Grammar is not a dirty word - Exploring grammatical prejudice in teaching and learning

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Abstract
The teaching of grammar in language and literacy education has been the site of considerable ideological debate in Australia. Part of the hesitation and uncertainty as to the role of grammar in education may be due to the existence of ‘grammatical prejudice’. Grammatical prejudice, as in common with other forms of prejudice, could be viewed as a negative judgement or opinion formed without recourse to a thorough understanding of the complexity and diversity of grammar’s role in language education.

Using a mixed methodological approach, the perceptions of pre-service and in-service teachers regarding grammar were explored. Of interest is whether negative or ambivalent attitudes regarding the role of grammar in language education held by teachers may affect the pedagogical approach employed and by extension, may shape students' attitudes towards grammar and language learning in general.

Introduction
Grammar is an aspect of language teaching and learning that often elicits a mixed response from educators – and students! One of the reasons for the ambiguity towards grammar is its historical ‘baggage’. Teaching grammar as ‘traditional’ grammar often focuses on rote learning of de-contextualised ‘rules’ and ‘exceptions’ with the overall aim of writing and speaking ‘correctly’. Other, more modern, forms of grammar teaching have sometimes skimmed the surface and attempted to repackage grammar to the point where the word ‘grammar’ is never mentioned, leaving students unsure of what grammar actually ‘is’ and how grammar works in our language. The polemics of recent debates on grammar may belie the fact that teaching practices often operate on a continuum which incorporates a range of viewpoints regarding grammar. The contested nature of grammar in education is a topic that pre-service teachers hold views on and have beliefs about, but what exactly do they believe about grammar, and how might this impact on their future teaching of language? In order to investigate this question, a small case study was conducted to examine the beliefs and opinions that pre-service teachers held about grammar, with a focus on uncovering a ‘grammatical prejudice.’

Why look for grammatical prejudice?
Teachers in early childhood and primary education are primarily teachers of language. Through speaking, listening, writing and reading teachers model language use in a wide range of contexts. During the course of their training, pre-service teachers are exposed to many theoretical and practice-based language teaching approaches, with the aim that upon graduation, they will be confident and competent in language teaching. The case study was motivated by a curiosity to find out how a group of pre-service teachers, in their second year of training, view grammar and will an analysis of their beliefs uncover a prejudice against grammar? If there is evidence of grammatical prejudice held by the group of pre-service teachers, what might be the cause?

Prejudice is generally considered to be an “An opinion formed beforehand, especially an unfavourable one based on inadequate facts” (Collins, 2003, p. 1281). It follows that a grammatical prejudice is an opinion or set of opinions regarding grammar formed without a thorough understanding of the complexity of grammatical functions in language. If there was a grammatical prejudice evident in the beliefs of the pre-service teachers, it could be assumed that this is due to a lack of understanding of the role that grammar plays in many language contexts. The students in the case study were undertaking a unit covering many areas of linguistic awareness and a considerable component of the unit included a socio-linguistic approach to grammar in education. The unit also underscored that grammar is not a unitary phenomenon, but can be defined as having a range of functions in different contexts. The term grammar often causes confusion as there is not one grammar, but many! During the course of the unit, the pre-service teachers were asked to reflect on their beliefs about grammar in a social, personal and school context. As their awareness of how and why the English language is continually changing developed, their recognition of the importance of grammar also developed. In other words, how might their beliefs and views on grammar influence their approach to the teaching of grammar in their language education program? If there is evidence of a prejudice against grammar, what is it based on, and what impact will it have?

The Case Study

The cohort for this exploration was second year Bachelor of Education students undertaking the core education subject, Education 2. There were 177 students in total. As second year undergraduates, they have had a ‘taste’ of ‘teaching’ in that they have completed two school experience practicums, they have developed skills as reflective learners, and they have begun the process of developing their own beliefs about teaching and learning. The students are a diverse group, a proportion of them are changing to a new career from an established one, such as nursing or sales, banking or human services. The range of ages in the cohort creates an interesting dynamic as the students have experienced a range of grammar teaching approaches in their own primary and secondary education – either traditional or whole language or a mix of the two. A proportion of the pre-service teachers are also parents as well, and they bring this perspective to the discussion.

The content of the second semester unit in Education 2 was ‘linguistic awareness’, and the students were exploring this topic from a variety of angles in their lectures and tutorials. They were considering the social, historical, psychological aspects of language acquisition, production and development. They were also being exposed to
aspects of grammar in their lectures that drew attention to the need to know ‘why’ grammar works in our language, particularly from a learner’s point of view.

The students were asked to respond to a series of questions in an online discussion by writing short responses, from 200-500 words. There was no prescribed word limit. They were required to complete a posting for each question as part of their assessment. There wasn’t a grade associated with their posting, it was a hurdle requirement. They were asked not to ‘read up’ in order to construct an answer, and they were asked not to give references. It was important that they didn’t frame their thoughts in a formal writing or essay format. The questions that they were asked related to their thoughts, feelings, beliefs about grammar.

The questions were:

**Personal Context**
- What does grammar mean to you?
- What do you know or not know about grammar?
- Do very young children (4 or 5 years old) know grammar?
- Do you think that grammar helps you in speaking and writing?

**Social Context**
- Some educators think that people of different social backgrounds use language differently and also have slightly different grammars even though they speak the same language (i.e. English). It is not right or wrong, just different. Others have the opposite view: People of low socio-economic backgrounds often use grammar incorrectly and they need to learn correct grammar so that they can speak correctly. What is your view? If possible, please give examples in your reply.

**School Context**
- Some parents complain that schools do not teach grammar any more. It is important that children should be taught grammar so that they can improve their speaking and writing, particularly for children who speak non-standard English. Others think that teaching grammar to children is not productive. What is your view?

As you can see, the questions referred to grammar in a number of contexts – social, personal, educational, and were asking for opinion, not fact.

**How was the data analysed?**

For the three sets of questions, approximately 240 pages of data were collected. The majority of the responses were honest, detailed and thoughtful, showing a process of developing beliefs about the role of grammar teaching and learning in language education across the educational spectrum. They often began their postings with a greeting for the lecturer, Dr. Thao Le. For example, ‘Hi Thao, how are you?’ or ‘Thanks for the lecture Thao’. This tone of familiarity and friendliness was maintained in their responses, they were writing to a person, not answering an essay
question. They did not feel that they had to give a ‘right’ answer, rather they were able to say how they felt ambivalent and unsure about teaching grammar, how they felt they did not fully understand what grammar was, or how it worked. This honesty gives the data immediacy and a very ‘real’ quality. The students were also able to read the postings of their peers, and could agree or disagree on points, but within this there was overall a valuing of the experience of others, and a willingness to engage in a debate where issues are discussed. As teachers, this ability to ‘talk it through’ and to listen to the opinions and experiences of others is important and characterises much of the work of practising teachers.

Emerging themes

From a close reading of the responses, dominant themes highlighting some of the key concerns that the pre-service teachers had regarding grammar, and the role of grammar in education emerged. Although they were not asked specifically to reflect on their own learning of grammar at school, many of them included their memories of grammar in their responses. One reason for this perhaps was to explain their own knowledge, or lack of, of prescriptive grammar. Another reason may have been to explain their personal beliefs in terms of their prior experience as learners. There was an overwhelmingly consensus that grammar was important. However, there was a range of reasons, from socio-economic to linguistic as to why grammar was important. These themes provided a multifaceted way of looking for grammatical prejudice – if it was apparent, what context was it associated with, and what might be the processes that led to this negative view on grammar.

Included in these themes were:

- Recognition of the primacy of grammar in language learning
- Ambivalence towards grammar
- They felt they did not ‘know’ enough to teach it
- A burden of responsibility to teach it
- The ‘great grammar debate’
- How prepared do they consider themselves to teach grammar?

Recognition of the primacy of grammar in language learning

Many of the responses highlighted the crucial role grammar plays in language. Many felt that grammar can also be viewed as a ‘tool’ that we use to communicate, to become accepted in society and to make our meaning clear. What implications does this view of grammar have for teachers?

- I think grammar is very important because it is the tool we use to communicate what we have to say to each other.

- I know that correct grammar is the key to effective communication. Grammar gives us the power to construct a sentence with meaning.
- To me, grammar is the rules and syntax of a language. Grammar involves the technical structure of language and its correct usage. Without grammar, everything we write and/or speak would not make sense.

- Grammar is to language what lines are to an athletics track. Grammar is to language what a steering wheel is to a motor vehicle. In this context, grammar is the guiding force in our language. Without grammar, our language would simply be a jumble of letters and words. Grammar is the force that controls and converts our letters into words, words into sentences and so on. It produces meaning from the written and spoken word.

- I think grammar is similar to road rules. Without them, the roads would be havoc and it would be like driving in the dark without the lights on.

- It is a tool that creates meaning through similarities in communication.

- Grammar is an organising system which we use to convey and understand the meaning of these experiences and talk to each other.

- Grammar in language is like the track on which a train runs.

Ambivalence towards grammar.

Many pre-service teachers felt that their knowledge of grammar was incomplete and 'patchy'.

- I know for a fact that I do not know all that I need to know about grammar.

- Grammar entails many rules, I know enough to communicate what I want to say, but I do not know all the rules involved

- This is one of the most interesting things about grammar, the fact that you can use grammatical rules everyday and still be unable to describe what those rules are.

- What I don’t know about grammar is all the technical terms and when to apply those terms. If I was asked to explain when to use a modifier, or how to split infinitives or be asked to explain what a preposition is, I would not be able to give a clear explanation.

However, many felt that although they did not know the reasons behind the rules of grammar, they recognised that they were competent in their grammar usage.

- When I was asked this I panicked, “Oh my God, I don’t know anything about grammar” was my first reaction. It is only sometimes when you analyse your own knowledge that you realise how much you do know.
• Whilst I know most of the rules, I have trouble explaining why something is grammatically correct or incorrect, I usually just say it sounds right this or that way.

• I am aware that although I can correctly construct my spoken or written message to convey my meaning, often I am not considering grammatical principles, nor could I even explain why my message was constructed as it was.

Knowing grammar well enough to teach it

This brings us to an interesting point – if we ‘know’ grammar well enough to use it, why do we often feel that we do not ‘know’ it well enough to teach it?

• How on earth can we be teachers if we do not understand the linguistics of our own language?

• I particularly feel that as future teachers we need to have a good knowledge of spelling and grammar. This is so that when children ask why we do certain things within our language we can give an answer that will actually make sense as opposed to saying ‘we just do’.

• Teachers can hardly be encouraging in the skills of English if they don’t understand it themselves

• A teacher that has an understanding of linguistics is going to be able to answer a question like “Why do we use tenses?” in the class better than a teacher who does not understand but simply applies the rules of a language.

• Teachers act as the ‘introducers’ of linguistic structures and therefore need to be aware of as many linguistic structures as we can.

Then again, the terminology of linguistic texts can sometimes be daunting and make us feel less than competent when it comes to grammar.

• An honest reassessment of my earlier claim regarding my knowledge of grammar may be necessary as I scan the contents page that deals with morphology, syntax and semantics. Perhaps I don’t know as much as I thought!

The ‘great grammar debate’

Asking pre-service teachers what grammar meant to them highlighted some of the issues that are at play in ‘the great grammar debate’.
• Grammar to me is how to say and use words properly in an everyday situation.

• The way language is organised is what I believe the word grammar means. Whenever we use language – through speech, listening, writing, reading or just thinking – we have to choose and arrange words in a certain way for it to make sense, although we are probably not aware of doing this. Grammar is essentially the rules of a language, relating to the ways you can combine words to form sentences.

• I believe that grammar is something that can be picked up through immersion.

• Grammar to me means the use of ‘proper English’! When I was young, I would often become lazy when speaking and no one could understand what I was saying. My dad would say ‘Use proper English!’ In my experience, grammar has also been viewed as a means and a way to categorise people into a social hierarchy.

• In my opinion, the term grammar refers to a set of rules which provide us with a clear understanding of how to use language in an acceptable and appropriate manner.

• The word grammar to me governs the rules I use to construct a sentence. It is therefore the basic structure of our English language that evolves into words and the arrangement of these that make up our phrases and sentences.

• In my opinion, the word ‘grammar’ means a list of rules set by the social structure of a society to guide the way people communicate their written and spoken language.

How prepared do they consider themselves to teach grammar?

• I believe that learning linguistics has helped develop my understanding of how to teach English. I was unaware of how complicated the process of learning English was.

• I think linguistic awareness, especially knowledge about grammar, is very important to a future teacher. Children look to teachers to ‘know everything’, so we as teachers should be confident in the way we are teaching and using language.

• It is only now I am 100% sure of the meanings of what verbs, nouns, adjectives and pronouns are. I now feel confident not only to be able to teach language correctly, but to know the answers to questions about language and be able to use it correctly myself.
• Today’s society is pretty easy going when it comes to language……or the lack of. It is essential that as teachers we need to reinforce linguistics and the importance of using language correctly to be able to communicate effectively with others.

• It would be impossible to be able to teach it all. I feel that teachers need to provide basic starters so the students can develop their knowledge throughout schooling years, and we can only do our best and pass on our knowledge in the best way we can.

Finally, is grammar a dirty word?

The research so far indicates that grammar is not a dirty word for these pre-service teachers. None of the responses indicated that grammar is unimportant or unnecessary – there was a strong sense that grammar was a vital aspect of a complete language teaching and learning program. An interesting consideration that arises from this case study is the question of linguistic awareness in pre-service teacher education. Many responses indicated that they could recognise the need for greater exposure to linguistic concepts and theory in order to broaden their knowledge of grammar, and the role grammar plays in language. The dialogue between linguistics and education is recognised as an important contribution to teaching practice (Halliday, 1982; Hudson, 2001; Sinclair, 1982) although the complexity and diversity of linguistics as a field of study has does not always fit with everyday teaching and learning practice. In terms of the inclusion of linguistics in everyday language learning, Shepherd (1993) reinforces the benefits of being able to use metalanguage in the classroom, “Metalanguage – a language for talking and writing about language – is a facilitator, enabling clear and precise description and discussion of language behaviour” (p. 7). Being able to talk about grammar - how it works, what it does, why it works – was seen as a valuable aspect of their future language teaching by the pre-service teachers. Many of them now felt that they could use metalanguage (such as noun, verb, and conjunction) with confidence and meaning.

Whilst there was not an overt grammatical prejudice present in the responses of the pre-service teachers, there was a strong sense of ambiguity towards grammar. This ambiguity emerged in their appraisals of their own grammatical competence, the socio-cultural issues arising from a prescriptive approach to grammar usage and their recollections of grammar teaching from the viewpoint of themselves as learners. When they considered the role of grammar in communicative contexts, their responses clearly indicated that they considered grammar as fundamental in allowing meaning to be made in spoken and written modes. However, there was also an acknowledgement that although they could use grammar competently, they were unsure of ‘how’ grammar worked. This highlights a fundamental area of learning about grammar that they were keen to pursue. Many of them asked for ‘more grammar’, as they had felt empowered and relieved to know some of the linguistic fundamentals governing grammar in the linguistic awareness unit.

The honest, insightful and passionate responses from the pre-service teachers indicated that ambivalence, rather than prejudice, was present in their beliefs about
grammar. This ambivalence may be due to a lack of confidence in their knowledge about grammar. The responses of the pre-service teachers also underscore their beliefs about teaching in general. It may be that in an inquiry based curriculum framework, these teachers of the future want to be able to give more comprehensive answers to ‘why’ questions concerning language usage than ‘because I said so.’

References


