy interactive learning, grammar analysis work provides opportunities for some quiet reflective time in the classroom.
•   Oral grammar drills provide the teacher with a strategy for rapidly raising energy levels in the classroom.

The debate in L2 teaching over whether teachers should or should not teach grammar has tended to revolve around one issue: does formal instruction enhance students' ability to use the language? (e.g., Bialystok, 1982; Gass, 1991; Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Pienemann, 1985). However, as Table 1 shows, although the teachers were concerned with the effect of grammar teaching on students' ability to communicate fluently, this was clearly not the only reason why they taught grammar (Eric, in particular, saw no relation between formal instruction and fluency). Rather, grammar teaching emerges collectively in the work

of these teachers as a multi-functional tool whose psychological impact on the students was just as important as any effect it may have had on their L2 acquisition.

• **What language points did the teachers focus on in grammar work?**

An analysis of the range of grammar points which the teachers focused on, in itself, reveals nothing noteworthy. The issues they examined were ones typically found in the grammar syllabuses of EFL coursebooks and which any EFL teacher will tell you that students have recurring problems with (e.g., present perfect, prepositions, relatives). What is more interesting here is the range of factors which, according to the teachers, influenced the selection of these points. These factors are summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Factors behind teachers' choice of grammar items.
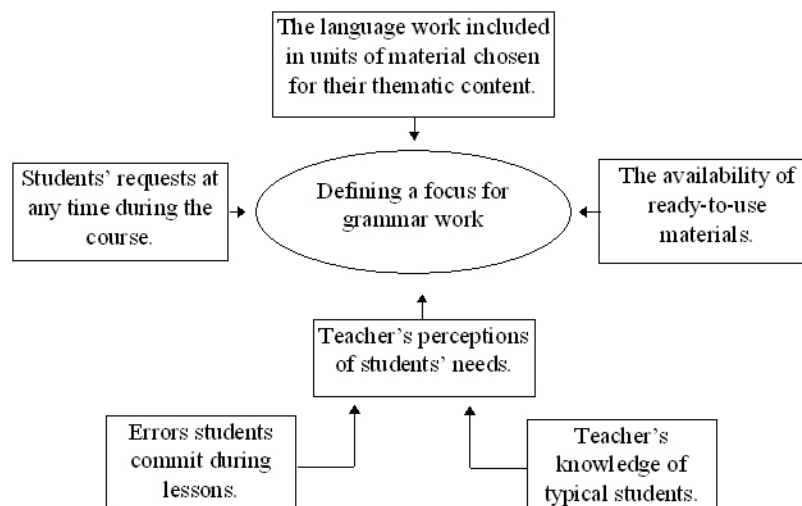
Martha seemed to depend predominantly on instructional materials in defining the focus of her work; i.e., she chose materials which dealt with themes she felt would motivate students and provide scope for communicative activities, and did the grammar work which was included in those materials. Eric drew heavily on students' errors in fluency work in deciding what grammar to focus on; however, he also utilised his experience of typical students to predict what language areas they needed to work on. Thus, when he gave students lists of their 'errors', he often "cheated" by including items which they had not got wrong but which he knew they needed help with. Dave's choices were also influenced by the students' errors, but in his case students' explicit requests were the most powerful influence on his selections. Tina defined what to teach on the basis of students' wants, her observation of their needs, as well as the availability of materials to cover the issues she wanted to focus on. Hanna explained that, although her choice of which skills to focus on was influenced by students' wants (thus she did little writing because the students were more interested in speaking), in choosing grammar content she adopted the "I know best in these things" approach. Nonetheless, when her students asked her to address a particular grammar point (e.g., in their weekly feedback questionnaires) she did try to do so.

The ways in which the teachers chose a focus for grammar work also reflects the distinction between teaching as a planned activity and teaching as improvisation (Borko & Livingston, 1989). Martha, Hanna, Tina, and Dave always knew what grammar they were going to work on <u>before</u> their lessons (i.e., they defined grammar content preactively). Eric, in contrast, typically decided what to focus on on the basis of students' errors and questions <u>during</u> the lesson (i.e., he defined grammar content interactively). The latter approach revealed Eric's willingness to provide an immediate response to students' needs and wants and to engage in improvised teaching; it also reflected his own confidence in teaching grammar. Hanna and Tina were similarly confident, but, for different reasons, they decided beforehand what

grammar to teach. Hanna felt a need to have tightly planned and structured lessons (even when she conducted post-fluency error analysis, she generally knew what grammar points she would address); in Tina's case, her choice of commercially available materials defined in advanced what the grammar content of the lessons would be. Martha seemed less confident in teaching grammar and the materials which she chose for thematic reasons also generally defined, before the lesson, the content of grammar work for her. Finally, Dave's insecurity in teaching grammar meant he always made sure he was well-prepared before he conducted any formal instruction. Thus there was no spontaneous grammar work in his lessons.

- **How were grammar lessons structured?**

    The different ways in which the teachers structured grammar work together with their rationales for doing so are summarised in Table 2. This analysis indicates that the teachers in this study perceived four distinct categories of activity in grammar work:

1. <u>Fluency work</u>, through which teachers identified the focus for subsequent grammar activities. Such work was either focused, as in the work of Hanna, where pre-grammar fluency work was chosen because it would provoke language errors related to a specific grammar point, or unfocused, as in the work of Eric, where the activity was not chosen with specific grammar points in mind.

2. <u>Presentation activities</u>, through which grammar was contextualized and which enabled teachers to illustrate and/or elicit examples of the target grammar. Such work initially approached grammar implicitly; with the option or more explicit analysis work (4 below) once the target forms had been established.

3. <u>Practice activities</u>, through which students were given opportunities to use grammar, in controlled and less controlled situations.

4. <u>Analysis activities</u>, which consisted of expository talk about grammar by the teacher or consciousness-raising and discovery tasks in which students (with teachers' guidance) analysed grammar and formulated a rule or rules about its form, meaning, and/or use.

Table 2: The structure of formal instruction in the work of five L2 teachers.

Teacher	Structure	Rationale
Martha	Presentation-Controlled practice-Less controlled practice-Production (triangle)	Before students can use grammar they need to understand its meaning and form. A sequence of gradually less controlled practice work develops students' ability to use the grammar in communicative speech.
Eric	Fluency work-Analysis-Practice	Grammar work which derives from fluency work motivates students to participate in the latter. Students perceive language work based on their own errors to be more relevant. Practice helps students to understand how the grammar is used.
Tina	Presentation-Analysis and/or Practice	Formal instruction should enable students to understand the form and meaning of grammar. Practice bridges the

		gap between a theoretical understanding of grammar and an ability to use it. Analysis makes students' aware of generative patterns in language.
Hanna	Presentation-Practice-Production	When students' entry-level knowledge of the grammar is inadequate, the latter needs to be presented before students can use it.
	Focused fluency work-Analysis	When students have some entry level knowledge of the grammar, this approach allows the teacher to identify which specific points need brushing up.
	Focused fluency work -Analysis-Controlled practice-Less controlled practice	As above with further opportunities for students to use the grammar correctly.
Dave	Analysis-Practice	Analysis helps students understand the form, meaning and use of the target grammar. Practice reinforces this understanding.

As Table 2 indicates, apart from Hanna, who demonstrated most versatility in the way she structured grammar work, the teachers all had a preferred way of combining the categories of grammar work outlined above. While a presentation-practice approach was a common

option, the variety of practices illustrated here makes it difficult to reduce the procedures these teachers adopted to one or two generalisable algorithmic sequences. Rather, the specific combination of activities the teachers opted for during grammar work was shaped by both their personal pedagogical preferences (e.g., beliefs about the extent to which grammar had to be presented before students could use it) as well as by specific instructional factors (e.g., their perception of students' knowledge).

I would like to compare this account of the components of grammar work - which I have derived from teachers' understandings of their own work - with that suggested by Peck (1988).

Peck's categories of grammar teaching, derived from his analysis of non-English foreign language classrooms (e.g., French and German) are summarised below.

Table 3: Five categories of grammar teaching (Peck, 1988).

Category	Description
Identification	When a teacher focuses the attention of the students on certain rule markers, so that they can be dealt with to the exclusion of other grammatical or lexical phenomena. Examples might be directing attention to verbs occurring in a certain tense or prepositions co-occurring with a certain case.
Classification	A means of distributing and rearranging the grammatical features of a foreign language. It can mean naming given forms and functions so that they can be gathered together. It can mean putting structures under headings so that similarities and differences can be adequately treated. Examples of classification could be arranging nouns by gender, or verbs by conjugation, or sentences by syntax.

Systematisation	A means of bringing observed grammatical features under a rule. It is the demonstration of a principle, or set of correlated principles in operation, which can result in some systematic arrangement of linguistic phenomena. For example, demonstrating principles of sequencing or agreement.
Application	A means of ascertaining that previously imparted information about the foreign language has been understood and retained. The student applies the rule to further, as yet unencountered, examples.
Generalisation	A means of accounting for a whole set or class of grammatical phenomena. It is a general statement intended to cover all grammatical features of a certain type in the form of an all-embracing statement covering structural or semantic features.

Apart from application, which clearly corresponds to what the teachers in this study saw as practice activities, Peck's categories of grammar work reflect explicit work of the kind which I have described here as analysis. For example, Dave exemplified classification when he asked students to sort sentences into three groups depending on the kind of conditional they contained, and Eric utilised generalisation when he provided students with a rule for deciding on the word order of wh-questions. Peck admits that his categorisation is expressed "in terms they [teachers] do not habitually use" (p.128). This admission is supported by this study, for the teachers here did not discuss their work - particularly their use of analysis activities - in the detail and the somewhat technical vocabulary Peck supplies. In addition, certain grammar teaching behaviours exhibited by the teachers in this study (e.g., the use of fluency work to initialise grammar teaching) are not accounted for by Peck's classification. Thus Peck's analysis illustrates

how pedagogical models for teaching grammar available in the literature (and which teachers in training may be introduced to) may often not bear much resemblance to the models which practising teachers employ. Thus we require much more research on the ways in which experienced teachers conceive of and combine different kinds of grammar activity in their work. Such information has a central role to play in the development of teacher education strategies for enabling both preservice and inservice teachers to cope more effectively with the demands of formal instruction.

• **What strategies did the teachers use in presenting grammar?**

Martha, Tina, and Hanna made frequent use of presentation activities as I defined them above. Although these teachers shared the view that the aim of grammar presentations was to enable students to understand the form, meaning, and use of the target grammar, they adopted different strategies to achieve this aim. These strategies are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4: Approaches to presenting grammar.

Teacher	Strategy
Hanna	Teacher sets up situational or thematic context where the grammar is not used but through which it is elicited. Teacher checks students' understanding of the grammar with minimal meta talk.
Tina	As above but with more explicit discussion of the target grammar.
Martha	Teacher presents a thematic-discoursal context which illustrates the target grammar. These

	examples are then discussed to establish the form, meaning, and use of the grammar.

One clear difference which emerged here relates to the teachers' views on the nature and the purpose of the context through which grammar is introduced. Hanna and Tina preferred to establish situational (e.g., 'my unhappy friend is talking about her life') or thematic (e.g., 'crime') contexts through which the target grammar was <u>elicited</u> (i.e., no instances of the target grammar were present in the initial context); Martha used thematic-discoursal contexts which <u>illustrated</u> the grammar (i.e., the context included instances of the target grammar). Another distinction in the way these three teachers presented grammar is the extent to which such work involved or led to explicit talk about grammar. Hanna never promoted such talk, while Tina and Martha did allow for some explicit discussion of grammar if this helped them in establishing its form, meaning, and use. These differences reflected the teachers' overall views about the desirability of metalinguistic talk in L2 teaching.

• What strategies did the teachers use in analysing grammar?

The different ways in which teachers approached the explicit analysis of grammar are summarised in Table 5.

Table 5: Instructional strategies in analysing grammar.

Example	Strategy
Tina -multi word verbs.	A mini lecture on the grammar which the teacher gives. The students listen and take notes.
Dave - gerund/infinitive.	The teacher provides students with purposefully selected examples of the target

	grammar. Students analyse these and formulate grammar rules. The teacher clarifies these at the end of the activity as required.
Eric - follow up to fluency work on 'listen and describe an object'.	Students analyse grammatically incorrect sentences taken from their own speech, correct these, and explain the reason for the error in each case and/or formulate a rule. The teacher may provide 'thinking' questions to facilitate this process as required.
Hanna - follow up to 'find the difference' activity in prepositions lesson.	As above except that students focus on and correct their errors with minimal metalinguistic discussion and without formulating an explicit rule which explains the correction.
Martha - past simple and continuous.	Teacher led class discussion of grammar previously presented in which students make explicit the conclusions they have reached about the grammar. Teacher rephrases and clarifies students conclusions as necessary.

Although there was one clear example of expository work, these strategies were predominantly inductive and explicit; i.e., they encouraged students to analyse examples of the target grammar in order to formulate statements about its meaning, form, and use. Hanna, though, minimised the explicit component of inductive grammar analysis as much as possible. That is, in error correction work (the only time when she conducted grammar analysis), she encouraged students to correct their errors without requiring them to formulate any explicit statement about the grammatical thinking behind the correction.

None of the teachers disputed the fact that what students discover for themselves is learnt more effectively, but the commentaries the teachers provided on their instructional decisions in analysing grammar revealed that there was a wide range of other factors which determined the strategy they chose:

1.   <u>The particular grammar under study.</u> Both Tina and Dave stated that not all grammar can be effectively dealt with inductively. This was a key reason behind Tina's mini lecture on the syntax of multi-word verbs.

2.   <u>The availability of time and resources.</u> Tina opted for expository work when she felt an inductive approach would consume too much valuable classroom time. She also felt that planning inductive lessons was more demanding and that appropriate materials were not always available to support this process.

3.   <u>Students' expectations and preferred ways of learning.</u> All the teachers admitted that they considered students' expectations and learning styles in deciding how to analyse grammar. While four of the teachers did make allowances for these factors (i.e., sometimes they adopted specific instructional strategies mainly because they felt the students would respond well to these), Hanna was less willing to modify her teaching to fulfil students' expectations (e.g., she adhered rigorously to her pedagogical ideals about not providing direct input during formal instruction).

4.   <u>Students' level of understanding as assessed by the teacher.</u> Martha, Eric, and Dave all explained that although they preferred inductive grammar work, they had no objection to explaining grammar themselves when it was clear that the students were unable to reach useful conclusions on their own. Such behaviour, after all, was part of their role as L2 teachers. In fact, there were no

examples in the teaching analysed here of 'discovery' work where the teachers did not round off the activity with their own input. Particularly in the work of Dave (e.g., the gerund/infinitive lesson), this input even assumed the form of an expository mini lecture. Nonetheless, Dave felt that the value of engaging students in the process of discovery was not invalidated by the need for him to provide direct grammatical explanations at the end of the activity.

5.   <u>Students' willingness or unwillingness to engage in discovery work</u>. When the teachers (apart from Hanna perhaps) observed that the students were not keen to examine grammar inductively, they were willing, for the sake of maintaining a positive classroom atmosphere, to adopt a more directive role than usual.

6.   <u>Teachers' assessment of their own knowledge of specific grammar points</u>. Eric admitted that when he felt unsure of his own knowledge of a grammar point students asked about, he was less likely to engage students in spontaneous inductive analysis. In such situations, he either provided a brief explanation and moved on or postponed the discussion until he had time to prepare for the subsequent inductive analysis of the particular item.

The range of factors highlighted here suggests that teachers' decisions about how to analyse grammar go well beyond simplistic inductive-deductive dichotomies promoted in experimental studies aiming to determine which of these approaches works best (e.g., Shaffer, 1989). In principle, all five teachers preferred inductive work; however, in practice, a range of factors interacted to define the particular pedagogical option they adopted. More often than not, in practice this option reflected elements of both discovery-oriented and teacher-directed grammar work.

- **What kinds of grammar practice activities did the teachers utilise?**

Although they were often vague in explaining the basis of their views, all five teachers believed that opportunities for practising grammar were important. A shared belief underlying this position was that in L2 learning, using the language is of fundamental importance. However, the teachers held different views about the specific manner in which grammar practice was beneficial. These are summarised below.

Table 6: Reasons for practising grammar.

Teacher	Reasons for Grammar Practice.
Martha	Graded controlled and less controlled practice converts students' knowledge about grammar into an ability to apply this knowledge in fluent communication.
Eric	Practice reinforces students' understanding of grammar previously analysed.
Tina	Practice gives students an immediate opportunity to use new grammar. Over time (i.e., not immediately) it bridges the gap between knowledge about grammar and an ability to use it in communication.
Hanna	Repetition of the target structure enables students to recall it and prepares them to use it in communicative situations.
Dave	Practice reinforces students' understanding of the grammar under study.

The teachers disagreed on the extent to which grammar practice contributed to the development of students' fluency. Eric and Dave did not commit themselves on this issue; Tina felt that practice helped, but over time; while Martha and Hanna believed that practice could lead to some immediate improvements in students' use of the target grammar in spontaneous communication. The uncertainty and the variety of positions evident in the teachers' comments is perhaps not surprising given that such uncertainty is reflected in the literature on grammar practice itself (for a range of positions, see Ellis, 1991; Ellis, 1998; Johnson, 1988; Johnson, 1994; Prabhu, 1987; Sharwood Smith, 1981; VanPatten, 1993). This is not to say that teachers were uncertain about the role of grammar practice <u>because</u> they were aware of the inconclusive evidence in the research. In fact, the teachers made no explicit reference to this research in explaining their views. Rather, these views seemed to be influenced more by models of L2 teaching (e.g., PPP) the teachers had been trained in as well as by the intuitive belief that using the grammar facilitated, in some way, L2 learning.

Characteristics of Effective Grammar Practice

An analysis of the teachers' commentaries on grammar practice work generated the following cumulative list of characteristics which made such work effective.

Table 7: Teachers' criteria for effective grammar practice.

- Provides repetition of the target grammar.
- Provides evidence of students' understanding of the grammar.
- Challenges the students.
- Allows students to use grammar in a personally meaningful way.
- Provides students with some choice of what to say.
- Is based on topics students find interesting.
- Does not engage students in activities they can complete alone out of class.

- Focuses students' attention on both the meaning and form of the grammar.
- Is not limited to parrot-like repetition.
- Forces learners to choose among different grammatical structures.
- Allows learners to introduce other language if they want to.
- Is enjoyable.

For the purposes of comparison, Table 8 presents a list of similar criteria provided by Ur (1988). Ur's criteria of validity, volume, and interest are included in those provided by the teachers, while the criterion of pre-learning, although not explicitly stated, was implied in the way the teachers used and talked about practice work (i.e., they all saw practice as an activity where students used grammar previously focused on).

Table 8: Characteristics of effective grammar practice (Ur, 1988).

Criteria	Description
Validity	It should activate the language it purports to practice.
Pre-learning	It should focus on language learners have already been introduced to.
Volume and repetition	The more language the learners hear and produce during practice, the better.
Success-Orientation	Practice should be designed and presented in such a way that learners are likely to succeed in doing the task.
Heterogeneity	It should be suitable for use in mixed ability classes.
Teacher assistance	Teachers' role is to assist students to produce acceptable responses not to 'sit back' or to assess and correct.

Interest	Practice should be based on topics learners find interesting.

Ur's notion of teacher assistance, too, overlaps with the teachers' criterion that practice should not simply involve students in activities they can complete alone, out of class (e.g., mechanical gap-filling work). However, the teachers made no reference to Ur's criteria of success-orientation and heterogeneity (the latter was probably not a concern because the teachers in this study did not teach mixed ability classes). On the other hand, the teachers' list includes a range of items not mentioned by Ur (e.g., challenging the students, focusing on meaning and form, fun). The teachers' criteria, derived from the study of actual classroom practices, illustrate how the study of teacher cognition can expand on, provide contrasts with, as well as support claims about L2 grammar teaching provided in the literature.

• How did the teachers deal with students' grammatical errors?

The teachers varied in the extent to which they focused on students' grammatical errors and in the explicitness with which they did so. Nonetheless, there were two general trends evident in the work of all five teachers:

1. They adhered to the practice of not interrupting students to correct grammatical errors which occurred during oral fluency work. However, while Eric, Hanna, and, to a lesser extent, Dave, did note students' errors and return to these later, Martha and Tina did not. In fact, the latter two teachers exhibited little concern for the grammatical errors students committed during fluency work.

2. Although they admitted that students expected to have their errors corrected by the teacher, all teachers promoted self-repair on the

students' part when errors occurred during accuracy work or when errors committed in fluency work were subsequently attended to.

Regarding the first of these points, the reasons the teachers gave for their position are summarised in Table 9.

Table 9: Reasons for not interrupting students during fluency work.

- Errors are an inherent part of students' attempts to use new language.
- Attention to students' errors during fluency work hinders the development of their fluency.
- Interrupting students undermines their confidence and hinders learning.
- Students benefit from classroom activities where they can focus on communicating their message or completing a communicative task without worrying about their errors.

These views reflect the communicative precepts which all five teachers embraced and which are promoted in current L2 teaching methodology textbooks (e.g., Scrivener, 1994). Regarding the second point listed above, the teachers aimed to encourage students to correct their own errors because they felt that self-correction generated a sense of achievement in students and made the correction more memorable. The teachers used two main strategies to encourage self-repair:

- Elicitation. This approach was widely used by Hanna, who believed that as long as the teacher provided the right prompts, students could correct themselves. Thus, during grammar presentation activities, when students produced an incorrect form she very rarely corrected it herself; rather, she utilised a range of prompts to elicit the correction. Tina, too, did use this approach, but

she was less persistent than Hanna and often provided the correction herself when students seemed unable to do so. During written fluency work, Dave also made students aware of errors through prompts without providing direct corrections himself.

- <u>Post-Fluency Error Analysis.</u> Eric made wide use of this strategy. Following fluency work, he gave students a list of errors to discuss and correct. This discussion was metalinguistically explicit and often resulted in the formulation of a rule or rules about specific grammar items. Hanna also engaged students in post fluency error analysis; however, in contrast with Eric, she minimised explicit grammatical discussion and focused on getting students to produce corrections without having to make explicit the underlying grammar rules.

The work of these five teachers supports the assertion that, despite the absence of empirical support for such a position, self-repair is widely considered by L2 teachers to be more desirable than teacher-correction (Ellis, 1994). It is interesting to note that the teachers' promoted self-repair even though they felt they were generally expected by the students to adopt a more directive role in error correction (Schulz, 1996, provides questionnaire data which support the teachers' belief here that L2 students expect teachers to correct their errors). This was, in fact, one clear issue where teachers were unwilling to adopt instructional strategies which fulfilled students' expectations, although the way teachers dealt with these expectations about error correction varied:

- Martha told students directly when she was not interested in their errors and despite their protests she did not relent.

- Eric used fluency-based error analysis activities to show students that he was concerned about their errors and to reduce their concerns about his lack of intervention during fluency work.

- Tina generally ignored any grammatical errors her students made during fluency work. Given that these were advanced students, the errors they did commit rarely interfered with their ability to communicate their meaning.

- Hanna avoided direct correction but believed that students eventually came to understand the logic of the approach she adopted (i.e., postponing error analysis until the completion of fluency work and eliciting corrections from the students).

- Dave ignored errors during oral work but focused on some of these in subsequent grammar work. During written fluency activities, he did point out and encourage students to correct errors which he noted.

Collectively, the analyses of these teachers' work indicated that the process of responding to the students' grammatical errors involved complex decisions which often had to be made quite quickly ("snap" decisions, as Dave called them). Thus teachers had to decide:

> (a)   whether to address the error or to ignore it;

> (b)   whether to address it immediately or later;

> (c)   whether to point it out to the individual student or to draw the attention of the whole class to it;

> (d)   which strategy to use to promote correction of the error.

In making such decisions, the teachers drew not only on the underlying beliefs about error correction which I outlined above, but they also had to consider the specific instructional factors such as:

> (a)   the purpose of the activity the error occurred in (e.g., accuracy or fluency);

(b) the gravity of the error in the context it occurred;

(c) what effect they felt that ignoring it was likely to have on the student making it and/or on the rest of the class (i.e., whether the other students would 'learn' the error);

(d) the extent to which the error was specific to a particular student or whether it reflected an issue the whole class were having problems with.

2. Conclusion

My focus in this paper has been on presenting a collective analysis of the grammar teaching practices of five L2 teachers. Here I summarise the main points which have emerged from this analysis.

1. <u>All teachers conducted formal instruction</u>. Although to different extents, all teachers in this study felt that grammar teaching had a role to play in their work. There were no cases of 'naturalistic' L2 teaching where formal attention to language was eschewed. Even in the case of Dave, where there was little evidence of formal instruction, this did not reflect a belief that such work was not important in L2 teaching; rather, it was the result of his own lack of confidence in teaching grammar and of his beliefs about the needs and wants of the advanced students which he taught.

2. <u>Teachers did not teach grammar simply or necessarily because they felt it promoted acquisition.</u> Teachers conducted formal instruction for a range of reasons; a belief that it promotes L2 acquisition was not necessarily predominant among these. The positive psychological impact on students and teachers emerged

clearly here as an important reason for the presence of grammar work in the lessons of all five teachers.

3.   <u>Formal instruction was a multi-faceted decision-making process.</u> In teaching grammar, the teachers in this study made a range of decisions both before and during lessons about the content and processes of instruction. Thus they had to decide:

- whether to conduct formal instruction at all;

- what language points to focus on;

- how to structure grammar lessons;

- how to present and/or analyse grammar;

- how metalinguistically explicit to be;

- what kind of grammar practice activities to utilise;

- how to deal with students' grammatical errors.

4.   <u>Formal instruction was not seen by teachers as the exclusive application of a best method</u>. Although all five teachers had pedagogical preferences in teaching grammar, these preferences did not automatically determine which instructional strategies the teachers adopted. Thus they were generally willing to vary their approach to formal instruction according to the instructional variables such as students' characteristics or the grammar under study. Grammar teaching was thus clearly not viewed by these teachers as the exclusive application of one method. Rather, formal instruction was a pedagogically variable activity which reflected the interaction between teachers' cognitions and the contextual factors which were active in their classrooms.

5. <u>Each teacher's practice was unique</u>. The grammar teaching practices of the teachers in this study cannot be reduced to one generalisable flowchart-like model of decision-making. There were similarities in some of the teachers' assumptions about L2 teaching and learning (e.g., shared communicative precepts about error correction and the importance of meaning as well as form in teaching grammar) as well as in their choice of instructional strategies (e.g., the use of presentation-practice models); yet the contextualised nature of teachers' instructional decisions and the individualised cognitions underlying these decisions interacted in such a way that the resulting practices were highly personalised.

It is clear from these findings that grammar teaching is by no means a monolithic enterprise, one which can be defined in terms of a set of universally shared and applied principles and practices. An important issue in the agenda for continuing research on L2 teaching must therefore be to deepen our understanding of the range of practices which unfold in classrooms under the label of 'grammar teaching' and to explore the factors which influence teachers' decisions to adopt these practices. Studying teachers' practices and rationales in this manner is central to the task of understanding the process of L2 grammar teaching and thus central to the work of both L2 teachers and teacher educators.

References

Bialystok, E. (1982). On the relationship between knowing and using linguistic forms. *Applied Linguistics, 3 (3*), 181-206.

Borg, S. (1998a). Talking about grammar in the foreign language classroom. *Language Awareness, 7* (4), 159-175.

Borg, S. (1998b). Teachers' pedagogical systems and grammar teaching: A qualitative study. *TESOL Quarterly, 32* (1), 9-38.

Borg, S. (1999a). Studying teacher cognition in second language grammar teaching. *System, 27* (1), 19-31.

Borg, S. (1999b). The use of grammatical terminology in the second language classroom: A qualitative study of teachers' practices and cognitions. *Applied Linguistics, 20* (1), 95-126.

Borko, H., & Livingston, C. (1989). Cognition and improvisation: Differences in mathematics instruction by expert and novice teachers. *American Educational Research Journal, 26* (4), 473-98.

Burns, A. (1996). Starting all over again: From teaching adults to teaching beginners. In D. Freeman & J. C. Richards (Eds.), *Teacher learning in language teaching* (pp. 154-177). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ellis, R. (1991). *Second language acquisition and second language pedagogy.* Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ellis, R. (1998). Teaching and research: options in grammar teaching. *TESOL Quarterly, 32* (1), 39-60.

Gass, S. (1991). Grammar instruction, selective attention, and learning. In R. Phillipson, E. Kellerman, L. Selinker, M. Sharwood Smith, & M. Swain (Eds.), *Foreign/ Second pedagogy research* (pp. 134-141). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Johnson, K. (1988). Mistake correction. *ELT Journal, 42* (2), 89-96.

Johnson, K. (1994). Teaching declarative and procedural knowledge. In M. Bygate, A. Tonkyn, & E. Williams (Eds.), *Grammar and the language teacher* (pp. 121-131). London: Prentice Hall.

Krashen, S. D., & Terrell, T. D. (1983). *The natural approach.* Oxford: Pergamon.

Peck, A. (1988). *Language teachers at work: A description of methods.* London: Prentice Hall International.

Pienemann, M. (1985). Learnability and syllabus construction. In K. Hyltenstam & M. Pienemann (Eds.), *Modelling and assessing second language acquisition* (pp. 23-75). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Prabhu, N. S. (1987). *Second language pedagogy.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schulz, R. A. (1996). Focus on form in the foreign language classroom: Students' and teachers' views on error correction and the role of grammar. *Foreign Language Annals, 29* (3), 343-364.

Scrivener, J. (1994). *Learning teaching.* Oxford: Heinemann.

Shaffer, C. (1989). A comparison of inductive and deductive approaches to teaching foreign languages. *The Modern Language Journal, 73* (4), 395-403.

Sharwood Smith, M. (1981). Consciousness-raising and the second language learner. *Applied Linguistics, 11* (2), 159-168.

Smith, D. B. (1996). Teacher decision making in the adult ESL classroom. In: D. Freeman & J. C. Richards (Eds.) *Teacher learning in language teaching* (pp. 197-216). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ulichny, P. (1996). What's in a methodology? In D. Freeman & J. C. Richards (Eds.), *Teacher learning in language teaching* (pp. 178-196). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ur, P. (1988). *Grammar practice activities.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

VanPatten, B. (1993). Grammar teaching for the acquisition-rich classroom. *Foreign Language Annals, 26* (4), 435-50.

Woods, D. (1996). *Teacher cognition in language teaching.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.