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The impact of self-perceived subject matter knowledge on pedagogical decisions in EFL grammar teaching practices

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Abstract

Recent developments in language teacher cognition research highlight the need to explore subject matter knowledge in relation to classroom practice. This study examines the impact of two foreign language teachers' knowledge about grammar upon their pedagogical decisions. The primary data base consisted of classroom observations and post-lesson stimulated recall interviews in which the teachers explained the rationale for their use of particular grammar teaching actions. The findings show that teachers' decisions are influenced by a multiplicity of factors which are internal and external to them, one of which is their self-perception of their knowledge about grammar. This self-perception has been found to be grounded in a range of aspects and to influence diverse facets of grammar teaching. The results expand on our current understanding of knowledge about grammar and its impact on grammar teaching, and have strong implications for language teacher education and development.

Keywords: language teacher cognition; knowledge about grammar; grammar teaching; teacher decision-making; non-native speaker teachers; secondary foreign language education.

Introduction

Language teacher cognition (LTC) refers to the networks of beliefs, knowledge, and thoughts which language teachers hold about all the aspects of their profession and draw on in their work (Borg, 2006). Particularly since the mid-1990s, research on LTC has shed light on the nature of teachers' cognitions and the impact these have on teachers' practices. This study contributes to this tradition of work by examining, with specific reference to EFL (English as a foreign language) grammar teaching, the influence of teachers' self-perceived subject matter knowledge upon their pedagogical decisions. The study takes place in the context of the work of non-native[1] speakers

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teaching EFL to state secondary school students in Argentina, a geographical context which has not featured at all in the LTC literature to date.

Literature review

LTC research has devoted significant attention to L2 (second/foreign language) grammar teaching, most likely due to the enduring role of formal instruction in L2 classrooms around the world. This existing work, while sharing a common overall interest, highlights different empirical perspectives. One strand of inquiry which has aroused considerable interest has been the study of teachers' knowledge about grammar[2] (KAG) and, in particular, the way in which this relates to classroom practice (e.g. Andrews, 1999, 2007). Within this tradition of research the present study examines the impact of teachers' perceptions of their KAG on their instructional decisions, an issue which has received scant attention to date (Borg, 2001, 2006).

Though it is as yet not possible to make any generalisations about exact connections between teachers' self-perceived KAG and specific behaviours (Borg, 2001), there is no doubt that the way teachers perceive their understanding of the subject matter highly influences the pedagogical decisions they take in the classroom. Grossman et al. (1989), for instance, found that the English teachers in their study who felt unsure of their KAG tended to avoid teaching it and, when they did, they adopted teaching styles (e.g. lecturing) and behaviours (e.g. racing through a review of the homework and avoiding eye contact with the students) which did not encourage learners to raise questions. Shulman (1987) also noted a similar pattern in the case of an English teacher who, when teaching some content she had a good understanding of (e.g. literature), adopted a highly interactive and learner-centred approach; however, when dealing with an area she felt uncertain of (e.g. grammar), her teaching became didactic and teacher-directed. Likewise, Mitchell et al. (1994, p. 203) suggested a link between foreign language teachers' 'avoidance of technical vocabulary' and their 'lack of knowledge /insecurity in using grammatical or discourse terminology'. In more recent studies, Borg (1999, 2001, 2005) found that EFL teachers expressing insecurities about their KAG minimised grammar teaching and avoided impromptu grammar work; on the other hand, an EFL teacher who felt confident in his KAG encouraged spontaneous discussions and formulated rules on the spot.

These findings might lead us to conclude that there is a correlation between teachers' levels of confidence and the extent to which they teach a particular content;

in other words, the more confident teachers feel about their subject matter knowledge, the more they engage in teaching it and in spontaneous work. However, there is evidence which suggests otherwise. Borg (1999) found that a teacher who felt confident in her metalinguistic knowledge minimised the use of terminology in her classes. This means that confidence in one's metalinguistic knowledge may well be accompanied by a principled view that the classroom use of terminology should be kept to a minimum. Similarly, Berry (1987, p. 144) and Pahissa & Tragant (2009, p. 57) noted that 'non-native' English language teachers who lacked confidence in their proficiency of the target language emphasised grammar work as a 'defence mechanism'. This evidence, in turn, suggests that teachers' self-perceived KAG is one of several factors shaping their grammar teaching practices and that the ways in which their self-perception impacts on their instructional decisions may vary across teachers (Borg, 2001).

In addition to teacher behaviour, teachers' self-perception of their KAG has been found to influence the grammatical information which they expose learners to (Borg, 2001). Andrews (1999, 2001, 2007) argues that teachers' language awareness (including their confidence in it) highly influences the quality of the input (i.e. 'language contained in materials', 'language produced by other learners', and 'language produced by the teacher'; 2007, p. 39) made available for learning. One of the teachers in his 1999 study, for instance, felt confident with his language awareness, which resulted in his making extensive use of the learners' contributions as a major source of input into his grammar teaching and in his filtering the deficiencies of the input provided by the textbook he was using. In the same vein, Borg (2001) and Pahissa & Tragant (2009) found that a teacher in their study used tentative language in their explanations (as a cover-up) when they were uncertain about some grammar rules. Apart from 'the nature of the grammatical information they provide to students', Borg (2001, p. 27) lists five other grammar teaching aspects which teachers' self-perceived KAG may influence: 'the extent to which teachers teach grammar', 'their willingness to engage in spontaneous grammar work', 'the manner in which they respond to students' questions about grammar', 'the extent to which they promote class discussion about grammar', and 'the way they react when their explanations are questioned'. In the current study I present and discuss data which provide more empirical support to these findings and which cast further light on the role which KAG plays in shaping teachers' classroom practice.

The study

Overview and design

This study is part of a larger investigation into the interaction among cognitive, experiential and contextual factors in EFL grammar teaching practices. This article examines the relationship between teachers' KAG and pedagogy, particularly the ways in which teachers' self-perceived KAG impacts on their pedagogical decisions. The study follows an exploratory-interpretive (Grotjahn, 1987), 'within-site' (Creswell, 2007), 'embedded multiple-case' (Yin, 2009) design. Two cases (*Emma* and *Sophia*) and a set of embedded units within each case (*cognitive, experiential,* and *contextual factors*) were examined in their particular micro (the teachers' EFL classes) and macro (EFL department at a state secondary school) contexts of occurrence.

Participants and context

The cases were selected on the basis of three main criteria: qualifications (a Bachelor's or higher degree in ELT or related field), experience (at least ten years of EFL teaching experience in state schools), and current teaching position (teaching EFL at a state secondary school).

      The participants in this study were Emma and Sophia (pseudonyms). They were both qualified 'non-native speaker' EFL teachers with more than 30 years of teaching experience. Emma had developed expertise in discourse analysis, grammar, lexis, language skills development (especially reading and writing), and literature, whereas Sophia had specialised in language skills development (especially speaking and listening), assessment and testing, and teaching young learners.

      The study was conducted at a 'university' secondary school (Cortázar School, fictitious name) in Argentina, where Emma taught EFL (5th level) to sixteen 15-16 year-old students and Sophia (6th level) to eleven 16-17 year-olds. Dependent on an autonomous state national university, university schools differ from other state schools in a number of respects such as the fact that their teachers are all qualified and subject-specialised, there are heads of department for each curricular area, the curricular content is more advanced than that suggested by the national curricular guidelines, and the students must pass highly competitive entrance examinations. With reference to EFL instruction, at Cortázar School, unlike other state schools,

students are grouped into proficiency levels and attend 96 teaching hours annually (instead of 72), classes are considerably smaller (20 learners or fewer, as opposed to 35-40 students per class), and teachers are all experienced and selected through public tenure exams. However, Cortázar School, like all state schools in Argentina, is subject to budgetary restrictions which result in basic building facilities and limited materials resources (Zappa-Hollman, 2007). For instance, classrooms are often too small and ill-equipped, consisting of old desks and chairs, a small blackboard, a storage cabinet, and no audio-visual electronic devices (e.g. TV or DVD sets). There is only one CD player which is shared by all the teachers from the EFL department and a video room which is common to all the curricular departments. In terms of ELT resources, each classroom contains printed (e.g. monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, abridged novels, and a set of the textbook materials) and audio materials (e.g. cassettes and CDs). The students are required to buy their own study materials (textbook and worksheets).

Data collection and analysis

The data presented here were collected during eight weeks using classroom observation and stimulated recall (SR) interviews. I observed 10 two-hour classes per teacher and conducted 8 SR interviews with Emma and 10 with Sophia. During observations, my role was that of a non-participant observer, that is, I sat at the back of the classroom, took field notes (e.g. recorded information about the events taking place, the people involved, teacher and learner actions and attitudes, and the materials used; Spradley, 1980), and avoided interacting with the teacher or the learners involved in the naturally occurring events being observed. In addition to field notes, the observed lessons were audio recorded. After each class the observational data were analysed and grammar-related episodes (e.g. grammar presentations and explanations; teacher responses to learners' grammar questions, comments, and mistakes; and grammar-based tasks) were identified and transcribed. These transcribed events were then used as stimuli in SR interviews to elicit teachers' interpretations of the events and their rationale for their instructional decisions (Borg, 2006). Though each SR session was based on the episodes which I selected, the teachers were free to comment on other actions or incidents they considered relevant. Each SR interview was carried out in English and lasted 40-80 minutes, depending not only on my agenda for a particular session but mostly on the participants'

physical, mental, and emotional state. I conducted a SR interview once a week and made sure that, as suggested by Faerch and Kasper (1987), the time between the events and the interview was kept to a minimum (never longer than four days).

Data analysis was both cyclical and summative (Borg, 2011). First, I engaged in some data analysis as I collected the data. This means that each data collection stage was influenced by the analysis of the data collected in previous stages (Borg, 1998a). All SR sessions, for example, were informed by the analysis of the observational data gathered during that week. Then, on completing the fieldwork, I conducted summative data analysis for each case (within-case analysis; Creswell, 2007) and across the cases (cross-case analysis; ibid.). This level of analysis involved the use of qualitative content analysis procedures, including thematic analysis (i.e. linking the data to pre-conceived themes derived from the research questions), codification (i.e. generating comments and insights which cast light on the nature of the themes), and categorisation (arranging the coded data within each theme into categories) (see, e.g., Boyatzis, 1998; Yin, 2009). With respect to ethics, informed consent in writing was obtained from the participants and the school authorities, and anonymity and confidentiality was ensured throughout. At the end of the data collection process, I conducted respondent validation, showing each teacher the findings of their case and inviting them to correct misinterpretations, add information, and comment on the adequacy of the analysis (Cho & Trent, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

Throughout the description of the findings, the following conventions are used to locate the information provided by the participants within the data corpus: (CO) classroom observation and (SR) stimulated recall interviews. The presentation of the findings is organised into each case and around classroom episodes which illustrate the impact of their KAG on their pedagogical decisions. The analysis will be supported with teachers' commentaries provided in relation to the issues emerging in the episodes. In extracts where Spanish is used, translations into English are included between brackets and in italics.

Emma

Emma's overall EFL teaching approach was grammar-based and teacher-centred. Her grammar teaching practices were characterised by deductive, explicit and teacher-fronted grammar instruction, the analysis of discrete items at the sentence level, the use of simplified grammatical terminology, and extensive controlled practice. Emma believed that teaching grammar provided 'accountability' since it offered something 'tangible' for the learners to study and for the teachers to test their students on. It also helped 'weaker' learners and gave her teaching face validity in the eyes of the students.

During grammar work Emma provided immediate responses to students' questions, typically in the form of short and simple explanations. There were a few occasions, however, where she responded in an uncharacteristic manner. In the extract below the students, based on a series of prompts, were creating pairs of sentences combining present perfect continuous (PPC) and present perfect simple (PPS). Emma had explained to them that in this exercise, PPC was used to express the notion of 'duration' (i.e. an activity continuing or repeated over a period of time) and PPS to talk about 'accomplishment'. A problem arose in connection with the last set of prompts ('He / be / aggressive / all his life. He / sent / two men to hospital'), in which a combination of PPC and PPS was not possible and in which 'duration' was not expressed by PPC but by PPS. Confused, the learners raised the question to the teacher:

Extract 1
St1: Teacher [unintelligible]. He has been being aggressive?
T: [Addressing St1] No, and why not? No, and why not? Good, good question!
[St1 remained silent; 17 seconds later]
T: Erm … One reason could be .. this verb cannot be used in this tense. That could be … a very simple reason. The other could be that it's redundant to use the two verbs … two forms of the same verb. Has been being, being. Both are the correct reasons.
St2: Teacher, por que es [*why is it*] 'has been' y no [*and not*] 'has been being'?
T: 'Has been being'. That's what we are saying. [Addressing the whole class] Can I have your attention please? Last sentence there you have the verb to be. And you said it correctly 'he has been aggressive all his time, all his life. He has sent two men to pris/ to hospital'. We didn't use present perfect progressive in

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this half. We used present perfect simple. Because of two reasons, and [naming St1] is going to tell you the two reasons. One is …

St1: The first reason is because you cannot use two forms of the same verb near, two verbs together.

T: Or it doesn't sound good. I don't know if you cannot, but it doesn't sound, doesn't sound good.

St1: And the other reason I have forgotten.

T: That the verb, simple, verb to be …

St1: Ah, is not permitted for this tense.

T: OK. For you to remember. Try to keep that as an explanation. Spanish has something like that. Er …

St2: He estado siendo [*I have been being*].

T: He estado siendo, he estado estando. He estado. He estado comprando, si, pero he estado estando, no. He estado aquí durante dos horas. Pero he estado estando? [*I have been being, I have been being. I have been. I have been buying, yes, but I have been being, no. I have been here for two hours. But I have been being?*] No. So something similar to that. Redundancy … OK. (CO8)

Emma recognised the statement as inaccurate at once but, unlike her typical behaviour, she did not provide an immediate explanation of why the sentence was wrong. Instead, she referred the question back to the student. In the SR session she explained:

I was surprised and I sent the question to see if they realised *while*, and that would be my strategy, my secret, while I thought about a clear, simple answer … while I gathered my ideas to give the explanation (SR8)

Emma's uncharacteristic behaviour was influenced by her perceived inability to provide an immediate response which was 'clear' and 'simple'. This rationale might also suggest Emma's concern for losing face in the eyes of the students, which is why she defines this pedagogical technique (i.e. bouncing the question back to the learner) as her 'strategy', her 'secret'. After (considering Emma's style) an unusually extensive wait time (17 seconds), the teacher hesitantly cited two reasons to account for the ungrammaticality of the statement ('this verb cannot be used in this tense' and

'it's redundant to use […] two forms of the same verb. Has been being'). These did not formulate any clear rules, as Emma usually did, and sounded speculative. This atypical behaviour was impacted by her lack of confidence in the information she was giving the learners, as was later confirmed by subsequent comments in class ('I don't know if you cannot, but it doesn't sound, doesn't sound good') and in the SR interview ('I didn't want to commit myself to saying "they *cannot* go together because it's a grammar rule"' SR8). It is not surprising then that, when Emma decided to address the issue with the entire class, instead of producing one of her typical teacher-fronted explanations, Emma invited St1 to explain the two reasons to his classmates. Finally, not confident about the accuracy or clarity of this explanation, Emma exemplified the issue of redundancy by making a cross-linguistic comparison of similar structures.

The relationship between self-perceived KAG and instructional decisions was also observed when Emma was teaching the notion of 'accomplishment' expressed by PPS:

Extract 2

T: 'I've run three times' will be one of the … one of the … examples that you're going to take .. to remember present perfect simple. Because when you show number of things, number of things, you use the present perfect simple. Que dije? [*What did I say?*]

Sts: Que cuando decís el numero, un numero, o sea tres, cuatro ... [*That when you say the number, a number, that is three, four …*]

T: Bien. Va a ser va a ser mi regla .. mi regla entre alumnos, no es una regla que el profesor les diga pero cuando ustedes vean que en una frase se expresan cantidad de cosas logradas [*Good. This is going to be my rule .. my rule among students, it is not a rule that the teacher gives you but when you see that in a phrase a number of things are accomplished*], you don't say 'I've been I've been running three miles' you cannot say 'I've been running three miles'. You have to say with three you have to say 'I've run three miles'. Good? (CO7)

It was not unusual to observe Emma providing simplified 'grammar rules' or 'exam tips'. This was often motivated by the need she perceived to help learners, especially 'weaker' ones, to create a memorable visual image of a complex rule and, thus,

succeed in completing grammar practice and tests ('I tried to make it short for the students […] to survive a choice […] because the exercises would be based on that, on recognising one [tense] or the other' SR7). What is atypical of her behaviour is the complicity she created with the learners by pointing out that this was not a rule which a teacher would give his/her students but that it was 'her' rule to be used among the learners. In the SR interview she explained what she intended to communicate to the learners:

… don't say it, don't say, I mean, be careful, this is not something that you are going to find in textbooks but it can help you. It's a tool that I'm giving you … don't reproduce it as such because it might be … you might make a mistake (SR7).

This explanation clearly indicates that she was not entirely confident about the rule or tip she was giving the learners, which motivated her to create complicity with them and, therefore, convey the idea that the simplified rule had limitations and might result in mistakes. Worth noting is that this was communicated in Spanish, possibly to forge a stronger bond with the students, as she had expressed in other SR interviews.

The influence of Emma's self-perceived KAG on her pedagogical decisions was additionally observed in the language she used in some of her explanations. In extracts 3 and 4 she was introducing the use of 'used to' to express past habit:

Extract 3
T: … 'used to' you used it when you want to refer to a past habit that you had, *probably* with the idea of some time ago, and *probably* with the idea that you don't do it any longer. That habit has stopped somehow (CO2; emphasis added)

Extract 4
T: […] What else did you use to do as a kid?
St: Watch television [unintelligible].
T: But you don't watch it now? Because that's the point: if you use 'used to' it means that *practically* now you don't do it any longer (ibid.; emphasis added)

The extracts show Emma's use of what Biber et al. (1999: 854) call 'epistemic stance adverbials of doubt' (e.g. 'probably') and other hedging expressions (e.g. 'practically') in her explanations. When asked to comment on this, she said:

I don't know if they are true. I mean, what happens is that sometimes when you give a rule … er, well, you remember the rule as a teacher because you have studied it, because the text says it, and … you play safe because you're not a native speaker, probably you play safe by repeating a rule. Sometimes, and it *has* happened to me, you say a rule and, somehow, someone says an expression and you have to agree that it was right, and that expression was *the* exception to the rule, or … it was breaking the rule altogether. […] you cannot hold on to [a] rule in front of the students. […] So what I do is I protect [T laughs] myself by saying well 'probably', 'most probably', in case, in case you can use 'used to' for one meaning that includes the present too, which I don't think so, I don't think *now*. But I have that, that strategy (SR2).

Emma's use of hedging expressions was influenced by her uncertainties over the categorical validity of the rule she was giving the learners. Her lack of confidence seemed to be grounded in the fact that she was not an L2 native speaker and in previous L2 teaching experiences when she taught a rule and then found this was not entirely true. She also showed some concern about losing face in the eyes of the learners ('you cannot hold on to [a] rule in front of the students'). This led her to 'play safe by repeating a rule' which she had studied from a textbook and to 'protect [her]self' by adopting the 'strategy' of using hedging expressions when she felt uncertain about some grammar rules.

All in all, the teaching episodes presented here indicate that Emma's self-perception of her KAG influenced her pedagogical decisions and actions. When she felt confident, which is what she experienced most of the time, she offered teacher-fronted explanations, provided immediate responses to students' questions and comments, and produced her own simplified grammar rules and exam tips. However, when she felt uncertain, she took actions which were atypical of her grammar teaching approach. She was observed, for instance, to refer questions back to learners, extend her wait time when posing a question, give explanations which sounded speculative and did not formulate any clear rules, invite students to reproduce her

explanations to the rest of the class, create complicity with the students in relation to simplified rules she had provided, play safe by repeating a rule from the textbook, and make use of hedging expressions in her explanations.

Sophia

Sophia's EFL teaching approach was communication-based. Her occasional grammar teaching practices were meaning-oriented and characterised by inductive and explicit grammar instruction, the discussion of contextualised chunks of language at and above the sentence level, teacher-fronted presentations, minimal use of grammatical terminology, and little practice. Despite her limited engagement with grammar work, Sophia thought that teaching grammar was useful in that it helped learners develop language awareness and noticing skills, fostered meaningful communication, motivated them as they participated in intellectually challenging discussions, and gave her teaching face validity in the eyes of the students.

Unlike Emma, Sophia had a tendency to defer or avoid formal grammar explanations and, instead, adopted alternative approaches which promoted meaningful communication. She argued that formal explanations were not conducive to L2 learning (at least in the short term) and, therefore, were unnecessary. When she did give explanations, these were normally short and sometimes incomplete. This is illustrated in extract 5, where Sophia was eliciting the correct answer to fill in the following gap: *'Every year thousands of students take important exams which can decide their future. .... , students have to pass exams with satisfactory grades in order to get a place in a university'*:

Extract 5

T: OK. So, which one should we use, 'such as' or 'for example'?

St2: Such as

T: … everybody agrees, agrees, that this is an example, OK? But 'for example' is correct because …

St3: Pero es lo mismo [*But it is the same*].

T: Yeah, but you are right, the meaning is the same but listen to me: 'for example', 'for example' is better, more appropriate for a front position at the beginning of the sentence (CO4).

Sophia did not give a clear explanation or, as was typical in her classes, engage in a discussion which helped the learners understand the distinction between 'such as' and 'for example'. Instead, she provided the correct answer and justified her choice referring to the syntactical position of the item. In the SR interview she stated:

I did not find at that moment any other explanation to help them in this particular in this particular case. Sometimes I tend to think but I don't know, maybe it's the case with this group [of learners], it could be, that if I go over everything *all* the time, this might take me very long, and I don't know if I will have [time available] (SR4)

Sophia's behaviour thus appears to be motivated by not only her perceived inability to provide a more precise explanation at that moment but also by her perception of the context (i.e. her particular learners and the time constraints she faced at school). This suggests that teachers' pedagogical decisions are influenced by a multiplicity of factors which are internal and external to the teacher.

The impact of Sophia's self-perceived KAG upon instructional decisions was also evidenced in relation to her heavy reliance on the textbook materials. In extract 6 she was eliciting the semantic categories of a group of linking words:

Extract 6
T: Say, for example, in paragraph 2 and in paragraph 3, when you list, when you list […] the different arguments in favour or the different arguments against, when you list, when you add one argument and maybe other argument […] we …What is the name? What, what do we call that idea, that we use 'also', 'furthermore', 'moreover' …
St: Add ideas.
T: Adding ideas, OK. In this case we're listing ideas [T writes 'listing ideas' on the board], or listing arguments, OK? So these are the ones that we have used. (CO4)

The learner suggested 'adding ideas' and, though she acknowledged this category as correct, she wrote 'listing ideas' on the board, the label used in the textbook. When asked to comment on this episode, Sophia replied:

I wanted to keep to the terminology in the book. I have the feeling sometimes that maybe the books have been able to choose a better, the textbook writer, a better term or a term that more precisely indicates the idea, although 'adding' would've been perfectly all right (SR4)

Though Sophia would possibly use 'adding' and 'listing' interchangeably depending on what emerged at the moment, her lack of confidence in her KAG led her to trust the textbook writer's ideas more than her own and, therefore, to stick to the terminology used in printed materials. She argued that she tended to rely on the textbook more 'when it comes to grammar, or when it comes to aspects of the system' (ibid.) and, in relation to grammatical functions in particular, she stated:

These questions of the semantic categories always make me doubt, *always* make me doubt, always. Because I'm not exactly sure and I only have … you always have … you always have … the only reference sometimes you have for certain things is what the book says (ibid.).

The influence of Sophia's lack of confidence in her KAG upon her pedagogical decisions was also observed on another occasion. In extract 7, for instance, Sophia noticed the students had difficulty in completing a cloze passage with linking words because they could not tell the difference in use between pairs of such words (e.g., 'however' vs. 'although'):

Extract 7
T: […] Do you know why we can only use 'however' in this case and not the other ones that we have there? [T points to a list of linking words on the board].
St: Yes, because it connects it contrasts ideas.
T: Yes, but they all contrast ideas. 'On the one hand' and 'on the other hand' we have to … erm that's not good for this one, OK? That's not good. Because this is one idea, so it's not good. Those are not good. 'Despite', in order to use 'despite', girls, to contrast, we have to mention the idea: 'despite the fact that exams are good, bla bla bla'. But here we don't have the idea, we have 'howev'/ we have the space and comma. All right? We could have 'despite' and it continues with an

idea. It says: one space and the comma, so this we cannot use [T crosses out 'despite' from the list on the board], and this we also need the idea [T crosses out 'although'], the only one that we can use before the comma of these ones is 'however'. So you have to write 'however' (CO4).

Sophia's response to the learners' manifested difficulties here was to provide either a partial explanation or no explanation at all. In the SR interview she referred back to her lack of confidence in her KAG ('in relation to grammar, I tend to doubt. […] I do not tend to trust myself' SR4) and then added:

I don't think [my explanation] helped them. And I don't think it was very accurate. This is … I don't know … a problem I have there … that I don't sometimes maybe I don't know how much to tell them about these grammatical explanations or maybe it was not … I don't think it was clear (ibid.).

Sophia's instructional decision was influenced by two distinct factors: her perceived understanding of not only the grammatical item under discussion (i.e. the differences in use between linking words) but also of the appropriate conceptual load of her explanations (i.e. how much information to provide). This indicates that teachers' pedagogical decisions are impacted by different domains within their knowledge base (e.g. their subject matter knowledge and their pedagogical content knowledge). It also suggests that, though Sophia was highly experienced, she had not developed expertise in the area of grammar teaching.

The analysis of Sophia's grammar teaching practices shows that she normally lacked confidence in her KAG, which was reflected in her limited engagement with grammar work and her tendency to defer or avoid grammar explanations. On occasions when she felt most uncertain, she was observed to race through the answers to exercises and to disclose the right answers herself in order to avoid engaging students in inductive discussions about grammar. Her insecurities also led her to rely heavily on printed materials and to provide partial or no explanations to students' questions or comments.

Discussion

The present two case studies generated extensive observational and interview data about the teachers' grammar teaching practices and rationales for the instructional strategies they adopted. This enabled me to explore, among different facets of their approach to grammar instruction, the impact of their self- perceived KAG upon their pedagogical decisions.

A range of themes emerge from the data presented here. Firstly, teachers' instructional decisions are influenced by a multiplicity of factors which are *internal* and *external* to them. Evidence of internal factors discussed here includes:

- teachers' perceptions of their KAG (this is examined in detail below);
- their perceptions of their grammar-related pedagogical content knowledge, that is, their knowledge of how to represent and formulate grammar content and make it accessible to the learners (see Shulman, 1987): an example of this is Sophia's understanding of the appropriate conceptual load of her grammar explanations;
- their concerns about losing face in the eyes of the learners: this was one of the reasons which motivated Emma, for instance, to refer questions back to learners and to use hedging expressions.

External factors consist of contextual agents which influence teachers' decision making. For example, Sophia's decision to disclose the correct answer to an exercise instead of initiating a discussion or giving an explanation was shaped by her perception of the context, specifically her particular group of learners and the time limitations she faced at school. These internal and external factors are in line with the contextual (e.g. time and syllabus), attitudinal (e.g. interest and confidence), and professional (e.g. knowledge and experience) influences identified by Andrews (2007) which impinge on the application of teacher language awareness on lesson preparation and classroom practice. Consistent with Andrews' claims, the findings of the present study suggest that, within each individual teacher, these factors may combine and interact in different ways, and that these unique combinations and interactions are dynamic and may well differ from classroom episode to classroom episode.

With specific reference to teachers' perceptions of their KAG, the data indicate that teachers' varying levels of confidence have an impact on their pedagogical decisions and strategies. Emma felt, in general, confident in her KAG,

which was reflected in her extensive engagement with grammar work (both planned and impromptu) and in her immediate responses to learners' questions. There were episodes, however, in which she felt uncertain and took actions which were uncharacteristic of her approach to grammar teaching (e.g. bouncing questions back to learners). Sophia, on the other hand, normally lacked confidence in her KAG, which resulted in her tendency to defer or avoid grammar work and explanations. She expressed that she felt even less confident when dealing with particular grammar content (e.g. the semantic categories of linking words). In such situations, she raced through the answers to exercises (a strategy also adopted by the teachers feeling insecure in Grossman et al. 1989) and avoided her typical engagement of the students in inductive discussions. Though this evidence is not sufficient to establish precise connections between levels of confidence and particular teaching actions (this is, in any case, not the purpose of this paper), it is possible to observe that differences in self-perceptions of KAG often result in teachers adopting pedagogical decisions and actions that are atypical of their regular approaches to grammar teaching (further evidence can be found in Borg, 2001).

In addition to differences in self-perceptions of KAG, the data here provide evidence of two factors shaping these self-perceptions: the teachers' linguistic backgrounds and their previous L2 teaching experiences. For instance, in her rationale for using hedging expressions, Emma linked her lack of confidence to the fact that she was not a native speaker of the target language and to previous teaching episodes in which her explanations had been challenged by the students. The former factor confirms the need to study self-perceptions of subject matter knowledge in regard to L2 non-native speaker practitioners. Data from previous studies suggest that other aspects influencing teachers' self-perceived KAG include their previous opportunities to develop their KAG and their prior engagement with grammar teaching (e.g. Andrews, 2007; Borg, 1998a, 2001, 2005).

A final theme to emerge here involves the facets of grammar teaching which L2 teachers' perceptions of their KAG influence. The data provide supportive evidence to two of the aspects outlined by Borg (2001). First, these perceptions impact on the manner in which teachers respond to learners' grammar questions and comments. Emma, for example, was observed to refer questions back to learners, to extend her wait time when posing a question, and to invite a student to reproduce her explanations to the entire class when she felt uncertain. Sophia raced through the

answers to exercises, disclosing the right answers herself and not giving room to students' questions or further discussion. Second, teachers' perceptions shape the grammar information they provide to students. This was observed, for instance, in Emma's atypical explanations not formulating any categorical rules and sounding speculative, and in her use of hedging expressions. The use of hedging language as a 'cover up' was also reported on in Borg (2001: 24) (e.g. 'not 100 percent, but it's 90 per cent') and Pahissa and Tragant (2009: 55) (e.g. 'it would be better to write …').

Apart from these two aspects, the data presented here indicate three other areas which may be influenced by teachers' perceptions of their KAG:

- the use of the learners' L1 in grammar instruction: e.g. Emma switching codes when creating complicity with the students. This influence is restricted to teaching contexts where the teacher speaks the students' L1 (this is true in most monolingual EFL classrooms);
- the extent to which teachers rely on printed materials: e.g. Emma repeating a rule from the textbook to play safe and Sophia sticking to the terminology used in the materials;
- the extent to which they acknowledge (implicitly or explicitly) the categorical validity of their explanations: e.g. Emma creating a complicity with the students to suggest that her rule may have limitations.

Conclusion

The grammar teaching episodes and rationales presented here provide evidence of the influence of EFL teachers' self-perceptions of their KAG on their pedagogical decisions. The findings indicate that differences in these perceptions impact on both teachers' overall approach to teaching grammar as well as on specific teaching situations. They also show teachers' L1 linguistic backgrounds and grammar teaching experiences as factors shaping these perceptions, and provide further insights into the aspects of grammar teaching which self-perceived KAG may influence, particularly the three areas identified in this study. Moreover, the results shed light on the multiplicity of factors (internal and external to teachers) which impinge on their instructional decisions.

These outcomes have clear implications for teacher education and development in the area of language awareness. I would agree with Borg (2001, p. 28)

that 'work aimed at developing teachers' KAL [knowledge about language] should incorporate opportunities for them to develop and sustain a realistic awareness of that knowledge, and an understanding of how that awareness affects their work'. This can be achieved through engagement in ongoing and systematic (self and/or peer) reflective practice which enables teachers to: a. identify strengths and areas for improvement in their KAG; b. develop an understanding of the impact of their self-perceived KAG upon their pedagogical practice and the potential implications for their teaching; and c. become aware of the sources of both their positive and negative self-perceptions of KAG. Given the level of inhibition which self or peer reflection may involve, especially in in-service teaching training, participants may be invited to reflect first on the practices of Emma and Sophia and then on their own teaching. The data thus offer 'an ideal platform for the kind of other-oriented enquiry which facilitates self-reflection' (Borg, 1998b, p. 273).

A limitation of this study which must be acknowledged is that the project bears unique characteristics in terms of where and when it was carried out, who were involved, and the particular circumstances in which the data were collected. As a result, limited generalisation is warranted to other contexts and practitioners. Yet, through the descriptive and interpretive data provided, readers are expected to be in a position to draw their own generalisations and make transferences to their own realities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is expected that, with its focus on an under-explored institutional and geographical setting (a secondary school in Argentina), this study will make a contribution to developing a picture of the impact of self-perceived KAG on pedagogical practice in different contexts.

For TESOL research to claim worldwide legitimacy, I would recommend that future research interests involve under-researched contexts and practitioners. With reference to the focus of this paper, further insights are needed into the sources of teachers' self-perceptions of their subject matter knowledge and into the aspects of teaching which these perceptions may influence. I would also suggest that research be conducted on subject matter knowledge as it interacts with other factors in real classroom contexts. This could increase our understanding of the complex, dynamic, and multidirectional nature of L2 teaching.

Notes

1. I am aware of the contested nature of the constructs 'native' and 'non-native'. 'Non-native' is used here to mean that the target language was not the participant's first language or mother tongue. The teachers in this study spoke Spanish as their first language and started learning EFL when they were 6 (Emma) and 8 (Sophia) years old.

2. In LTC research a distinction is made between 'knowledge *of* language' and 'knowledge *about* language', the former referring to language proficiency (knowledge that is largely implicit) and the latter referring to declarative or explicit subject matter knowledge.

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