Oral versus written grammar: Teacher perspectives and common practices

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Introduction

A contentious issue in second language teaching today is whether or not grammar rules should be taught explicitly or through incidental processes that might raise a learner's consciousness. This question often depends on the teacher's own personal beliefs in terms of developed teaching practices, the institution's philosophy or stance on this issue, and the student's learning culture. The focus of course readings for LALS 5603 considers this issue at great length. Current research leans in favour of more incidental teaching of grammar practices by developing a learner's conscious awareness of forms, in order to increase a learner's grammatical accuracy (Ellis, 2002).

The research carried out for this paper is required for a course entitled Pedagogical Grammar and Focus on Form in Second Language Learning. The goal of the course is to examine "the concept of pedagogical grammar in second language teaching and critically examine recent theories of focus on form in communicative language classrooms based on empirical research" (course outline, p.1). According to the course outline, the purpose of this student-based research project is to look for the "complexities of grammar and grammar teaching in a communicative curriculum and a communicative classroom" (P. 1). The primary focus of the course is related to issues around grammar teaching, teacher and student beliefs about grammar teaching, activities used to improve grammatical acquisition, and the difference between explicit or prescriptive grammar teaching, grammatical rules of thumb, and descriptive or real life language in use. Accordingly, some general course-based research questions, which evolved from the course topics and readings, and addressed by a questionnaire developed jointly by this class are, How do learners and teachers believe grammar is acquired? What is their perception about grammar acquisition? And, Is grammar explicitly or implicitly taught and acquired?
More specifically, this paper looks for a distinction between what teachers perceive and believe is the difference between teaching grammar in writing versus an oral process class.

The assigned course readings do not make a satisfactory distinction between written and oral grammar. An underlying assumption in the

readings is that sentence grammar is equal to all grammar (spoken or written); therefore the grammar of authentic speech is represented according to the written grammar in a grammar book. This is problematic because, if we consider spoken language in use at a descriptive level, it includes fragmented sentences, gestures, pauses, intonation and other metalinguistic features, which are typically not found in writing. Conversely, writing is more structured, less spontaneous and can be edited. These differences have huge implications for teaching, and are a good argument for descriptive rather than prescriptive grammar teaching.

My research objective is to explore the following questions: Is there a difference between teaching written and oral grammar as a process? Are teachers aware of this difference? And, if so, how does this influence their teaching practices and beliefs? These questions developed as a result of the course readings, panel discussions by practicing teachers, lectures, seminar discussions, and reflective journal writing. Of interest is to understand the teachers' perceived differences between written grammar and oral grammar, which as mentioned is something that is rarely differentiated between (in terms of description) in the literature. Surely spoken grammar can not be taught as per written grammar rules. The focus group/ interviews carried out for this paper were intended to find out if teachers make this distinction between oral and written grammar, and if so how did this influence their teaching practices. Similarly, how do their beliefs about grammar acquisition (or assumed acquisition) affect their teaching practices? While it seems plausible that certain grammatical forms or structures could be taught prescriptively for a written grammar, it seems highly unlikely that a person's spoken grammar is anything at all like written grammatical form. Incidentally, all teachers who participated in the questionnaire indicated that there is a difference between spoken and written grammars (question #8).

Method
The data analysed for this paper comes from two sources: an on-line questionnaire administered to all intensive (IC) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instructors at Carleton University, and a focus group/interview involving two IC teachers from Carleton.

Participant s of On-line Questionnaire
Of the 7 completed questionnaires, 5 participants have over 8 years ESL teaching experience and four of the 7 have over 2 years teaching at Carleton in the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies (SLALS). The questionnaire participants teach a range of ESL courses from workshops, to core (integration of four skills through thematic units), to writing and oral process classes. Although, the data comes from a variety of teachers, they all teach at the same institution (Carleton); therefore teachers' beliefs are

naturally influenced by the teaching philosophy within this particular teaching community. This teaching culture is necessarily addressed later in this paper, because this culture likely impacts the final analysis in terms of teacher beliefs about grammar teaching and practices. However, given that one of the goals of the class' research is to influence personal teaching practices, the limitations to my data are less problematic.

Participant s in focus group/interview
Two IC teachers volunteered as participants for the focus group. They each demonstrated a genuine interest in the course topic and a willingness to co-operate with classroom-based research and share personal time. Each participant has experience teaching oral process (OP) and writing process (WP) which ensures equal and insightful contribution during the discussion. Both teachers have taught at Carleton for almost 8 years and are presently teaching OP only (by choice).

Data Collection Process
The analysis includes data from the questionnaire and the focus group/ interview in an effort to answer research questions and validate the discussion and conclusion sections of this paper. Although data from each of the collection processes is considered, the data from the focus group is most relevant to this particular paper and research objective. As such, the methods for the questionnaire are discussed only to the extent in which I was directly involved.

The questionnaire was a result of a collaborative, in class effort, and is based on the overall research interest of the course and its participants. Consequently, the questionnaire intentionally includes some questions, which are specifically related to individual research projects such as my own. For example, two of the questions (#15 and #19) specifically address how teachers feel about correcting spoken errors. I have extracted and used data from those two questions and answers that I felt were particularly relevant to my own research interests (see appendix #1).

The lead-in and interview questions for the focus group discussion were organised in a way so as to prompt spontaneous conversation in an attempt to reveal some of the teachers' underlying and perhaps unconscious beliefs about grammar teaching and grammar acquisition. They were designed particularly to understand how teachers distinguish between oral and written grammars, if in fact they do. Another purpose was to help illustrate how the teachers' beliefs influenced their own teaching practices and planning.

Initially, a fairly detailed list of questions was developed (appendix 2). These questions stemmed mostly from the course readings and surfaced throughout my journal entries; however it was agreed that a long list of

questions would result in a rigid interview. In the end a few lead-in questions were used in order to elicit a more natural flow in conversation. Ideally, this less structured interview format would allow for more natural responses from each teacher about their individual teaching practices, whereby capturing individual teaching behaviours and beliefs. Some questions to get started were "How do you develop accuracy and fluency in a writing process class?" and "In terms of OP, what is different or important in developing accuracy and fluency?" After these initial few questions, the teachers mostly directed the conversation.

Institution's Perception of Grammar Teaching
Before delving into the results section of this paper, it is important that the reader has a sense of the "teaching culture" at Carleton, because it may help account for some of the observed pedagogical practices that manifested in the teachers' personal beliefs and practices. These practices were observed during the focus group/ interview and are highlighted in the discussion section of this paper.

While no one actually says, "Carleton does not teach grammar explicitly", it is a common truth perceived by ESL teachers from other institutions, ESL students at Carleton, and even the Carleton ESL teachers. For instance, while teaching off campus last year, another teacher said, "I hear Carleton doesn't teach grammar". She insinuated that this philosophy was likely a fad and sooner or later Carleton would teach grammar prescriptively, like other schools do, with a focus on rules and tasks that involve de-contextualized grammar exercises, repetition and memorization from grammar books. This culture was similarly articulated by the two teachers who were interviewed in comments such as, "Carleton's culture or the method that they use for teaching is contrary to most academic experiences of the students – so they (the students) are pushing you constantly for one on one correction". And, when asked to clarify if they felt language acquisition included grammar the teacher replied, "you have to be careful of that, because our program is not grammar based –we don't teach grammar per say – explicitly". The apparent uniqueness of this philosophy was evident when another teacher came into the room during our focus group/ interview and said "excuse me, I'm not coming into eaves drop" teacher B said "you mean about the use of grammar in the class room?' followed by giggles all around. Finally, at the very end of the interview teacher B said "certainly philosophically our school does not teach grammar – that's the law, I mean that's the rule – we're not grammar based…". Funnily, this philosophy is almost the "unspoken rule", the taboo among English teachers and learners.

Over the past five years and as a student in the department of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies at Carleton, I have developed my

own philosophy about grammar teaching, which has understandably been influenced by the same culture. Prior to this course at some level I believed that grammar did not need to be taught explicitly, but now I can articulate this sense. It is not that grammar does not exist and so no teaching is required, on the contrary, and this became quite evident through listening to an in-class panel discussion between four Carleton teachers, grammar is very much an integral part of language. In terms of defining grammar, I believe many teachers in this "teaching culture" see grammar as the foundation, the structure, the glue that makes language have meaning. In terms of pedagogy, the assumption is that grammar is developmental and requires learner readiness for successful acquisition. This sentiment was confirmed by one response to question #16 on the questionnaire, "…Students' written mistakes should be corrected… sometimes - only when they are ready for it".

Analysis
Data came from loosely transcribed taped conversation from the focus group/interview. The tapes were replayed many times in order to really capture the beliefs of each teacher and to transcribe pertinent and direct quotations (appendix #3). In line with other qualitative research methods, this quasi ethnographic/case study (Ertmer, 1997) consisted of identifying patterns or recurring ideas through reflection, observation and interpretation of the data. Due to the descriptive nature of the data (including participant comments on personal beliefs and teaching practices) the results lend themselves well to possible speculation of common beliefs about how grammar is acquired, taught, and grammatically what is perceived as different between OP and WP, certainly within the department of SLALS at Carleton University. The data was rich in terms of beliefs, practices and identifying similarities and differences between OP and WP.

Results Discussion
The discussion begins with results according to shared teacher beliefs about grammar acquisition. Next, the discussion focuses on those differences and similarities articulated by the teachers in terms of grammar acquisition in OP versus WP classes. Finally, the discussion analyses these beliefs and differences in terms of regular teaching practices, and looks for a link between these practices and current research in the field. These three categories relate back to the specific research goals of this paper.

Beliefs
One important result of the analysis shows that teachers do distinguish between teaching oral language and written language grammar. This section synthesises the most frequently expressed ideas by these teachers. The most common and shared teacher beliefs about grammatical acquisition across the

two domains pertains to learner awareness, readiness, and stage of development, the importance of listening and input, and the need to teach language as a process which includes developing the learner's grammatical accuracy. These evolved from the data as basic teacher beliefs.

esearchers agree that a student's awareness of structure contributes to grammatical accuracy and that this awareness is taught through tasks which promote noticing, comparing and concentrating on structure, rather than explicit grammatical instruction of rules (Ellis, 2002, Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001, and Thornbury, 1997). Both teachers interviewed practice these techniques. For example, teacher A has the students listen for specific word stress and intonation to become aware of differences in pronunciation. And, in terms of writing as a process, she says "part of the whole process (of writing) is having students be aware and take ownership" and "make them focus and concentrate more through the process". In talking about error correction she said "I'm not against making the students aware of it". Similarly, in her OP class, teacher B teaches academic and informal language use by making the students aware of the different structures and vocabulary used in each mode. Also, another indication that developing awareness is important comes from a comment on the questionnaire and in response to question #16 which is worded as, Students' written mistakes should be corrected…, one teacher replied "sometimes – when they keep occurring and the student does not seem to be aware of the mistakes…"

While developing awareness is all well and good, teachers believe the student must be ready to learn or acquire the new structure. If not, they will continue to make the same errors. This belief is articulated by teacher A as she says, "It's also - as I say just the whole spontaneous nature of a lot of what they're saying, I mean you can make them aware of that, but chances are they'll continue making that mistake until they reach a certain level". Similarly, a response to the questionnaire, question #16 is, "sometimes - only when they are ready for it".

Listening is an integral part of the oral process. This receptive skill compliments speech production, much like reading compliments the writing process. Both the questionnaire and the focus group express the value of listening for oral process. The response to question #2 "…reading and listening to a lot of English will help students improve their accuracy in English", ranged from agree to strongly agree. Similarly, both teachers in the focus group stress the importance of developing listening skills for group work, lectures, informal conversation, and listening for stress and intonation.

By teaching writing and speaking as a process some argue grammar does not need to be taught explicitly, because through the process approach you are "building in grammatical accuracy" and "grammar is folded in" to the language. But, teaching the appropriateness of language use depends on the purpose. Both the interviewed teachers believe the purpose is important.

For example, they agree that students need to know the appropriateness of oral language use in different circumstances such as in a university seminar, at the dinner table with their home-stay, or in line at Tim Horton's. Additionally, the focus has moved away from having students do presentation after presentation, instead there is more focus on developing strategies to be understood in group discussion as this is how oral language is used in first year university courses. This next section will compare the similarities and differences between WP and OP.

Similarities and differences
The distinctions between OP and WP that materialized from the data range from similarities in organization, teacher correction, and the importance of meaning. Differences surfaced in terms of relative cognitive demands on students, and the effect of time and spontaneity.

While not grammatical per se, teachers believe oral presentations share some of the characteristics of a written paper. For example, a formal presentation involves an introduction; supporting points and a conclusion much like a paper. What is interesting is that these similarities allow the student the opportunity to write out, think about, and practice the content and form before formally speaking. Therefore, a formal presentation takes on many of the characteristics as a written assignment and determines the type of grammatical instruction required. Teacher B shows how an academic presentation mirrors the "bare bones" of academic writing in terms of an introduction, body, and thesis statement, but stresses there is a difference which lies in "the way they deliver in terms of speed, repetition, different cues, pausing".

Another similarity is how much emphasis teachers place on the importance of meaning compared to error correction. This is expressed by the answers to questions #15 ...Students' spoken mistakes should be corrected, and #16 …Students' written mistakes should be corrected. Respectively, some answers are as follows: "never – when the mistake interferes with communicability…" or "sometimes – if you can't understand what they are saying…" and "...when I can't understand what the student is trying to say". Clearly, the teachers' responses indicate how important being able to get meaning across is.

An interesting difference, articulated early in the conversation, is that many teachers at Carleton find OP harder to teach because OP tasks are less demanding on the students than WP. During staff meetings, teachers argue that OP should be taught in the afternoons, when students are typically more tired because students need to be more alert for writing. WP teachers apparently argue that "students have to work harder… because in writing you need to produce something on paper." Interestingly, of the seven

participants, only one chose oral process as their favourite to teach. Both teachers interviewed only teach OP, and by choice.

Another difference is this sense of time allotment. In his article, Standard Englishes: Speech and writing Carter (1997) justifies that more time allowances in writing permit the student to write something out, take the time to self-correct, peer-review, or even have the teacher "correct it". This time allowance for writing compared to spontaneity of speech is captured in the answer to question #4 ...knowing grammar rules explicitly is more important for writing than speaking - "I agree, because speaking is spontaneous and one can make him/herself understood using body language as well". Teacher A says, "oral is immediate, the student has little time to play around…" spoken language can't be edited like writing because, the "…spoken word is gone" whereas writing "stands alone". Also, in speech there is discussion, which goes "back and forth – not like writing".

Tasks and teaching practices
The teaching methods and practices discussed in the focus group were clearly driven by teacher beliefs and include distinctions made by the teachers between spoken and written language. For instance, in an OP class due to the spontaneous nature of speech compared to writing, teachers focus less on grammar structures and more on strategies that can help students to be understood in a variety of situations, as there is no time to edit speech. According to these teachers, developing strategies in oral process is necessary because second language acquisition takes time and the strategies will help compensate for their deficiencies during the acquisition process. When asked about the types of strategies, teacher B says she gives, "...lots of presentation strategies, loudness, eye contact, repetition…asking for confirmation", gives them strategies to "get them over the hump – to help them be understood". Teacher A agrees and says "strategies to be understood are more important in OP than WP" and "yeah, it's almost like teaching them scaffolding to be fluent…"

What follows are some of the common teaching practices that emerged during the focus group discussion. Frequently, these tasks included activities such as: modelling through listening and writing, comparing and contrasting by developing consciousness awareness, editing and self-correcting (depending on learner readiness), teacher correction and pre-emptive or reactive focus on form, and teaching strategies as opposed to grammatical form to enhance accuracy in oral process classes.

Modelling is a technique used by both teachers of the focus group as a way to increase the students' oral fluency. For example, the teachers believe that if the students understand the use of stress and intonation in English this will help the student improve their oral process and that this can be developed through modeling and lots of listening input. Teacher A talks

about a listening task whereby the students follow a script and then later try to imitate the original speaker by mimicking the stress and intonation they heard. She believes this type of modeling helps them improve their oral process. Teacher A uses modeling in OP and sometimes puts model sentences on the board. So for example, if the task was to use "If I were….I would" in a full sentence, the teacher would model what she would say by writing it on the board. She guesses that in 50% of the cases, students can use this structure spontaneously by the end of the twelve week course.

Comparing and contrasting is another practice used frequently by both teachers in OP and WP to develop language awareness. The difference with oral language depends on the expected context of use, "…language, particularly spoken language, needs to be taught according to how it is going to be used and what it needs to accomplish". For example, teacher B differentiates language in use between academic and informal situations, "I work on two separate things in the class and I make the students very aware of what's expected of them academically and informally". And similarly, in terms of oral structure, she models those structures depending on what's acceptable in a given situation "informally we have lots of wanna, and the vocabulary is different too – the students need to know this". This task includes developing skills in awareness as she has the students think about, and then compare how, one might say something to their grandmother, friend or professor.

Comparison tasks in WP have the advantage of time. In teaching writing process, the student has the time to edit and self- or peer-correct. Teacher A expresses this thought, "usually, umm, with this process the students are looking at their own writing and looking at other peoples writing and they are able to self-correct...". According to Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen (2001) "student-initiated focus on form may be more efficient than teacher-initiated focus on form (p. 428).

These teachers do not offer any specific grammatical instruction by way of prepared tasks in OP or WP. One made this comment, "each one of us in our own way gets the student familiar with what they need to know grammatically, but you won't see a lesson. From time to time if I do see my students struggling we will review it". Upon further clarification, both teachers agreed that they would do a mini grammar lesson in OP and WP if they felt it was important enough, but depending on overall student readiness.

Although teachers do not plan for explicit grammar and the grammar teaching was typically pre-emptive or reactive, many of the writing tasks were set up purposefully in a way that would generate certain grammatical forms. For example, one activity was based on the prompt "what did you do a 9 o'clock, where were you and how did you feel?" The argument for these types of tasks is to draw the students' attention to the

forms that emerge from the task. Again the focus is on raising the students' awareness so that they begin to understand the relationship between form and circumstance.

Any grammar focus in WP tends to be reactive (performance) or pre-emptive (gap in learners' knowledge) (Ellis, Basturkmen & Loewen, 2001). This type of grammar focus is incidental rather than pre-planned and deliberate. For instance, the teacher might pull examples from the students own writing or have the student "look at someone else's work, because they don't see their own mistakes". If the errors are similar then the teacher may focus on a particular grammatical form and make this the focus of discussion. There is of great emphasis in both the OP and WP classroom on developing the students' awareness by "just making them focus and concentrate more through the stages".

The use of overt teacher correction depends on the individual teacher and the type of class. The results to question #15 …students' spoken mistakes should be corrected range from sometimes to never, while the teachers in the focus group said that in OP, rather than stopping the student and explicitly pointing out an error, both teachers will recast, restate, or rephrase their students' utterance. Doughty (1993) describes the benefits of this kind of interaction in oral language acquisition. The purpose of her study was to see if ESL teachers fine-tune their feedback like a parent does with their child. Teacher B made this comment about supporting her own children's grammar development "I didn't correct them, but repeated it back using the correct way." This practice of fine-tuning lends itself to increasing input and a form of modeling which the students may benefit from if they are ready to, or are aware of the error. Similarly, in terms of OP, teacher A said she would never stop a student and say "you're wrong", but may restate what they said correctly; she said "some pick up on this indirect correction and repeat it correctly". The tasks are purposeful in that they are set up based on the students' weaknesses in order to bring about a certain form.

Both teachers commented on the value their students place on explicit correction. Teacher B said "they want everything corrected". Through the process approach in WP, the teachers can show the students what they have done and how this relates to their language acquisition, rather than correcting each mistake. This is very much in line with the notion of descriptive versus prescriptive grammar teaching.

Many of the tasks discussed in WP, such as brainstorming, drafting, conferencing, and peer editing, relate to the writing process as compared to tasks in OP, which focused more on strategies. As mentioned, some strategies the teachers help to develop are for presentation type tasks. During these tasks, they focus on eye contact, repetition, use of visuals, and speed. Teachers equip the students with strategies such as requesting clarification and asking someone to repeat him or herself. The teachers give the students

"lots of ideas and strategies that will get them over the hump and help them to be understood". Some other tasks they use involve listening and watching for cues during a videotaped lecture, for instance. The teacher reminds the student to consider the context where language will be used and has them notice the differences in structure. In terms of developing practical skills in OP, the teachers use group and pair work so that the students are always practising techniques such as turn taking and conversational skills. The teachers biggest concern is, because oral is immediate the students have no time to really edit their output, so they need to be familiar with strategies to help make themselves understood.

The importance of strategies in OP confirms an intuition I articulated in one of my journal entries, "rules of thumb likely help account for oral language in use…". Meaning, teachers share a belief that strategies, not overt correction, will best help the student to be understood. In his article, Rules of thumb and other teacher-formulated rules, Faerch (1986) stresses the practicality of using rules of thumb, because they typically apply to real life situations. The practicality of the strategies being introduced by the teacher seems more like tricks or hints rather than prescriptive grammar rules.

In another journal entry I asked, "What happens to grammar in communicative language teaching in an oral process class at Carleton?" And, "How is grammar integrated into oral process classes at Carleton?" In OP these two teachers emphasize listening, note taking skills and lots of group work, because it involves informal language use. The focus is on feeling comfortable with informal conversation and being able to express opinions confidently and more spontaneously. The teacher purposefully sets up tasks where the students need to accomplish these things, which is as teacher B pointed out, more necessary than rehearsing presentation skills because informal group discussion is a common requirement in first year university courses now.

Validity of research
The fact that I knew one of the teachers in the focus group contributed to a comfortable environment which led to genuine and rich conversation as the teachers discussed their teaching beliefs and practices openly. Partly, this was the rational behind the choice of teacher participants. And, although the teachers may have felt a loyalty to the "we don't teach grammar" philosophy at Carleton, I don't believe this restrained any of their answers. The questions deliberately were not structured to elicit as spontaneous a discussion as possible. Further, participants did not know any questions ahead of time in hopes that the conversation would generate more underlying attitudes, rather than premeditated answers.

This analysis was clearly directed by my research questions and interests; as a result I was consciously looking for common or conflicting ideas according to my questions. This may be a limitation in that, at some level, I was not receptive to new ideas. For instance, I went into the analysis looking for differences between OP and WP and had to force my self to notice that in fact there were similarities between the two processes as well. Some obvious limitations to this study were that I came to the conclusions in my discussion section on my own, and due to the small and relatively homogeneous sample of participants, any interpretations are relevant only within the context of SLALS at Carleton University and should not be generalized to other ESL teachers or teaching contexts without further research. Additionally, it is possible that the teachers' beliefs are influenced by the teaching philosophy, either explicitly or underlying, in SLALS. Also, and in listening to the recorded discussion many more times, I am aware that I put into words some beliefs that the teachers were expressing, but were just not specifically articulating. For example, in the results and discussion section, I mentioned a big difference between OP and WP is that in OP teachers teach practical strategies. While neither teacher had actually articulated this, I was confident that this is what they felt at least tacitly, so I clarified my suspicions by specifically stating "you're giving them a lot of practical strategies that you don't need in written" process. They agreed entirely that this is what the main difference is, "yeah, that's what is very different" and "strategies to be understood is more important in OP than WP".

Future Research
Some issues, which I found particularly interesting and worthwhile for further study is the transfer or incorporation of institutional philosophy to teacher beliefs, the value of correction in writing versus oral process, and the contribution of teaching strategies in overall grammatical acquisition and successful language use in further academic study. It would be interesting to do similar research in a different context, another university, or an EFL situation to see how much of the institutions' philosophies are reflected in the teachers' beliefs and practices. Carleton teachers seemed to, for the most part; share this "teaching culture".

Finally, the usefulness of teaching pragmatic strategies in oral process classes needs to be somehow measured in further research to test to see if the teachers' practices have valuable pedagogical outcomes. This preliminary research supports the argument that grammatical structures need not be taught explicitly, but rather teaching practices should help to raise the students awareness, through incidental focus on form, noticing and comparing. These are highly effective ways to develop the students' grammatical accuracy. What was most enlightening to me as a new teacher

is the apparent effectiveness and need for teaching strategies in OP through listening tasks and by practicing practical communication skills that go beyond grammatical structures. Additionally, teachers appear to distinguish between writing and oral process in terms of grammatical forms and structures, and these differences are reflected in the teaching practices, which have been shared with me.

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