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TEACHING GRAMMAR: A SURVEY OF EAP TEACHERS IN NEW ZEALAND

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Abstract

This paper reports on a survey of New Zealand teachers' attitudes towards grammar and grammar teaching in their own particular teaching contexts. It uses a questionnaire adapted from that used in a survey of teachers of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in British universities (Burgess & Etherington, 2002), followed by a series of email interviews with volunteer respondents. The findings of the present study indicate that, like the teachers reported in the 2002 study, EAP teachers in New Zealand appreciate the centrality of grammar in their language teaching and have a critical awareness of many of the problems and issues involved. There is also evidence to suggest that the teachers favour the treatment of grammar through its emergence in whole texts, rather than its presentation in decontextualised sentences and structures. In this regard, there is support for an approach tending towards Focus on Form (Long, 1991; Long & Robinson, 1998). However, the teachers' comments on the importance of systematic practice of grammatical features and detailed error correction suggests that there is a preference for more extensive treatment of grammatical issues than is usually suggested by proponents of a strictly incidental Focus on Form approach.

Introduction

The teaching of grammar continues to be a matter of controversy in the field of Applied Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition (SLA.) It is generally agreed that some attention to grammatical form is useful, perhaps necessary, but many issues related to the teaching of grammar still need further research, especially into the key social factors that are an inescapable element of classroom learning. Prominent among these social factors are the personal identities of the teachers and learners – and their individual and collective constructions of classroom reality. Increasingly, the beliefs and attitudes of practising teachers are being sought to shed light on theoretical concerns in the teaching of grammar, such as the nature of implicit/explicit learning, the way that grammar is best presented, the need for various types of evaluative feedback, the role of practice, etc. The study reported here took as its starting point a questionnaire slightly modified from that published a few years ago (Burgess & Etherington, 2002) which explored the attitudes of a group of British teachers of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) regarding the role of grammar teaching in their courses. The present study surveyed a similar group of EAP teachers in New Zealand, and followed this with a series of email interviews

with a self-selected sample of the respondents. For the purposes of this report, the following broad definition of EAP is used: "those educational activities in higher education, the purpose of which is the teaching and learning of the English language required by undergraduates and/or staff" (Kennedy, 2001, p.25).

Literature review

The teaching of grammar

The consensus among applied linguists involved in SLA is that language learning should have a primary focus on meaning within an overall communicative framework (Ellis, 2006). However, "the inability of communicative ESL teaching alone to promote high levels of accuracy in learners is now clear" (Fotos, 1998, p. 301). Hence, over the past decade there has been a re-focus on research into, and the practice of, grammar teaching (see Nassaji & Fotos, 2004). There is current theoretical debate –even sharp controversy (for example, Sheen 2003) – between applied linguists who argue for a focus on forms (FonfS), and those who propose a focus on form (FonF).

In the former, the teacher plans a series of lessons around specific grammar points in order to: promote an explicit understanding of grammar by a variety of means; provide written and oral exercises to practise the target form; and allow frequent opportunities for the (communicative) use of the target items. FonfS is most obviously exemplified by the Presentation, Practice, Production (PPP) model, although grammar can also be explicitly and inductively taught through activities such as 'dictogloss' (Wajnryb, 1990), or consciousness-raising tasks based on input texts (Ellis; 1992; Ellis & Gaies, 1999).

Focus on form, on the other hand, assumes an indirect, context-based focus on grammar, rather than overt, teacher-led instruction (Doughty & Williams, 1998). Ellis (2001a) has distinguished two types within this category: incidental and planned. Proponents of *incidental* FonF assume that classroom activity is based on communicative tasks and that attention to form should be paid only when grammatical difficulties arise which lead to (or are anticipated to lead to) a communicative breakdown. At this point, remedial treatment is effected by transitory corrective feedback, and when more extended grammar treatment is needed, this should be based on grammar problem-solving tasks, rather than forms-focussed instruction. *Planned* FonF, on the other hand, involves the treatment of pre-determined grammatical features but differs from FonFs because it occurs when the learners' attention is primarily engaged in processing meaning. It may thus be seen as an intervening point in a continuum between the other two approaches. Various empirical studies investigating FonF in some English as a Second Language contexts have been recently conducted, notably by Ellis and his associates (Ellis, 2001a and b; Ellis 2002, Ellis, Basturkmen & Loewen, 2001; Ellis, Basturkmen & Loewen, 2002). FonF appears to be consistent with current SLA theories; however, the following statement made some years ago about KAL (Knowledge About Language) still, to a

large extent, applies today about the relationship between theories of grammar instruction and teachers' beliefs and practices:

> Theoretical debates and popular discussions of rationales and models for KAL in the classroom have been informed by little empirical evidence regarding teachers' current beliefs and classroom practices in the area (Brumfit, Mitchell & Hooper, 1996, p.70).

It is to the issue of teachers' beliefs that attention is now turned.

Teacher cognition

Research on teachers' beliefs and the relationship of those beliefs with pedagogical practice, originated in America in the early 1970s. Following the publication of *Life in Classrooms* (Jackson, 1968), the National Institute of Education of America published a report which enunciated the need for research on teachers' thought processes (instructional beliefs) more deeply. The report stated that:

> It is obvious that what teachers do is directed in no small measure by what they think. Moreover, it will be necessary for any innovations in the context, practices, and technology of teaching to be mediated through the minds and motives of teachers. (National Institute of Education of America, 1975, p.1)

Since then, the relationship between teachers' thinking and the impact of their knowledge and beliefs on instructional practices has increasingly attracted educational researchers' attention, first in America (for example, Clark & Yinger, 1977), then elsewhere. In general, research on teachers' thought processes is based on the three major assumptions: (i) teaching is largely influenced by teacher cognition, (ii) teaching is guided by teachers' thoughts and judgments, and (iii) teaching constitutes a high-level decision-making process (Isenberg, 1990). As Clark and Peterson (1986) have claimed, teaching is "substantially influenced and even determined by teachers' underlying thinking" (p. 255). However, it has long been recognised that individuals' thinking processes and belief systems cannot merely be observed or measured, but instead must be inferred from what individuals say – and this has conventionally been investigated by attitude measurement techniques, often via questionnaires pioneered in the 1920s and 1930s by Thurstone, Likert and Gutmann.

Since that time, a great deal of research into teachers' cognition has been carried out, and a wide array of constructs has been employed – not only various categorisations of thinking, knowledge and beliefs, but also diverse operational definitions of conceptions, assumptions, values, principles, decision-making, attitudes and so on – and Borg (2006, p. 272) has argued the need for a shared terminological framework to be used. In the absence of such, the view will be taken in this paper that *attitudes* are the surface expression of underlying values, beliefs and knowledge, and may not fully represent those deeper constructs for various reasons such as: an individual's

lack of explicit awareness of those underlying constructs; an internal contradiction between and within these categories; and/or a simple inability, or unwillingness, to convey these to another person. Thus, at the best, soliciting teachers' attitudes is barely scratching the surface of much deeper cognitive processes, but one which – it may be argued – is a necessary first step towards more fully exploring cognitive processing. It is also evident that what a teacher believes or knows may not always correlate highly with his or her professional practice. Thus, investigations into teachers' beliefs should be balanced by consideration of their actual behavior in planning and executing classroom activities, and the extent of the convergence or divergence between beliefs and practice explored by both researchers and participant teachers. It is important to acknowledge this as a further limitation to the issues raised by the study reported in this paper.

Second language teacher cognition

The field of Second Language Teacher Education has tended to lag behind mainstream educational research in its attempt to understand the cognitive dimensions of second language teaching (Johnson, 1992a). In the 1970s, interest in classroom-based research on second language teaching and teacher education focussed on three issues: effective teaching behaviours, positive learner outcomes, and teacher-student interactions (Freeman, 2002). Only in the past two decades have second language teacher education researchers (Freeman, 1989; Richards & Nunan, 1990; Johnson, 1992a, 1992b; Woods, 1996; Borg, 1998a and b, 1999, 2003a; 2003b; 2006; Borg & Burns, 2008) drawn attention to ways in which second language teachers' cognitive processes influence their classroom instruction.

A key work in this area was Woods' (1996) longitudinal study of planning and decision-making by eight teachers in Canadian ESL classrooms, which he carried out using multiple sources of data documentary analysis: teachers' logs, interviews, observations, and stimulated recall sessions. The book provides a wealth of detailed insights into both the decision making processes and the factors which shaped these, which Woods divided into internal and external groups:

> *External* factors are situational factors which teachers take into account in making decisions (or to be accurate, what teachers know, assume and believe about these factors). *Internal* factors are ones internal to the decision-making process itself, i.e., the internal structuring of decisions and the relationships of decisions to each other. (Woods, 1996, p. 128).

One important contribution made by Woods to investigating language teachers' planning processes was his notion of BAK (Beliefs, Assumptions and Knowledge); rather than assume that these are distinct categories he considered them as separate points on a semantic continuum. In this respect, he echoed somewhat earlier thinking on the knowledge base of general teachers (Grossman, Wilson & Shulman, 1989).

Teachers' beliefs about grammar teaching

Borg (2003a and b; 2006) reviewed 64 studies of language teacher cognition, of which all but twelve appeared after 1994, including Woods (1996) – the only case study at book length reported in the review. Borg divided his reviews into five parts, according to whether these studies related to: prior language learning experience, teacher education, classroom practice, teaching grammar, or literacy instruction. The 38 studies which focussed on grammar teaching were considered by Borg (2006) in terms of three distinctive sub-topics: (i) teachers' knowledge of grammar; (ii) surveys of teachers' beliefs about grammar teaching; and (iii) the relationships between teachers' beliefs about grammar teaching and their classroom practices. The findings from all of these studies suggest that teachers do indeed have a set of complex belief systems about the teaching of grammar, and that these are sometimes not reflected in their classroom practices for various complicated reasons. Borg concludes his consideration of the somewhat heterogenous collection of research reports by saying "there is no suggestion in any of these studies that formal instruction is becoming less prevalent in language classrooms" (Borg, 2003b, p.100).

Of particular relevance to the present study are two surveys. The first was carried out by Burgess and Etherington (2002) to identify the attitudes of 48 British teachers of EAP in UK universities. The findings from this survey clearly indicated that the responding teachers "appear to see grammar as important for their students and to have a sophisticated understanding of the problems and issues involved in its teaching" (Burgess & Etherington, 2002, p. 450). The teachers favoured discourse-based approaches, rather than decontextualised presentation of grammar items, with an inclination towards the use of authentic, full texts and real-life tasks for practice.

The second is a more recent survey (Borg & Burns, 2008) of beliefs about the integration of grammar and skills teaching. A questionnaire comprising both open- and closed-ended items was completed by 231 teachers of English from South America (2.5%), Asia (23.2%), Europe (25.7%) and Australia and New Zealand (46%). In this survey, the number of respondents from South America was very small (n=6) and the authors (p. 461) decided to exclude their responses from their analysis of the findings. Although 76% the remaining respondents worked in universities and other Adult Education Centres, there is no indication that EAP was in focus either in the questionnaire items or in the responses. Much of the authors' discussion of their findings (pp. 476-480) was taken with considering how their respondents perceived the relationship between grammar and the teaching of language skills in apparently General English (rather than specifically EAP) classes, but they also discussed their teachers' beliefs about the centrality of grammar to language instruction, and some of the points made will be considered in the final section of the present paper.

The present study

The international survey reported by Borg and Burns (2008) came to the attention of the present researchers too late to influence their own survey, and other than this no

other research into New Zealand teachers' attitudes towards grammar and its integration into language teaching has been identified. It is not clear from the international survey how many of the respondents were from New Zealand, nor how many, if any, were working in EAP contexts, rather than in more general situations. Moreover, while there were many extracts of comments from respondents from other countries, none were reported as having been expressed by New Zealand teachers. Thus a survey of the attitudes of a sample of EAP teachers in New Zealand may be seen to complement previous studies and also, to a limited extent, to add to a general academic and professional understanding about what certain teachers believe about key aspects of grammar teaching. However, it is realized that such a survey, using questionnaires and interviews as the sole sources of information – a mere 'snapshot' of opinions of a small group at a specific moment in time – can at best be only a first step of what should be a more detailed and intensive investigation into the cognitive processes underlying teachers' classroom activity.

Research questions

It was decided that the same research questions used by Burgess and Etherington (2002, p.437) would guide the present study:

1. Which beliefs about grammar and grammar teaching are most widely held by EAP teachers (in New Zealand)?
2. Is there a bias towards decontextualised presentation of grammar and away from discourse-based, unified approaches?

Survey instrument

With the permission of Sian Etherington, a slightly modified version of the 2002 questionnaire was used (see Appendix 1): unlike the 2002 questionnaire, which had a five-point response scale, the version used in New Zealand solicited only four responses: strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree. The reason for this was that a four-point scale facilitates a clear analysis of positive and negative responses; there is a tendency for many respondents to regress to the central point (#3 – no opinion, or neutral) in a five-point scale – a matter which led to some uncertainty in interpreting Burgess and Etherington's discussions of their findings. The questionnaire in the present study was written in HTML, XSSI and CSS to include university branding. It included radio buttons for respondents to indicate their preferences, and one open-ended question for additional comments, as well as five general background questions. The respondents were able to review their responses, and make any changes, before submitting the completed questionnaires, which then came directly to the researchers' email addresses when respondents clicked the 'submit' box. The researchers received no indication of the identity of the respondents.

Survey respondents

An online search of all the New Zealand university websites produced a total of almost 200 teachers who were initially assumed to be teaching EAP. These were all contacted by email and advised of the scope and purpose of the study and their willingness and formal consent to participate was solicited, following the university's

standard ethical procedures for conducting human research. Many of those contacted responded that they did not currently teach EAP classes and therefore declined to participate; a few others simply did not respond. However, questionnaires were completed and returned by 32 teachers working at six of the eight universities in New Zealand, and at Unitec. All of these respondents taught EAP courses to undergraduate or pre-undergraduate students as all or part of their teaching duties. In terms of the types of classes and students they taught, and the length of EAP teaching experience, the New Zealand respondents were largely comparable with the British teachers reported by Burgess and Etherington. One relatively minor difference is that all of the British teachers taught on pre-sessional EAP classes (Burgess & Etherington, 2002, p, 437), whereas some of those in New Zealand were teaching students already enrolled in undergraduate EAP courses. As did Burgess and Etherington (pp. 437), the present authors readily acknowledge the possibility of 'volunteer bias' in the sample of those who took the time to complete and return the questionnaire. These 32 respondents were then asked if they would be willing to follow up the questionnaire with a series of email interviews.

Email interviews

Although they obtained, and discussed, some qualitative comments from their respondents, the British authors acknowledged that "[t]he lack of follow-up interviews is a major limitation to the study" (Burgess & Etherington, 2002, 449). Therefore, in the New Zealand study, all the respondents were invited to participate in a series of follow-up interviews to flesh out the bare descriptive statistics of the questionnaires. Because of the geographical spread of the participants, it was decided that these discussions should be conducted with each participant through email messages. So, over a period of two months, three sets of questions were posed to each interviewee; initially, the same questions were asked of each participant, but in the second and third sets the general questions were preceded by some tailored queries in order to follow up previous comments by the particular interviewee. (An example is provided in Appendix 3.) The information thus collected was collated and subjected to a process of grounded analysis, whereby all the data were interrogated to identify common and contrasting opinions on two or three themes.

Interview participants

Eleven of the survey respondents volunteered to take part in the email interviews, all of whom had more than five years of EAP teaching experience, and all but one held an MA and/or doctorate in applied linguistics. All were teaching undergraduate (support) or pre-undergraduate (access) programmes in the same six universities and Unitec as represented in the survey, and the students they taught were within the IELTS range 4.5 - 6.5; the median being 5.5. The following data were taken from nine interviewees (three female and six male), as one withdrew after the first set of questions due to pressure of work, and another was working overseas for his university at the time, and it was felt that his responses, though valuable, would not assist an understanding of EAP teaching within a New Zealand context.

The questionnaire and – especially – the interviews provided a wealth of interesting information about the respondents' attitudes towards grammar teaching. However, Sections 4 and 5 below report only those data relating specifically to the two research questions stated above: the centrality of grammar to the respondents' EAP classes, and how grammar might be introduced and practiced.

Quantitative Findings: Data emerging from the preliminary survey

The following section presents the findings (percentages rounded to the nearest tenth of a percentile) emerging from the New Zealand questionnaire, and the sequence of the discussion follows that in Burgess and Etherington (2002, pp. 440-447). For full details, please refer to Appendices 1 and 2, which provide tabulated data.

The role of grammar in language

Most of the New Zealand teachers surveyed considered that grammar plays a central role in language. Two thirds (68.8%) agreed that the role of grammar is *a framework for the rest of the language* (statement 1.1) and the same number rejected the idea that grammar is merely...*a refinement for a more basic linguistic knowledge* (statement 1.3). Over half (56.3%) agreed that grammar *can be seen as blocks of language combined to create the whole* (statement 1.2), and 71.9% concurred that grammar *can be seen as an equal backbone for sufficient linguistic competence* (statement 1.4).

Explicit grammar teaching

The majority of the respondents (71.9%) agreed or strongly agreed with statement 23, *My students expect teachers to present grammar points explicitly* – a point reinforced by the positive responses of just over two thirds to statement 33, *A lack of explicit grammar teaching leaves my students feeling insecure.* This possibility is strengthened by the 80.7% concurrence with statement 20, *Explicit discussion of grammar rules is helpful for students.* These findings strongly support the view that a direct approach to grammar instruction seems to be preferred by the New Zealand students – although it is important to note, as did Burgess and Etherington (2002, p. 441), that the above attitudes – while ostensibly focussing on the learners' needs and wishes – may actually reflect the pedagogical preferences of the teachers.

Instruction vs. exposure

The notion that grammar can be learned through exposure to language in natural use (statement 2) was agreed by 62.6% of the respondents, although 80.6% of them also agreed or strongly agreed with statement 3, *Formal instruction helps learners to produce grammatically correct language.* These findings are not necessarily contradictory, as they are linked to the following issues.

Declarative and procedural knowledge

Almost two-thirds (65.7%) of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with statement 21, *My students find it difficult to transfer their grammatical knowledge*

into communicative language use. The point was specifically taken up in the email interviews and some of the teachers' comments are reported in Section 5 below.

The importance of conscious knowledge

Three statements sought teachers' attitudes towards the role of students' conscious knowledge. Statement 4, *Student use of language does not involve conscious knowledge of the grammatical system and how it works*, received positive responses from only 28.1% of the teachers, a point reinforced by almost two thirds (62.5%) agreeing or strongly agreeing with statement 6, *Students need a conscious knowledge of grammar in order to improve their language.* On the other hand, a very similar proposition in statement 9, *Students need to be consciously aware of a structure's form and its function before they can use it proficiently*, did not produce conclusive results, as only 46.9% of the New Zealand teachers agreed with this point.

Comparison and contrast of structures

Two thirds (67.7%) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with statement 17, *Comparison and contrast of individual structures is helpful for students learning grammar;* of the dissenting third, only one teacher strongly disagreed.

The use of grammatical terminology

78.2% of the teachers agreed with statement 34, *My students find grammatical terminology useful.* Burgess and Etherington (2002, p. 444) suggested that the British teachers' similar preference for explicit grammar teaching may be linked to their students' previous experience of grammar-based language learning, and this is possibly also the case in New Zealand. In contrast to the positive responses above, statement 39, *My students find it difficult to use grammatical terminology,* did not produce conclusive results, as there was an exact 50:50 split between those who agreed and those who disagreed, although more (12.5%) strongly agreed than strongly disagreed (3.1%). Here, the distinction may be made between reporting the students' preference for the teacher's use of grammatical terminology in contrast to the students' own metalinguistic competence.

Problem solving

Statement 22, *My students are motivated by problem-solving techniques for learning grammar,* was agreed to by 67.7% of the respondents. Similarly, 61.3% of them disagreed with the contrasting statement 40, *My students are frustrated by problem-solving techniques for learning grammar*, thus confirming the learners' apparent preference for this approach to grammar learning, or at least the teachers' assumptions that this is the case.

Error correction

83.9% of the teachers agreed that form-focused correction helps students to improve their grammatical performance (statement 18). Two thirds (68.8%) rejected the proposition that *Teachers find it difficult to correct student errors of grammar within a written communicative context* (statement 35). However, they were almost equally

divided in their responses to statement 16, *Teachers should only correct student errors of form which interfere with communication,* with 43.8% agreeing and the majority disagreeing.

Presentation in authentic, complete texts

75% of the teachers showed agreement or strong agreement with statement 15, *Students learn grammar more successfully if it is presented within a complete text.* It was clear that the vocabulary used in authentic texts presented more difficulties than grammatical features; 78.2% supported statement 29, *My students find authentic texts difficult because of the vocabulary used,* but it was less clear whether *My students find it difficult to handle grammar presented within authentic texts* (statement 26), as there was a 50:50 split in the responses, although there was more strong agreement (15.6%) than strong disagreement (6.3%) on this issue. Just over two thirds of the teachers (68.8 %) disagreed that the use of authentic material was too time-consuming (statement 31). On the whole, the responses of the New Zealand teachers, like those of their British counterparts, indicate "no general feeling that authentic texts take too much time in the classroom or in preparation" (Burgess & Etherington, 2002, p. 446).

The role of practice

Very positive attitudes towards the role of practice were evident. 80.7% of the respondents concurred with statement 5, *Students can improve their grammatical accuracy through frequent practice of structures.* Likewise, 84.4% agreed with statement 12, *Productive practice of structures is a necessary part of the learning process.* In both cases, there was a marked degree of strong agreement (19.4% for statement 5 and 40.6% for statement 12). Over two thirds (68.8%) also supported the view that *Participating in real-life tasks with language is the best way for students to develop their grammatical knowledge* (statement 14).

The distinction between practice (of structures) and 'real life' tasks was not clear in the questionnaire, and this point was taken up in the subsequent interviews.

Qualitative Findings: data emerging from the email interviews

The first research question of this study sought to elicit EAP teachers' beliefs about grammar and its role in their language teaching. Six of the nine interviewed teachers reinforced the point made by the questionnaire respondents that grammar had a central place in their classes. One of the points in the first interview asked the interviewees to "...explain the extent to which you focus on grammatical issues in the above class." The following comments (using pseudonyms) were made:

> There would be some focus on grammar in all of my EAP lessons (Colin).
> Grammar is an important component in the paper (Charles).
> A great deal of focus, because the students are very inaccurate with grammar (Brian).

> It occurs in most lessons (Kenneth).
> Form is the focus of the whole course (Michael).
> Although I include in my weekly planning some sessions of explicit grammar teaching, a lot of incidental explanation occurs almost every day ... Students prefer explicitness when they are taught grammar and I feel they believe grammar is everything, more important than writing and reading (Emily).

There were similar comments which clearly indicated that most of the interviewed teachers believed that an *explicit* focus on grammar was important, although the following comments were also made:

> I really don't overtly teach it all (Carol).
> The overall approach to the course places very little focus on grammar (Simon).
> We do not focus on grammar unless it arises in the course of the lesson (Penny).

The teachers took into account their learners' background when deciding to adopt an explicit focus on grammar, for example:

> I would be fairly confident that the past English language learning experience of the majority of learners attending our programmes would be heavily based around *well structured courses based around the grammatical functions of English* (Simon –emphasis in original).

And some compared students from different language backgrounds:

> From experience, it has always been the non Asian students that do not know the grammar rules (the Pacific Island students or the Middle Eastern students) whereas the Chinese, Malaysians, Japanese, and Koreans know them and are able to answer the questions. So I think there is some difference in knowledge levels depending on how they are taught English (Carol).

The interview data from these teachers indicated that, like their British counterparts, they had a thoughtful and "sophisticated understanding" (Burgess & Etherington, 2002, p.450), of the issues involved. These will be revealed in the following discussion, which focuses on the interview responses addressing the second of the research questions posed above:

> Is there a bias towards decontextualised presentation of grammar and away from discourse-based, unified approaches?

The question was soundly rejected; the majority of the interviewees supported an approach based upon a discourse-based treatment of grammatical issues within whole texts, rather than through isolated, decontextualised presentation.

Because the actual questionnaire responses of the interviewees were unknown, they were asked to comment on the following item: *#15 Students learn grammar more successfully if it is presented within a complete text.* Seven out of nine agreed; one strongly agreed; one disagreed. The disagreement came from Penny, who explained that: "if grammar points do arise, I deal with them but not in great detail. ... Because they are having a grammar focus in their Text Based Skills class, this leaves me free to focus on EAP alone." There was otherwise a general feeling that "isolated grammar has no contextual relevance to many students" (Brian) and "if ... we look at the grammar in the context of a written piece of text then I think that this makes more sense to them rather than simply teaching grammar in a piecemeal way" (Carol). Another teacher put it this way: "I believe that if students are exposed to grammar in the context within which it is used, they are more likely to remember and use such grammar when they find themselves (using language) in a similar context" (Simon).

A wide range of texts were used by the teachers to draw attention to grammatical issues, ranging from journal articles and abstracts to the local and international newspapers to:

> an assignment that I had cobbled together from theirs – I would have picked out particularly bad examples of grammar that were particularly recurring, would have highlighted the issues and would lead a general discussion on the whys and wherefores of the mistakes (Carol).

They were asked what difficulties their students might have when dealing with grammar within complete texts. Perhaps not surprisingly, "it varies according to level – naturally – also is somewhat dependent upon their first language and previous academic achievement level" (Brian). More specifically linguistic issues were mentioned, such as

> difficulties in nuance especially of time and aspect ... modality can cause lots of problems as it is quite often badly taught in course books and teachers tend to be scared of it as it's hard to get an overall handle on (Emily).

When asked if the teachers themselves found difficulties in this approach, there was general feeling that the only problem was that of time – for example:

> I have no difficulties in presenting grammar in this way; on the contrary, students seem to enjoy this discourse / grammar approach. Our real problem is time because a change in how they look at a text requires time and practice, more than the four weeks between two assessment tests (Emily).

Another comment indicated the general freedom of choice enjoyed by university teachers:

> I don't have any difficulty with presenting grammar problems in the way that I have outlined as it is not imposed on me by anyone else. I would have a problem if someone told me I had to do it in a certain way, but as it is my way ... I am relatively confident of and with, the students in front of me, then I don't have any problems (Carol).

The issues of practice and correction stimulated a great deal of comment. As one interviewee said with regard to the difficulty students have in transferring grammatical knowledge into communicative language use: "the majority of students have a good grasp of grammar, but the problem is getting them to apply their knowledge and write meaningful sentences" (Charles). Another comment was: "I find that many students lack awareness of grammar and this hinders effective academic writing" (Brian). There was firm agreement or strong agreement among the interviewees on the need for practice (in response to items #5, 12 and 17 on the questionnaire; please refer to Appendix 1), although notions of what constitutes 'practice' varied. For some, this was a matter of skills and strategy training, rather than focus on grammatical features. For example:

> I train them and hope that they learn skills, strategies and that critical thinking and other faculties are honed. This involves practice (Brian).

Another interviewee put it like this:

> Tasks that require students to involve certain language structures to successfully complete a task (or to complete it to a higher standard) are also given as additional 'homework' tasks (Charles).

Some interviewees espoused an incidental approach to the practice of forms:

> Practice is a key part of classroom sessions. ... I would prefer to think of learning as more of a practice of language using target structures rather than as practice of the target structures themselves (Simon).

Another made a similar remark, but implied that she might have liked to have more forms-focussed practice:

> Practice is a very important part of my classroom practice ... but the practice tasks I am referring to are to do with assignment/ report construction, not grammar. In an ideal world ... I would have grammar tasks all the time to reinforce the structures taught and let them see the constructions in a real written form (Carol).

One very experienced EAP teacher clearly indicated a reactive focus-on-form approach:

> I recently responded to a student enquiry in class about 'reduced' relative or subordinate clauses. I gave the question some whiteboard focus, using examples from a text we had been studying ... I spent between 5 and 10 minutes on it and then moved on (Colin).

Here, however, the focus on form reported by the teacher went beyond the beyond "overtly draw(ing) students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise *incidentally* in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication" (Long, 1991, pp. 45-46 – emphasis added), which is a central feature of a 'strong' form of *incidental* Focus on Form. Others reported an approach similar to planned FonF (Ellis 2001a) regarding grammar points which might give rise to particular problems:

> It depends on whether you mean formal practice or productive use ... If by practice you mean solely for pedagogic purposes, I would say, only for "intricate structures", which require special attention to their formal features (e.g. conditionals), and which for this reason are difficult to 'pick up' accurately (Kenneth).

Another interviewee was explicit about her proactive strategy to raise her students' consciousness of how forms are contextualized:

> I prepare a significant number of worksheets designed for individual, pair and group work. As the modules that we run are driven by topic of subject, I try to use a variety of texts, which contain the same grammar structure, which students have to identify, and then compare to the way it was used in previous texts (Emily).

Overall, the interviewees' comments on issues relating to practice indicated that the attention to grammar was secondary to other aspects of language, such as the appropriate organisation of written texts. When they did deal with grammatical issues, however, there was clear evidence that this was more than an "*occasional* shift of attention to linguistic code features" (Long and Robinson, 1998, p. 23 – emphasis added). As one interviewee said: "Students ultimately need to – and in most cases want to – minimise errors" (Kenneth). This attention to form is also reflected in their comments about correction: reinforcing the general agreement of the questionnaire respondents to item #18, <u>all</u> of the interviewees agreed that form-focused correction helps students to improve their grammatical performance, and most did not find any particular difficulties in correcting grammar errors in either written or oral communication, which they did in various ways – such as:

> When I mark an assignment, I will circle or underline mistakes, but I don't re-write things for them, sometimes I will add 's' if there is a plural

> mistake and sometimes I will cross out words or phrases that are repetitious or redundant – and I will write 'repetitious' on their assignments (Carol).

This teacher also uses a marking code, as does at least one other:

> On the assumption that the fewer but more emphatic points of feedback are more effective, I use a code of no more than half a dozen symbols. I'm reviewing this however ... (Colin).

Much the same point is made by another interviewee:

> It is often a good idea to concentrate upon several errors, correct them and then move on to other errors. Picking up too many errors at once can sometimes make a student feel as if their writing is beyond correction (Charles).

This teacher, as well as others, made the point that corrective feedback could also be provided by the students themselves.

Conclusion

The New Zealand teachers in this study, like the British teachers in the 2002 survey, favoured the treatment of grammatical features in complete texts, rather than in isolation. Burgess and Etherington conclude their report (2002, p. 450) by saying "[T]he results paint a picture of the approaches to grammar teaching taken in EAP courses across the UK which may be encouraging to those who advocate a Focus on Form approach." Consistent with this view, the New Zealand EAP teachers rejected a strictly forms-focussed (FonfS) strategy with a pre-determined grammatical syllabus and emphatically preferred to deal with grammatical issues as they arose from the texts used to develop generic EAP skills. To this extent, their approach may be regarded as incidental and generally reactive, although there were some instances where they adopted proactive (planned) FonF strategies – for example, by drawing up forms-focussed worksheets for systematic and perhaps extensive treatment in subsequent classes. However, while following an approach based on FonF, it is also clear that their treatment of the emerging grammatical issues was generally far from the 'transitory' remediation suggested by many proponents of a FonF strategy(for example, Long & Robinson, 1998). This is evident from the attention they paid to extensive practice (both structural and otherwise) and in the importance they – and their students – attached to the explicit correction of formal errors, for example by the use of correcting codes. In this respect, too, the range of reactive practices espoused by the New Zealand teachers resembles those of the international respondents (Borg & Burns, 2008, p. 471).

The findings of the present study also align with the portrait of grammar teaching reported in the 2008 international survey as being one "characterised by regular phases of explicit work, a desire to encourage students to discover rules (without discounting the use of direct explanation), and regular opportunities for grammar practice" (Borg & Burns, 2008, p. 477). There was an implication among these international respondents of a broadly-based Presentation-Practice-Production approach to L2 teaching – an approach which was completely absent in the New Zealand interviews; this is almost certainly due to the aims of EAP programmes, rather than general language teaching (which may be inferred from the comments of many of the international respondents). Another interesting finding of the international survey (Borg & Burns, 2008, p. 479) was the absence among the respondents of any technical language, such as 'focus on form', despite the generally high level qualification held by the majority of the teachers surveyed. This lack of explicit reference to metalanguage was also noticeable in the at least equally-qualified New Zealand interviewees, although there was use of some terms such as 'discourse-based approach', which may have been stimulated by the focus questions. As has been pointed out by Borg and Burns and others, this apparently atheoretical standpoint raises interesting questions about the role of theory in second language teacher development and practice. However, Borg and Burns (2008, p. 479) go on to say: "The largely experiential nature of teachers' evidence base in justifying their work ... raises questions about the reliability of their judgements about its effectiveness. These are issues which merit continuing study." The implication here is that professional experience may be unreliable; it may also be the case that some SLA theoretical positions may be invalid. Certainly, it is necessary to investigate the relationship between explicit theories as published in academic works, and the implicit theories developed from teachers' professional practice.

As previously noted, the New Zealand study was a very limited one. While an attempt was made to contact the entire population of EAP teachers through a search of university websites, there is little doubt that many potential respondents were overlooked. Moreover, only 32 actually completed the questionnaire, and this self-selected sample may not have been typically representative of the wider population – a volunteer bias. Despite this, it is felt that the results which emerged from this survey had some concurrent validity with the findings reported by Burgess and Etherington (2002), Borg and Burns (2008), and several other studies reported by Borg (2006). Another limitation of the present study was the restricted number of interviewees (eventually, nine). Although this was a small sample, it did represent all the institutions covered in the survey and a great deal of useful information about their attitudes and practices were provided, of which only a fraction has been reported in this paper. While thus limited and not amenable to generalisation, the interview data enabled the present researchers to get below the surface opinions revealed in the questionnaire to explore some teachers' self-reported beliefs and practices in more depth. The usefulness of the findings may be considered in terms of the extent to which the interview extracts reported above may be relatable to the readers' own professional experiences and background knowledge of the field. Finally, the

inevitable limitation of time-constraints has to be considered. The data were collected over a three-month period, and thus merely reflect attitudes expressed at a particular moment in time; moreover, the research participants were all practising professionals with busy schedules and may not have been able to give as much thought as they would have liked to either the questionnaire or to the interview questions. These points do not necessarily invalidate the findings, but they point to the tentative and partial nature of any implications that are drawn from them.

The project also suggests directions for further research in the investigation of teachers' beliefs and their influence on professional practice, both within the New Zealand academic context, and beyond. In the first place, the present researchers were aware (as were Burgess & Etherington) of some improvements that could have been made to the questionnaire. However, in this case, it was decided not to make any change to the 2002 instrument (other than reduce the five-point scale to four) in order to provide a clear distinction between agreement and disagreement, and to administer the questionnaire online (which proved to be very time-effective and guaranteed complete anonymity to the respondents). It would be appropriate for future survey research in this area to more closely tailor questionnaires to the specific context under consideration, and to consider very carefully the number of scales provided. Secondly, while the decision to interview participants by email was made on the pragmatic grounds of overcoming geographical distance, the present researchers found that asynchronous interviewing in this way provided more opportunities for timely reflection on the issues by both the researchers and the participating teachers than would have been possible in face-to-face contexts. We would recommend this approach in further investigations. Finally, while the interview data provided useful information about teachers' practice, it is evident that – as Borg (2006) and Borg and Burns (2008) have stressed – expressed attitudes need to be triangulated with observed activity. Thus, more fruitful research would seek to identify, and explore, the extent of the convergence and divergence between attitudes, assumptions and knowledge expressed by teachers and their actual classroom behaviour. Finally, as Borg (2006) again emphasises, a fully-fledged investigation into the whole issue of cognition and practice would be to explore the same issues from the learners' perspective and here too make appropriate comparisons. This constitutes a very ambitious research agenda, of which the present study has been merely the first tentative steps, but one which we feel useful and interesting – and, perhaps, essential – if we really wish to understand the realities of classroom learning.

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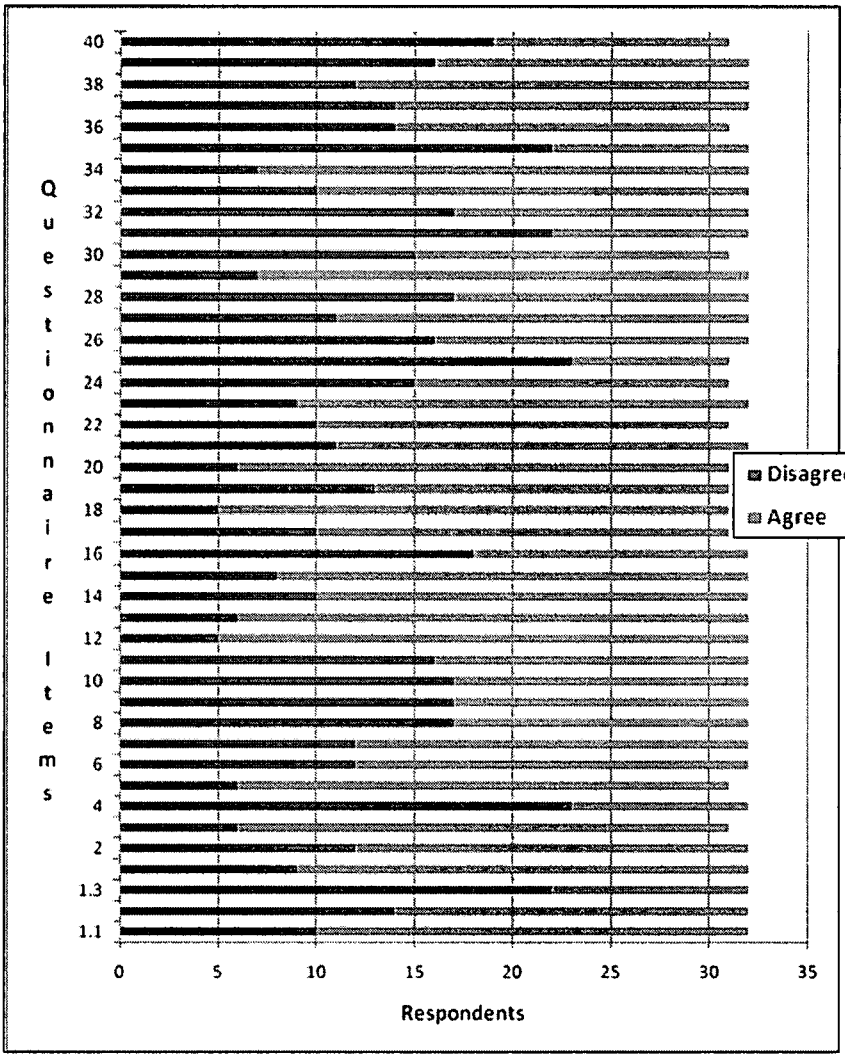
Appendix 1: Questionnaire

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	N
#1.1 The role of grammar in language is as a framework for the rest of the language – a basic system to build everything else on.	0	31.3	46.9	21.9	32
#1.2 The role of grammar in language is as the building blocks of language which are combined to form a whole.	6.3	37.5	37.5	18.8	32
#1.3 The role of grammar in language is as something which is added on to language proficiency: a refinement of more basic language knowledge.	28.1	40.6	25.0	6.3	32
#1.4 The role of grammar in language is as an equal pillar in supporting language proficiency. (Other pillars could be knowledge about pronunciation, appropriacy or culture etc.)	15.6	12.5	43.8	28.1	32
#2 Students can learn grammar through exposure to language in natural use.	6.3	31.3	43.8	18.8	32
#3 Formal instruction helps learners to produce grammatically correct language.	3.2	16.1	41.9	38.7	31
#4 Student use of language does not involve conscious knowledge of the grammatical system and how it works.	25.0	46.9	12.5	15.6	32
#5 Students can improve their grammatical accuracy through frequent practice of structures.	6.5	12.9	61.3	19.4	31
#6 Students need a conscious knowledge of grammar in order to improve their language.	9.4	28.1	37.5	25.0	32
#7 Practice of structures must always be within a full, communicative context.	9.4	28.1	28.1	34.4	32
#8 Separate treatment of grammar fails to produce language knowledge which students can use in natural communication.	3.1	50.0	21.9	25.0	32
#9 Students need to be consciously aware of a structure's form and its function before they can use it proficiently.	18.8	34.4	28.1	18.8	32
#10 The separation of work with a grammar focus from the rest of the language syllabus is useful for students.	18.8	34.4	43.8	3.1	32
#11 Decontextualised practice of structures has a place in language learning.	15.6	34.4	37.5	12.5	32
#12 Productive practice of structures is a necessary part of the learning process.	0	15.6	43.8	40.6	32
#13 Grammar is best taught through work which focuses on message.	6.3	12.5	46.9	34.4	32
#14 Participating in real-life tasks with language is the best way for students to develop their grammatical knowledge.	6.3	25.0	43.8	25.0	32
#15 Students learn grammar more successfully if it is presented within a complete text.	6.3	18.8	40.6	34.4	32
#16 Teachers should only correct student errors of form which interfere with communication.	9.4	46.9	34.4	9.4	32

#17 Comparison and contrast of individual structures is helpful for students learning grammar.	3.2	29.0	41.9	25.8	31
#18 Form-focused correction helps students to improve their grammatical performance.	6.5	9.7	58.1	25.8	31
#19 Grammar is best taught through a focus on individual structures.	9.7	32.3	41.9	16.1	31
#20 Explicit discussion of grammar rules is helpful for students.	0	19.4	35.5	45.2	31
#21 My students find it difficult to transfer their grammatical knowledge into communicative language use.	6.3	28.1	43.8	21.9	32
#22 My students are motivated by problem-solving techniques for learning grammar.	3.2	29.0	54.8	12.9	31
#23 My students expect teachers to present grammar points explicitly.	9.4	18.8	40.6	31.3	32
#24 My students prefer to learn grammar from one sentence examples	3.2	45.2	41.9	9.7	31
#25 My students prefer to find matches between meaning and structure for themselves.	19.4	54.8	19.4	6.5	31
#26 My students find it difficult to handle grammar presented within authentic texts.	6.3	43.8	34.4	15.6	32
#27 My students find authentic texts difficult because of the wide variety of structures which appear.	9.4	25.0	37.5	28.1	32
#28 My students find authentic texts difficult because they are too culture bound.	9.4	43.8	34.4	12.5	32
#29 My students find authentic texts difficult because of the vocabulary used.	9.4	12.5	43.8	34.4	32
#30 My students cannot find form-function matches in authentic texts without explicit direction from teachers.	6.5	41.9	38.7	12.9	31
#31 Teachers find the use of authentic material too time-consuming.	31.3	37.5	21.9	9.4	32
#32 Teachers find it difficult to produce tasks of a suitable level from authentic texts	21.9	31.3	31.3	15.6	32
#33 A lack of explicit grammar teaching leaves my students feeling insecure.	6.3	25.0	40.6	28.1	32
#34 My students find grammatical terminology useful.	9.4	12.5	59.4	18.8	32
#35 Teachers find it difficult to correct student errors of grammar within a written communicative context.	37.5	31.3	15.6	15.6	32
#36 Teachers find it difficult to correct student errors of grammar within a spoken communicative context.	9.7	35.5	41.9	12.9	31
#37 My students find it difficult to improve the accuracy of their grammatical language within a totally communicative writing activity.	6.3	37.5	37.5	18.8	32
#38 My students find it difficult to improve the accuracy of their grammatical language within a totally communicative speaking activity.	0	37.5	40.6	21.9	32
#39 My students find it difficult to use grammatical terminology	3.1	46.9	37.5	12.5	32
#40 My students are frustrated by problem-solving techniques for learning grammar.	6.5	54.8	29.0	9.7	31

Appendix 2: Responses to online questionnaire.



Appendix 3: Example of interview questions

Dear

Many thanks for your responses to the first set of interview questions. Before we come on to the second topic (*practice* – below) there are one or two points we'd be grateful if you would expand upon based on your earlier comments:

Apart from your initial 'heads down' activity, your comments suggest that you tend to adopt (as Ellis and others call it) an approach based on 'incidental focus on form' by dealing with grammar points as they arise. Can you think of a recent example where you did this? For example: what was the grammar 'problem'? Why did you think it should be treated? How did you deal with it? How much time did you spend on the treatment? For the purposes of these interview questions, we would be glad if you could again focus on the same EAP class you reflected on in the first set of responses

The following statements were in the questionnaire. Of course, we do not know how you personally responded to these questions, so we would be grateful if you could, firstly, let us know the extent to which you agree with the statements by underlining one of the following responses (or by deleting the three inappropriate options):

5. Students can improve their grammatical accuracy through frequent practice of structures.

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

12. Productive practice of structures is a necessary part of the learning process.

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

17. Comparison and contrast of individual structures is helpful for students learning grammar.

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

Would you now expand on these in any manner that you feel appropriate, for example:

- What methods do you employ in the classroom to ensure that students practice current structures?
- Is practice an essential part of your classroom sessions, or do you leave the practice of the target structures to homework, or cohort learning.
- If you can agree that practice is necessary and productive, should it be equally oral and written, or should there be a preponderance of one over the other.

Please feel free to add any further comments about your attitudes towards practice.