

What Austrian EFL teachers think about grammar teaching.

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This study

- offers insights into Austrian EFL teachers' views on grammar teaching;
- reveals if and how these beliefs correlate with the teachers' place of education and place of work;
- shows how the teachers perceive their own knowledge about language (KAL) and their knowledge about grammar teaching methodology (after graduation and now).

1. Rationale

In order to teach grammar communicatively so that it fits into a CLT approach, EFL teachers need suitable tools and skills, a toolkit that they can use later on. Do EFL teachers, whether pre-service or in-service, have these tools? According to Ur (2012, p. 84) the situation in most language learning classrooms around the world is such that traditional methods such as PPP (present-practice-produce) still prevail. Larsen-Freeman (2015, p. 263) claims “that not much second language acquisition or applied linguistics research on grammar has made its way into the classroom” yet. Hence, the first question that presented itself during the research for my diploma thesis (Wegscheider, 2018) was how one could research what teachers' attitudes were towards grammar teaching in general. A study by Dutch researchers Graus and Coppens (2016) gathered data on student teachers' beliefs on grammar teaching by investigating four dichotomous pairs of grammar teaching concepts: meaning-focused vs. form-focused instruction, Focus on Form (FonF) vs. Focus on Forms (FonFs), implicit vs. explicit, and inductive vs. deductive instruction. For the purpose of this article I will briefly describe the opposing pairs; however, in view of the scope of the debate in the ELT literature, my description can merely be understood as a very concise overview:

- Arguably, the distinction between meaning-focused and form-focused instruction might appear to be rather straightforward; however the fact that a form-focused teaching instance could derive from a communicative situation in which students are in need of the linguistic form concerned may complicate the understanding of these two terms. Thus, meaning-focused instruction focuses exclusively on meaning whereas “form-focused instruction (FFI) is used to refer to any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form”

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(Ellis, 2001, pp. 1-2), for example, by providing them with the structures of grammatical items.

- To specify FFI further, the distinction can be made between Focus on Form (FonF) and Focus on Forms (FonFs). Doughty and Williams (1998, pp. 3-4) argue that while FonF includes a focus on grammatical items, FonFs “is limited to such a focus”, meaning that linguistic elements are presented without a communicative situation or context in FonFs. Long (1991, pp. 45-6) emphasizes this by defining FonF as “overtly draw[ing] students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning, or communication”.
- Another construct pair which needs to be discussed is implicit versus explicit instruction. Hulstijn (2005, p. 132) provides a rather concise definition by stating, “learners do [explicit] or do not [implicit] receive information concerning rules underlying the input”. Additionally, it is necessary to mention that there is a difference between the terminology “implicit/explicit knowledge” and “implicit/explicit instruction”, the latter being the primary focus in the discussion here as the study’s focus lies mainly on teachers’ beliefs about grammar teaching/instruction.
- Lastly, the difference between inductive and deductive grammar teaching needs to be determined. Inductive teaching enables the learners to detect a grammar rule or linguistic structure by themselves whereas deductive instruction confronts the students with the grammatical item or rule first and only afterwards provides examples, as in the very common “present-practise-produce sequence” (Ellis, 2006, p. 97).

Another study which investigated associations and perceptions of grammar teaching and grammar instruction was carried out by Jean and Simard (2011). They interviewed roughly 2,300 students and 45 teachers and found a general tendency for grammar teaching to be viewed as something inescapable yet not enjoyable among student participants (2011, p. 477).

As mentioned above, it appears that grammar teaching in general has a lot of potential for improvement since outdated methods still prevail. In terms of reasons for this phenomenon, four potential factors have been identified which were relevant for my study. First of all, teachers need to experience different methods first in order to realize their value and suitability and to implement them in their own teaching: as Newby (2012, p. 101) said, “students tend to consume theories but do not digest them”. Secondly, as has been demonstrated in various empirical research projects (e.g., Andrews, 2003; Bartels, 2009; Borg, 2001, 2005; Farrell & Richards, 2007; Hadjioannou & Hutchinson, 2010; Svalberg, 2015), teachers’ knowledge about language (KAL) has a strong influence on teachers’ classroom practices. For example, Andrews (2003, p. 361) found that teachers with low explicit grammar knowledge tend to favor deductive teaching methods whereas teachers with high KAL show a tendency towards inductive teaching methods. Thirdly, not only KAL but also the teachers’ confidence in their personal KAL is a relevant factor as it has an effect on their teaching practices (Andrews, 2003; Borg, 2001; Farrell & Richards, 2007). Borg (2005, p. 339) suggests that “KAL and methodological courses” should be “interconnected” since teachers with a lack of methodological knowledge or KAL tend to fall back on traditional methods due to their small repertoire of options and teaching choices. Lastly the relationship between teachers’ practices and beliefs needs to be considered, namely whether teachers’ practices and beliefs towards grammar teaching are congruent on the one hand and whether teachers’ beliefs about grammar teaching methodology can be changed on the other.

2. Research questions

The aim of my diploma thesis was to obtain an impression of Austrian EFL teachers' beliefs on grammar instruction and whether these could be correlated with several external factors. For the purpose of this article I chose to focus on the following research questions:

RQ1

What are Austrian EFL teachers' beliefs on grammar teaching?

- Differentiating between four construct pairs, namely meaning-focused vs. form-focused, FonF vs. FonFs, implicit vs. explicit, and inductive vs. deductive grammar teaching.

RQ2

Do these beliefs correlate with teachers' education at different institutions and/or with their teaching experience?

- How do Austrian EFL teachers perceive their own KAL (after graduation and now) and where do they turn for information about grammar?
- How do Austrian EFL teachers perceive their knowledge about grammar teaching methodology (after graduation and now) and where do they turn for information about teaching methodology?

3. Study description

The study described here was of a quantitative nature as an online questionnaire was used to investigate AHS, BHS, and NMS teachers' beliefs on grammar instruction.

3.1 Sampling and participants

In total 112 teachers responded to the questionnaire and the answers of 103 participants could be used for further analysis; 88 respondents were female, 13 were male, and 2 chose not to indicate their gender. It was found that 46 participants taught at an *Allgemeinbildende Höhere Schule* (AHS, Academic Secondary School), 29 at a *Neue Mittelschule* (NMS, New Secondary School) and 28 at a *Berufsbildende Höhere Schule* (BHS, College for Higher Vocational Education). When looking at the participants' institution of education, it became evident that the data was, unfortunately, not normally distributed, with 79 respondents graduating from university, 33 participants from a *Pädagogische Hochschule* (PH, University College of Teacher Education) and two from other institutions. This amounts to a total of 114 answers because several participants had degrees from more than one institution.

3.2 Methodology

This study was partially a replication of Graus and Coppen's (2016) study which investigated Dutch EFL teachers' beliefs on grammar instruction. My questionnaire included the original multi-item scale focusing on the four dichotomous construct pairs in grammar instruction, namely meaning-focused vs. form-focused instruction, Focus on Form (FonF) vs. Focus on Forms (FonFs), implicit vs. explicit instruction, and inductive vs. deductive instruction. These

items (using a 6-point Likert scale) made up the first part of the questionnaire. The second part focused on the Austrian context (experience at university, self-evaluation of KAL, hours spent on further training, knowledge or interest in research). The third part of the questionnaire dealt with participants' demographic information.

3.3 Instruments and reliability

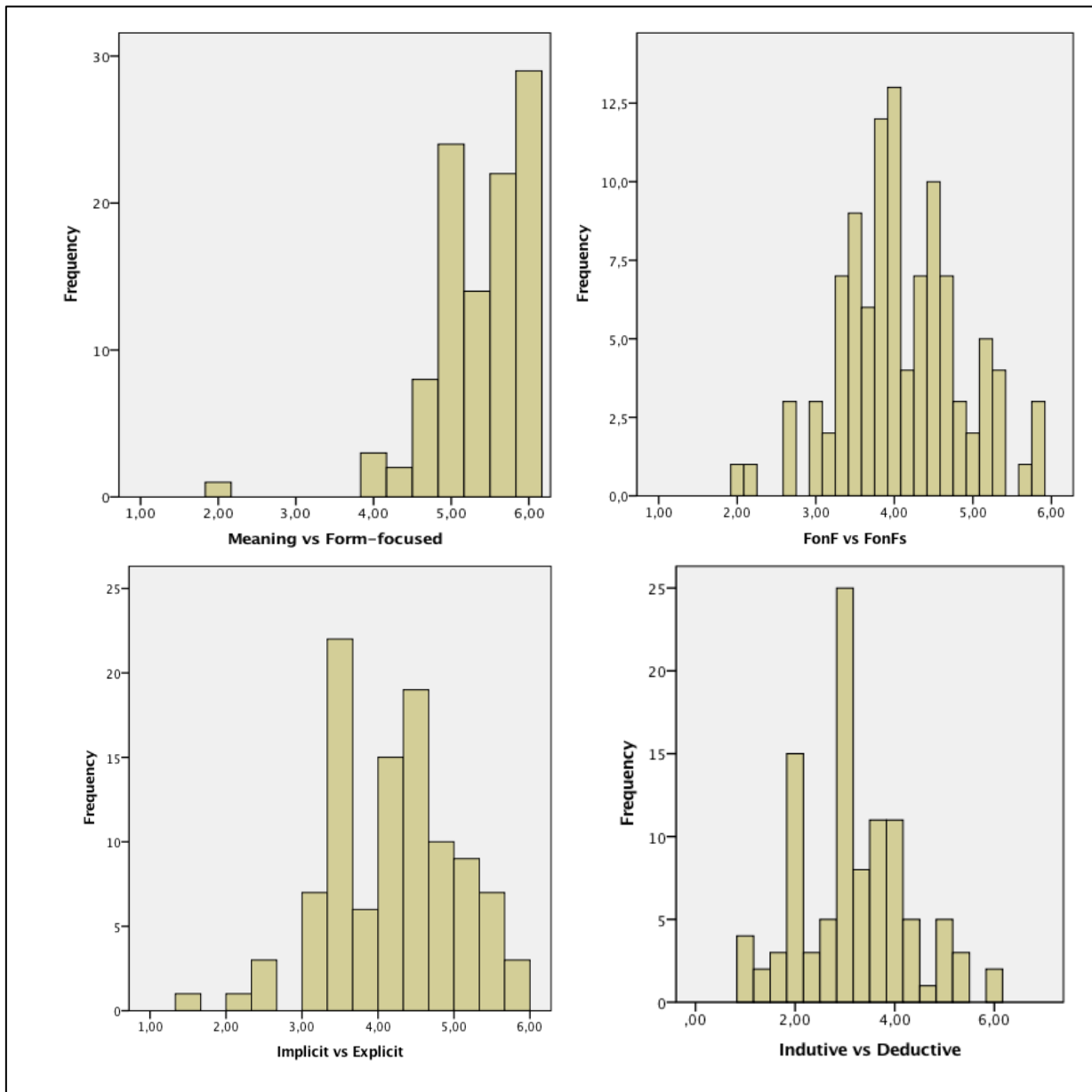
Since both the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and the Shapiro-Wilk test showed that the distribution of data was not normal, subsequent tests in the data analysis were non-parametric tests. The reliability of the multi-item scale was tested using Cronbach's Alpha and the results were found to be reliable, albeit to different extents (MF1-MF6 [meaning vs. form-focused] Cronbach's Alpha **.810**; FS1-FS6 [FonF vs. FonFs] Cronbach's Alpha **.679**; IE1-IE6 [implicit vs. explicit] Cronbach's Alpha **.758**; ID1-ID6 [inductive vs. deductive] Cronbach's Alpha **.916**).

3.4 Findings

With regard to the question as to what types of grammar instruction Austrian EFL teachers prefer, my results show that there is a tendency among participants towards form-focused, explicit instruction with a slight preference for FonFs. To briefly explain Diagram 1 (p. 13), the questionnaire listed several statements for each construct pair (e.g. meaning-focused vs. form-focused); thus the mean within one construct pair shows the participants' tendency towards either of the opposing constructs. Diagram 1 reveals the exact distribution of participants' means: the higher the participant's mean, the higher their tendency towards form-focused/FonFs/explicit/deductive instruction. To go into more detail (Diagram 1), there is a strong tendency towards form-focused teaching as can be seen in the top-left diagram; a slight preference for FonFs, which is shown in the top-right diagram; a tendency towards explicit instruction as revealed in the bottom-left diagram; and a balanced albeit slight tendency towards inductive instruction as shown in the bottom-right diagram.

However, as stated in the research questions, the purpose of the study was also to find out whether there are statistically significant correlations with the teachers' place of education, place of work or their professional development experiences. While there was not any indication that teachers' professional development experiences have an effect on their grammar teaching beliefs, the data suggest that teachers' place of work does have an effect on them. For instance, although graduates from universities generally show a stronger tendency towards form-focused instruction than graduates from PHs, when splitting up the graduates from universities according to their current place of work (AHS or BHS school type), it becomes evident that teachers working at a BHS show a lower preference for form-focused instruction than AHS teachers. A similar split can be observed when looking at the construct pair "inductive vs. deductive": graduates from universities prefer inductive instruction more than graduates from PHs. However, if graduates from universities are divided up according to their place of work, the preference for inductive instruction is lower for BHS teachers. This observation is to some extent confirmed by teachers' stated sources for their beliefs in general, which were predominantly their work experience, followed by learners' expectations, their own studies, and their former teachers.

Diagram 1: Frequency of respondents' means for the different construct pairs (N=103; Wegscheider, 2018, p. 74)



Participants were also asked to self-evaluate their knowledge about language (KAL) as well as their knowledge about grammar teaching methodology, both at the time of their graduation and now. It can be seen in Diagram 2 that respondents feel that their knowledge about grammar has improved substantially since graduation. When participants were asked about the sources of their knowledge, school books ranked highest at 23.9 percent, followed by material exchange with colleagues (18.8%), the Internet (16.8%), and external further training at 14.2 %. Twenty-six respondents stated that their KAL did not change, making up a total of 13.2%.

Diagram 2: Teachers' self-evaluation of KAL after graduation and now (1=very good > 5=not sufficient; N= 103; Wegscheider, 2018, p. 83)

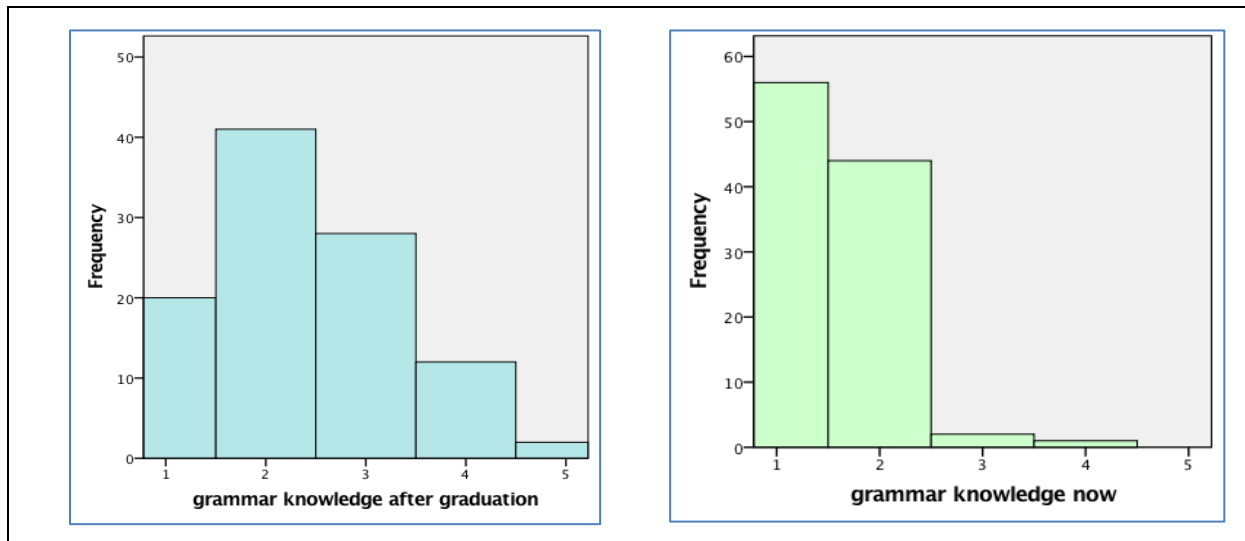
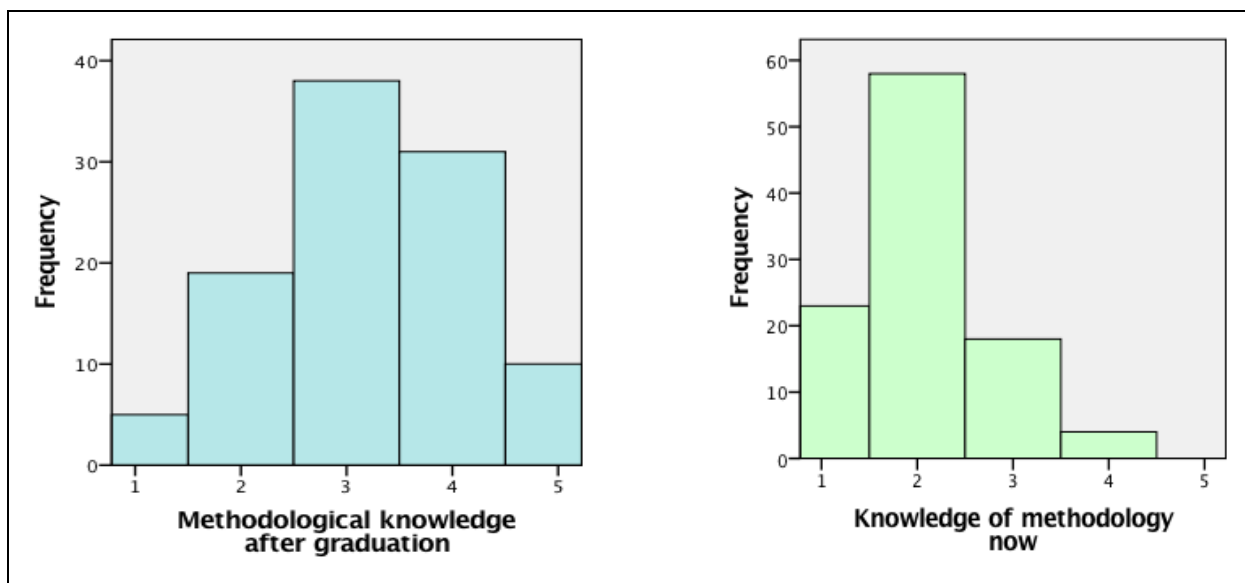


Diagram 3 represents the development of teachers' knowledge about grammar teaching methodology as they perceive it. It is clearly evident that methodological knowledge also improved according to the participants' self-evaluation. What needs to be considered here is that the data show a statistically significant correlation between the participants' age and their rating of their methodological knowledge. In fact, the older the participants were, the poorer they judged their methodological knowledge to be after graduation, indicating that there have been changes in Second Language Teacher Education (SLTE). These changes were also represented to some extent in other questions when participants were asked about their experiences during their studies (whether they tried out methods, attended grammar courses, etc.). Respondents were also asked to indicate the sources for the improvement in their methodological knowledge and here material exchange with colleagues ranked highest at 18.4%, followed by teachers' handbooks (17.6%) and external further training courses (14.4%); 27 participants felt that their methodological knowledge had not changed.

Diagram 3: Teachers' self-evaluation of methodological knowledge after graduation and now (N=103; Wegscheider, 2018, p. 85)



5. Discussion and implications

What should be taken note of is that while teaching grammar appears to be of great importance for many teachers (tendency towards FFI, FonFs, explicit instruction), respondents self-evaluated both their knowledge about language as well as their methodological knowledge as being rather low immediately after graduation. It is, however, open to question whether teachers' KAL is, in fact, insufficient at the time of graduating or whether it is simply not the kind of KAL that they need for teaching. Other empirical research has brought forward similar results according to which teachers could not use their KAL for their teaching (e.g., Bartels, 2009; Svalberg, 2015). Hence, the appeal to enable student teachers to acquire applicable KAL during their teacher education, as voiced by, for instance, Borg (2005) and Bartels (2009), can be emphasized here as well. Considering the results of the participants' self-evaluation of their methodological knowledge, it may be highlighted that student teachers ought to experience and experiment with new methods and approaches in order to broaden the methodological repertoire which they, as professionals, can draw on in different teaching situations. Considering also Ur's acknowledgement that "there is no one 'right' way to teach grammar" (2012, p. 91), it is necessary for EFL teachers to be equipped with a multitude of possible methods and approaches from which they can select what is best in the given context.

A follow-up study would be highly interesting since the circumstances and teacher training curricula and institutions are currently experiencing massive changes in structure and organization. Thus, to see how these changes affect student teachers and, later, in-service teachers educated in these new programmes would be of enormous interest.

Main insights

- ✓ Although there is not one 'perfect' way to teach grammar, student teachers need to **know** what **options** they have. It is necessary to **experience these options**, especially since many school books continue to provide an explicit presentation of grammar items with a subsequent practice section, mostly gap-filling exercises (Ellis, 2002, pp.156-160).
- ✓ Teachers need **applicable knowledge** about the language they are teaching and they should be enabled to feel confident about this explicit knowledge in order to be able to implement spontaneous grammar teaching sequences if necessary.
- ✓ Teachers should be encouraged to **reflect upon** their **beliefs** on grammar instruction, becoming aware of the fact that they may already have a certain idea of what grammar teaching needs to look like from their own language-learning experiences.
- ✓ In general, there is no need to ban form-focused, explicit or deductive instruction from the classroom completely.
- ✓ In the end, the professional language **teacher needs to decide** what is adequate and suitable for his/her specific group of learners, their aims, the classroom environment, the institutional contextual factors, and all the other external contributing factors to his/her decision-making process.

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