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Grammar Instruction in Iraqi High Schools: Novice vs. Experienced EFL Teachers' Beliefs and Their Practices

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Abstract

Studying teachers' beliefs may help to reveal the gaps between what teachers believe and what they do in the classroom. This study attempts to inquire into Iraqi EFL teachers' beliefs and practices in teaching English grammar. Two hundred Iraqi English teachers in high schools were selected as the participants of the current study. They were given a questionnaire on beliefs about grammar instruction, and interviews were conducted with 10 of them. The data collected from the questionnaires and the interviews were analyzed by SPSS and MAXQDA, respectively. The results revealed that novice and experienced teachers have nearly similar beliefs on grammar instruction; both groups believed that grammar is a significant and unavoidable part of their instruction. However, novice teachers believed that environmental conditions can have effects on their grammar instruction, while experienced teachers believed that personal characteristics might influence their grammar instruction. The majority of the participants agreed on integrating grammar instruction, and over 80% of them favored explicit instruction of grammar. This study has practical implications.

Keywords: Grammar instruction, Iraqi EFL teachers, Teachers' beliefs.

I | INTRODUCTION

Henriksen et al. (2020) indicate that education, especially language teaching, requires a great effort from teachers because teaching a second language is a complex process where teachers must choose what teaching method to use and prepare their lessons scientifically and practically. Teachers' beliefs have an important impact on the behaviors that classroom teachers make in achieving their goals. The study of the beliefs helps reveal the gaps between what the teachers believe and what they do in the classroom (Borg, 2019).

Beliefs are ideas that result from what we get through the experiences we go through, which make us qualified to judge things rationally (Chan & Yuen, 2014). A teacher's beliefs can be defined as their personal view resulting from their experiences in educational processes (Borg, 2011). They have a clear impact on their education and form a fundamental factor in developing their ideas about teaching as they are of great importance in understanding their mindset and practice (Zheng, 2009).

One of the measures that would improve the education process in general and teaching English language in particular, as mentioned by Borg (2015), is the investigation of what teachers think about their instruction as it ultimately leads to reaching a clear vision that enables the decision-makers to know the origins of the educational decisions that teachers make when they are teaching. According to Mercer (2018), beliefs influence in one way or another the actual practices of the teachers in the classroom. Therefore, understanding beliefs as the hidden elements in the teaching processes, would provide valuable information to work on developing teacher training programs to carry out more effective practices in the classroom (Sato & Loewen, 2019). Teachers' beliefs about teaching may contribute to the continuous development of their teaching strategies and plans, and their awareness (Sheikhol-Eslami & Allami, 2012). The English language is a common international language so the beliefs and views of the teachers of the English language must be taken into account to contribute to the development of teaching methods (Tajeddin & Pashmforoosh, 2020).

There is a great argument about the role that grammar plays in the learning process and the appropriate approach to teaching it (Ellis, 2006). According to Brown (2000), teachers must use multiple methods in the classroom to facilitate the task of teaching grammar, as it is a difficult practice for students to understand. Also, many studies have found that most learners prefer their teachers to use their mother tongue to explain the grammar of the language, regardless of whether that strategy is correct or wrong. Ellis (1998) explained that the decisions that teachers make regarding the activities, materials, and instructions they use in the classroom are clearly influenced by what they think about them. Thus, every teacher has their own personal beliefs about how to teach grammar.

Although the teaching of English grammar is not recent in Iraq, it still looks problematic, especially in high schools, which negatively affects the teaching process. Although grammar plays a significant part in Iraqi EFL classes, there is a scarcity of research on teachers' beliefs about teaching English grammar in Iraqi high schools. This study attempts to inquire into Iraqi EFL teachers' beliefs and practices in teaching the grammar of the English language. In addition, it aims to identify the main sources of teachers' beliefs and to address the problems which they may encounter in teaching grammar.

II. REVIEW OF RELATD LITERATURE

Teachers' beliefs include the ideas, knowledge, and theories that teachers hold about language, learning, themselves, teaching, and their students (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). They are thoughts that are formed from their experiences, observations, and training in educational processes, which may either foster accepting new ideas or make obstacles to accepting them (Borg, 2011). Because teachers are the basis of educational inquiry and their beliefs can benefit the educational practice, they must be taken into account (Abelson, 1979). Thus, there is a need to understanding the underlying language teachers' beliefs and their impact on their practice in class.

Teaching grammar occupies a prominent place in the process of language teaching, especially when English is in a foreign context (EFL) because without teaching grammar, the teacher feels they have not taught much, however, it has still remained a controversial topic, especially with regard to methods of teaching grammar.

Some studies indicate that there are discrepancies between teachers' stated beliefs and what they do in the classroom (e.g., Basturkmen, 2012; Graus & Coppen, 2018; Phipps & Borg, 2009). Farrell and Lim (2005) reported on two English language teachers' beliefs and practices of grammar, as well as the factors that may affect the performance of teachers. The results indicated that teachers have special beliefs which they do not often apply to what they do during teaching. The teachers preferred to use the direct method in teaching grammar, rejecting the implicit method, justifying that the direct and explicit method requires less time and may lead to accurate use of language.

Nishimuro and Borg (2013) employed motivation recall interviews with a focus on the beliefs of the interviewees about how to teach grammar. The results of their study showed all the teachers who were interviewed believed that the communicative method should be used in teaching grammar even though they were not actually using it in the classroom.

In an earlier study, Burgess and Etherington (2002) found that the majority of the teachers in their study were supportive of the method of focusing on form. Their study also indicated that the environment and the quality of students may have an impact on choosing the method of teaching grammar.

In another study, Schulz (2001) distributed a questionnaire to 824 American learners and their 92 teachers as well as 607 Colombian learners and their 122 teachers to investigate the differences of culture in the awareness of teachers and learners about the importance of instruction of grammar. The results obtained indicated that teaching grammar was very important for both Colombian and American learners and their teachers.

Borg (2003) reviewed more than 60 works concerning second language teaching. He explained that experienced teachers are the ones who say that grammar must be taught explicitly, while teachers with limited experience prefer to teach it implicitly.

As part of his research, Andrews (2003) studied the beliefs of second language teachers about teaching grammar in Hong Kong through a questionnaire distributed among 170 English language teachers. His findings indicated significant correlations between teachers' beliefs, their knowledge of grammar and language proficiency.

Alghanmi and Shukri (2016) investigated teaching grammar and its relationship to beliefs through a study they conducted in Saudi Arabia. The study revealed that there are factors such as the environmental and personal facets that affect the process of teaching grammar, and these factors may affect teachers' beliefs and their classroom performance.

Tsehay (2017) conducted a study in Ethiopia to find out the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their actual practices in teaching grammar. Two teachers were selected and the researcher observed them, they were also interviewed after the observation, and the results indicated that teachers were still using traditional methods in teaching grammar. It was also discovered that there is a relationship between the beliefs and practices of these teachers in the classroom.

Sato and Oyanedel (2019) also focused on teachers' beliefs regarding the theories of teaching a second language and the relationship between grammar and the communicative method, and the most significant obstacles in employing the communicative method. The study included 498 school teachers who responded to the questionnaire, and 9 teachers who participated in the interviews conducted by the researcher. The results showed that many participants support using the communicative method in teaching grammar.

After reviewing the studies related to teaching grammar, it emerged that teaching grammar is a controversial issue among researchers, as some preferred to use the focus on form in teaching grammar, while others preferred the communicative method in teaching grammar. The overall purpose of this study is to examine the Iraqi English teachers' beliefs concerning grammar teaching. It seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What do Iraqi (novice vs. experienced) EFL teachers believe about the instruction of grammar in their classroom activities?

2. What approaches (explicit vs. implicit) do Iraqi English teachers employ to teach grammar in practice?

III. METHODOLOGY

1. Participants

In the present study, 200 Iraqi English teachers (115 male and 85 female) in high schools were chosen from all cities of Iraq. They had different university degrees (143 BA, 48 MA, and 9 PhD) and were teaching at different grades (91 at 4th grade, 49 at 5th grade and 60 at 6th grade of secondary school in Iraqi general education system). They were also of different ages (55 teachers between 22 and 30, 71 teachers between 31 and 40, 53 teachers between 41 and 50, and 21 teachers between 51 and 63), and of various teaching experiences as driven by the interval data (55 with 0 to 4, 47 with 5 to 9, 51 with 10 to 14, 24 with 15 to 20, and 23 with over 20 years of teaching experience). From the selected participants, 10 teachers (five novice teachers with less than five years of teaching experience and five experienced teachers with more than 5 years of teaching experience (Freeman, 2001)) from the city of Karbala were chosen for interview.

2. Instruments

2.1. Questionnaire

Raouf's (2009) and Önalan's (2018) questionnaires were combined and slightly modified to suit the context. The questionnaire included two sections: the first section was to collect demographic information about the participants, and the second section consisted of items on teaching grammar in the form of four-point Likert scale (Strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree). The questionnaire aimed to elicit beliefs about the major issues in grammar teachings such as the position of grammar in instructional sequences, explicit/implicit grammar knowledge, and role of explicit/implicit teaching. It also inquired into the integration of grammar rules with language skills, as well as the teachers' position on this integration, and if it is considered an effective method in teaching.

2.2. Interview

The research relied on semi-structured interviews to get further information that the questionnaire could not obtain. The interviews were managed with 10 English language teachers in Karbala in Iraq. Five of them were expert teachers while the other five were novice teachers. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews began with a brief introduction of the research and its aims.

3. Procedure

Due to Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, it was impossible to have access to all the participants. Thus, a few of them were given the questionnaire in person and most of them were sent the questionnaire virtually. From the city of Karbala, 10 teachers were chosen to be interviewed on their ideas about grammar instruction.

The quantitative data collected from questionnaire was submitted to SPSS to be analyzed. The qualitative data collected from the interview was transcribed and inserted to MAXQDA to be analyzed qualitatively.

IV. RESULTS

To answer the first research question, the data obtained from interviews and reflective journals were analyzed through grounded theory. A great deal of data was gathered through interviewing with the participants. First, the interviews were transcribed and all data were analyzed according to the principles

of grounded theory using MAXQDA software (Glaser & Strauss, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Through analyzing the interviews transcripts, 37 codes were extracted out of which 19 codes were related to novice teachers (Table 1) and 18 codes were related to experienced teachers (Table 2).

Table 1. Open codes of novice teachers.

No	Code	Occurrences
1	Intensive insistence on the necessity of teaching grammar	1
2	Teaching grammar is helpful in production	3
3	Explicit teaching of grammar	4
4	Explicit grammar teaching is better than implicit one	1
5	Implicit grammar teaching does not work for tests	1
6	Rural and urban school affect teacher beliefs about grammar differently	2
7	In schools with smarter students, teaching grammar is easier	1
8	According to students, explicit grammar is better.	1
9	Level of students influences teaching method	1
10	Reviewing basic grammar is necessary	2
11	Teacher's school administration affects his belief on grammar instruction	1
12	Using real world tasks.	1
13	Using role play for teaching grammar	2
14	Using stories and games for teaching grammar	1
15	Using self-correction and peer correction for advanced students	2
16	Correcting the global mistakes	1
17	Intensive curriculum and high number of students as the main problems	2
18	Having fewer students to improve the problem	2
19	Students' encouragement to improve the problems	1

Table 2. Open codes of experienced teachers.

No	Code	Occurrence
1	Practicality of grammar in various English tests	1
2	Grammar is vital to learn a language	2
3	Implicit grammar teaching is a challenge.	1
4	New teachers cannot teach implicitly.	1
5	Both explicit and implicit methods are effective.	1
6	Necessity of explicit grammar teaching for passing university entrance exam	2
7	Teacher's experience influences teachers' beliefs	2
8	Knowledgeable teachers can teacher grammar better	2
9	Students' preference to teach grammar in their mother tongue	1
10	Teachers with more knowledge on teaching methodology can teach better	2
11	Teacher's mood can affect his teaching grammar	4
12	Higher-paid teachers can teach more willingly	3
13	Correcting the global mistakes	2
14	Explicit error correction	4

15	Underestimating grammar by students	1
16	Building rapport with students	1
17	Teaching grammar can be helpful to understand reading and listening	2
18	Grammar instruction can help learners with their writing	1

To come up with a conclusion on the Iraqi high school novice and experienced English teachers' beliefs about grammar and instruction of grammar, it was vital to form bonds between the axial categories and the concepts dealt with them regarding their textual and conceptual aspects. The hypothetical bonds in axial coding must be constantly examined in a deductive way, implementing new data (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorenson, 2010). Reviewing the codes obtained could reveal that some of them center around a shared concept. Different attributions are related to that concept in those codes. Regarding the novice teachers, five categories were extracted out of the 19 codes:

- Category one: positive beliefs towards the necessity of grammar instruction,
- Category two: preferring explicit method to implicit,
- Category three: teacher's environmental facets affect grammar instruction,
- Category four: the role of students in teacher's beliefs,
- Category five: variety in grammar exercises.

These five categories led to a core category which can cover the main ideas of all five categories which is presented in Figure 1.
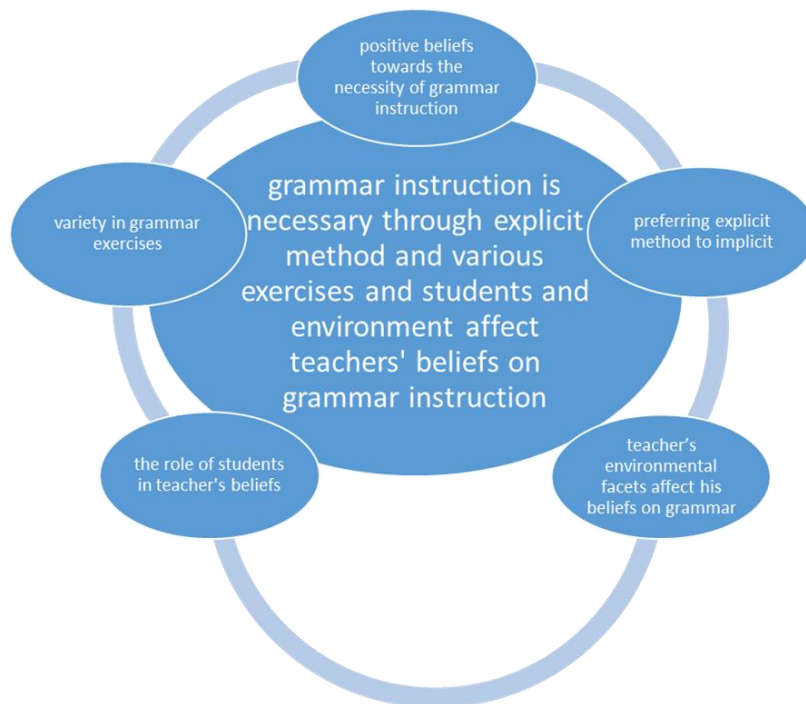

Figure 1. Emergence of the core category regarding novice teachers.

As seen in Figure 1, the five categories obtained from the 19 codes are illustrated. From each category, the main idea was extracted and added together to shape the core category which functions as the novice teachers' beliefs on grammar instruction. This core category is "grammar instruction is necessary through explicit method and various exercises and students and environment affect teachers' beliefs on grammar instruction". In other words, the Iraqi high school novice English teachers mainly believe that grammar instruction is necessary through explicit method and various exercises, students, and

environment affect teachers' beliefs on grammar instruction. Regarding the experienced teachers, five categories were extracted out of the 18 codes:

- Category one: positive beliefs towards the necessity of grammar instruction,
- Category two: preferring explicit method to implicit one,
- Category three: teacher's personal facets affect his beliefs on grammar,
- Category four: variety in error correction,
- Category five: the role of students in teachers' beliefs on grammar.

Regarding experienced teachers, five main categories were developed out of 18 codes. Searching for shared areas among these five categories led to a core category which can cover the main ideas of all five categories which is presented in Figure 2.
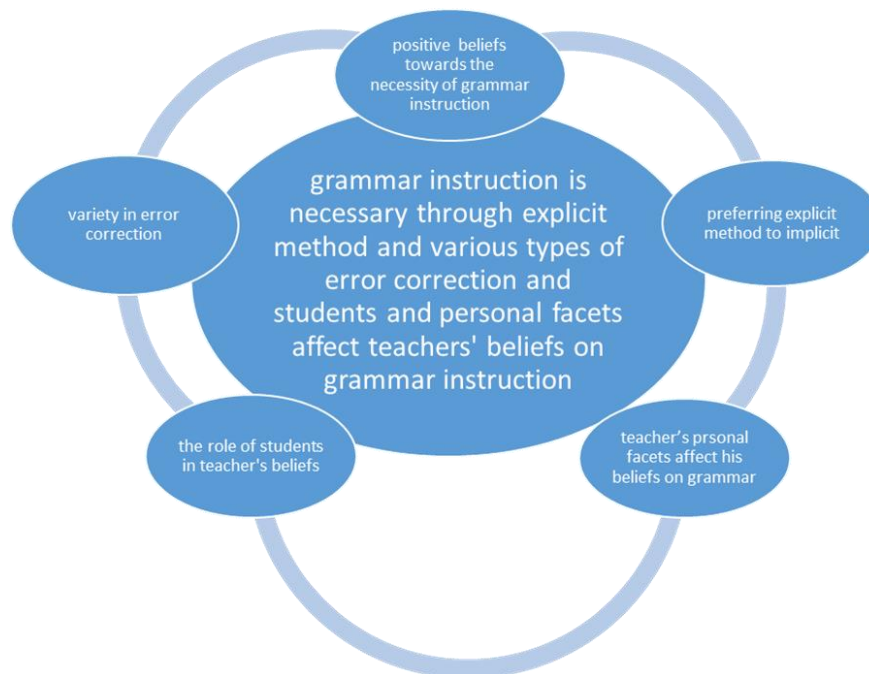
Figure 2. Emergence of the core category regarding experienced teachers.

As seen in Figure 2, the five categories obtained from the 18 codes are illustrated. From each category, the main idea was extracted and added together to shape the core category which functions as the experienced teachers' beliefs on grammar instruction. This core category is "grammar instruction is necessary through explicit method and various types of error correction and students and personal facets affect teachers' beliefs on grammar instruction". In other words, the Iraqi high schools experienced English teachers mainly believe that grammar instruction is necessary through explicit method and various types of error correction and students and personal facets affect teachers' beliefs on grammar instruction.

According to the main focus of the first research question which is finding teachers' beliefs on grammar and the obtained categories and codes, it was attempted to find out the main and shared idea which could best fit the required features of a core category.

All in all, it can be concluded that both novice and experienced teachers have nearly similar beliefs on grammar instruction with slight differences. While novice teachers believe that environmental facets have effects on their grammar instruction, experienced teachers believe that personal facets have effects on their grammar instruction. Besides, while novice teachers try various grammar exercises, experienced teachers try various types of error corrections.

To answer the second research question, the data related to the part of questionnaire which dealt with beliefs about approach to teaching grammar was analyzed using descriptive statistics. This part of the

questionnaire contained three items which the participants answered whether they use explicit or implicit approach to teaching grammar on a Likert scale. Item 7 supports implicit grammar instruction while item 8 supports explicit grammar instruction. Here, the frequency and percentage of their answers to these two items determine they adopt explicit approach or implicit one towards grammar instruction in their class activities. First, the frequency for responses is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Item answer frequency.

N.	Questions	Strongly agree 1	Agree 2	Disagree 3	Strongly disagree 4
Approach to teaching grammar					
7	Grammar is best taught implicitly (inductively), students should examine many examples and find out the grammar rules (patterns) themselves.	21 10.5%	32 16%	137 68.5%	10 5%
8	Direct explanation of grammar makes my Students feel secured. It ensures their straight forward grasp of grammar.	27 13.5%	134 67%	31 15.5%	8 4%

As Figure 3 shows, 26% of the participants adopted implicit approach towards teaching grammar in their classrooms while 80% of the participants adopted explicit method of grammar teaching in their classrooms. Thus, it can be said that a large number of the participants adopted explicit method of teaching grammar in their practice of teaching and just a small number of them taught grammar implicitly in their classrooms.
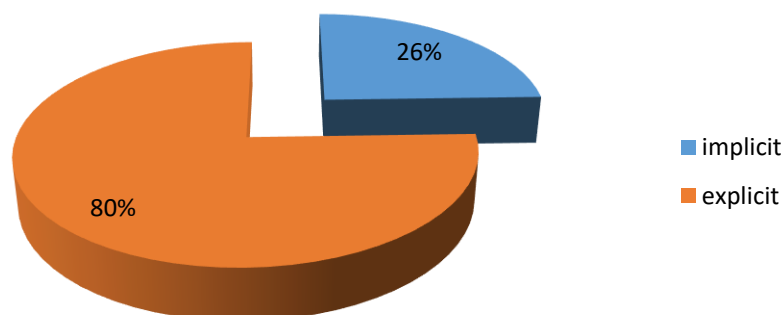
Implicit or explicit approach

- implicit
- explicit

Figure 3. Explicit and implicit percentages.

V. DISCUSSION

Although a good number of research works have been focused on grammar instruction and its related areas in ELT, there are still some areas which need more exploration. One of these areas is teachers' beliefs towards grammar instruction in terms of method of instruction and amount of instruction in

their classes. Furthermore, in the area of grammar instruction, teachers' beliefs have not been taken into account sufficiently. Consequently, the present study was done to find out more on the Iraqi teachers' beliefs towards grammar instruction, and the approach (explicit or implicit) they take in teaching grammar in their classes.

The findings indicate that both novice and experienced teachers have nearly similar beliefs on grammar instruction with slight differences. Both groups believed mostly in the explicit instruction of grammar. This confirms Borg and Burns' (2008) findings about English teachers' beliefs on grammar education and incorporating grammar education and skills. They found that most of the teachers explicitly teach grammar in their classrooms and grammar as an important part of their syllabus. In this sense, the present study revealed similar findings and confirmed that both novice and experienced teachers view grammar as a significant and unavoidable part of their instruction.

Regarding the second research question, the findings of the present study indicate that Iraqi high school English teachers mostly adopt explicit approach to grammar instruction. This finding is in line with the results obtained by Tsehay (2017) who found that most teachers prefer a traditional explicit instruction of grammar.

However, our findings are different from those reported by Sato and Oyanedel (2019) who conducted a study on teachers' beliefs about teaching English grammar through the communicative method. Although our study revealed that both novice and experienced teachers adopted more traditional approach (explicit method) towards teaching grammar, Sato and Oyanedel's (2019) results showed that their research participants mostly supported the use of the communicative method in teaching grammar.

Another difference between novice and experienced teachers, as shown in our study, was that while novice teachers try various grammar exercises, experienced teachers try various types of error corrections. Novice teachers are fresh graduates from colleges and have fresh knowledge of teaching methods. As error correction is highly emphasized in the current books of teaching methodology, novice teachers are expected to show the use of a wide variety of error correction in their teaching practices. On the other hand, since experienced teachers have become familiar with various teaching practicing during their long job experience, it is logical that they use many teaching practices in their classes. Besides, an experienced teacher has had more time to try more methods of teaching and could get mastery over various teaching methods. It can then be concluded that experienced teachers use more varied methods of grammar instruction.

Most participants in this study were positive about integrating grammar instruction, i.e., over 80% percent of the participants agreed on teaching grammar explicitly. This is due to the important role that grammar plays in English language exams in Iraq and specially the nation-wide university entrance exam that includes an English part in which grammar is an important part. Since implicit method of teaching does not prepare students well to be successful in the English part of the university entrance exam, teachers resort to adopting explicit approach. This way they can both prepare students well for the exam and convince the students' parents and administrative authorities. Thus, it can be said that explicit grammar teaching has practical advantages for Iraqi high school teachers.

As part of our results, it was discovered that some personal and environmental factors can influence the teachers' practice of teaching. This is similar to the findings obtained by Alghanmi and Shukri (2016) who mentioned that the teachers' job experience, students and school administration may affect teachers' beliefs and their classroom performance. These factors are normally classified under the environmental and personal facets.

The findings of the present study indicate how much instruction the Iraqi EFL teachers use in their classes. It shows that grammar instruction in Iraq is done more traditionally and teachers prefer explicit method to implicit method.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

While novice teachers believe that environmental facets have effects on their grammar instruction, experienced teachers believe that personal facets have effects on their grammar instruction. Besides, while novice teachers try various grammar exercises, experienced teachers try various types of error corrections. Both novice and experienced teachers believe in explicit grammar instruction which can be related to the kind of instruction they received when they were students. Since most English language exams in Iraq contain a certain part for measuring grammar, teachers have to teach it explicitly in order to meet the students' expectations. A teacher cares about what students want him/her to teach and what students' parents want. When students and their parents ask a teacher to prepare the students for the nation-wide university entrance exam, the teacher has no other way than accepting the requests and expectations and trying to meet them. Fulfilling these expectations can enhance the teacher's status from the administration viewpoint. As a result, it is normally expected to see Iraqi English teachers follow explicit grammar instruction due to importance of grammar in the university entrance exam. The present study implies that putting theory into practice in reality does not necessarily happen and the real performance of teachers seems different with their theoretical competence. Finally, it is to mention that the present study necessitates a revision towards the content of teaching methodology books and calls for introducing some methods which are compatible with the real and local conditions. In other words, prescribing one version of grammar instruction to all parts of the world is rejected by the present study findings.

AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHIES

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