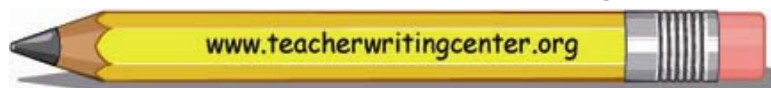


ESL/ELD Teacher Attitudes toward and Perceptions of Grammar Instruction: A Preliminary View

By Patrice Gotsch and Roberta Stathis

Teacher Writing Center
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ESL/ELD Teacher Attitudes toward and Perceptions of Grammar Instruction: A Preliminary View

Executive Summary

Researchers created and administered an initial survey for English as a Second Language (ESL)/English language development (ELD) teachers currently working in American schools. Survey participants were identified at the International TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) Conference in New York City in April 2008. The primary purpose of the survey was to identify ESL/ELD teachers' attitudes toward and perceptions of grammar instruction for English learners. The survey revealed that most respondents believe that English learners should receive direct instruction in the rules of grammar and writing conventions and that they (i.e., the survey respondents) were well-prepared to provide such instruction. However, slightly more than half said they do not believe that *most* ESL/ELD teachers have the grammatical knowledge and writing skills to do so. This survey is part of a broader, ongoing research study designed to examine the state of ESL/ELD teacher grammar knowledge and use.

Introduction

Today's teachers are confronted with a dizzying array of demands and challenges, including state and district content standards and English language proficiency (ELP) standards, high stakes achievement tests, and classrooms filled with increasingly diverse student populations. Among the challenges for teachers is the need to instruct students on the rules of grammar and writing conventions.

While it is important for all teachers to have a strong grasp of English language skills, it is essential for English language development (ELD)/English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers¹ to have a strong grasp of language skills because they are charged specifically with teaching English language learners, a growing population among American students. ESL/ELD teachers use the English language in modeling English for students, providing direct instruction on English to them, and communicating in English with parents and others. As such, it is critical that ESL/ELD teachers have the grammatical knowledge and writing skills in order to provide appropriate instruction to their students. Arguably, ESL/ELD teachers have demonstrated their competency to teach English language skills through successful completion of a baccalaureate degree, a teacher certification program, and specialized professional workshops and seminars.

Since teacher preparation programs are designed specifically to help prospective teachers develop and master the competencies, including writing competencies, they will need in order to function effectively in the instructional setting, it is tempting to accept completion of such programs as evidence of mastery. However, as Fillmore and Snow (2000, p. 3) emphasize, "teacher preparation programs often do not make time for substantial attention to crucial matters, ...". Fillmore and Snow argue persuasively that ESL/ELD teachers in particular would benefit from additional preparation in educational linguistics. They point to oral and written language topics about which they argue teachers should be conversant. Included in their listing are topics such as English spelling rules, structuring narrative and expository writing, judging the quality and correctness of a writing product, and the limitations of a readability index approach to understand the comprehensibility of texts. Fillmore and Snow (2000, p. 29) say: "Partly because teachers feel insecure about their own knowledge of grammar, and partly because teachers of writing are sometimes reluctant to correct students' writing, students may not get the kind of information feedback they must have in order to become more effective writers." More recently, a meta-analysis of international studies conducted by Exeter University for the Department of Children, Schools and Families (2008) reported, "English teachers

¹ Standardized terminology has not emerged to describe teachers whose primary responsibility is the instruction of English learners. Various terms are used across the nation, including ELD (English Language Development), ESL (English as a Second Language), and ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages).

who went to school when grammar was not on the curriculum struggle to teach it.” (2008) The whole language approach, which does not emphasize grammar instruction, gained great popularity in the 1960s and gained dominance in schools through the 1980s and 1990s. In recent years, the whole language approach has fallen out of favor in part because of statistically significant declines in student achievement. In its place, the curriculum has shifted to a renewed emphasis on phonics, grammar instruction, and what may be termed a “balanced approach.” The Exeter study (2008) concludes: "For English teachers, who themselves attended schools when grammar was not part of the English curriculum, there is a significant issue of lack of assurance in grammatical subject knowledge, leading to difficulties in addressing grammar meaningfully in the writing classroom. In particular, effective teaching requires a secure understanding not simply of grammatical terminology, but of applied linguistics and an awareness of the ways in which grammatical constructions are used in different texts for different communicative purposes."

These observations led to several questions: How well do ESL/ELD teachers in the United States grasp grammar rules and writing conventions, skills critical to their teaching mission? Are their perceptions of their writing knowledge and skills consistent with their demonstrated performance? What areas of grammar and writing conventions do they think are most important? To what extent are these areas aligned with grammar and writing conventions that ESL/ELD teachers are most insecure about? The Teacher Writing Center designed a study to address these questions and examine the state of ESL/ELD teacher writing knowledge and use. This inquiry-based descriptive research study includes five research strands.² As part of one of the research stands, the researchers created an initial survey to administer to ESL/ELD teachers. This report describes the findings from this survey.

Results of the Survey

The researchers created a survey to administer to ESL/ELD teachers, which was designed to identify their perceptions of their expertise in grammar and writing conventions in terms of content knowledge and in their ability to convey this knowledge to students. The survey form consisted of 10 multiple-choice questions, with space provided for respondents to expand their answers as needed. In addition, educators were required to specify the state or country where they currently teach, the grade(s) they currently teach, and their years of teaching experience. See Appendix A for a copy of this survey instrument. ESL/ELD educators attending the 2008 International TESOL Conference in New York (April 2-5, 2008) were the target audience for this initial survey. The researchers invited all interested educators to participate in the survey, but for

² See “About the Research Study” at conclusion of this document for a full description of the five research strands.

purposes of this report, limited analysis of results to those survey respondents who are currently teaching in the United States. A total of 116 usable surveys were completed.

1. Demographics of Sample Population

Table A shows the geographical distribution by region of the sample population.

Table A

Respondents by Region	N	%
Northeast (Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Massachusetts, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont)	48	41.37
Southeast (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia)	15	12.93
Midwest (Kansas, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, Wisconsin)	15	12.93
West (Alaska, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming)	20	17.24
Southwest (Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas)	9	7.75
Unspecified U.S.	9	7.75
Total	116	100%

Respondents represented 34 different states and the District of Columbia. There is higher representation from the Northeast because the conference where respondents completed the survey was held in New York City.

Tables B and C show the respondents' years of teaching experience and the grades they current teach.

Table B

Respondents' Teaching Experience	N	%
1-3 years	15	12.93
4-7 years	17	14.65
8-12 years	21	18.10
13-19 years	21	18.10
20+ years	41	35.34
No response	1	.86
Total	116	100

A majority of respondents (n=83, 71.55%) had eight or more years of teaching experience. Further statistical analyses may be instructive in identifying whether these teachers were educated during the "whole language" educational period.

Table B

Respondents' Current Teaching Assignment by Grade	N	%
Elementary (K-5 or 6)	14	12.06
Middle School (6-8)	11	9.48
High School (9-12)	13	11.20
Adult/University Level	67	57.75
Multi-grade Assignment	11	9.48
Total	116	100

Almost 58% of the respondents are currently teaching in adult education programs or teaching students at the university level.

2. Responses to Survey Questions

The first five questions on the survey asked educators to reflect on the instructional needs of English learners (ELs) and to share their perceptions of their own and other ESL/ELD teachers' preparation regarding grammar and writing conventions. Table C presents educator responses regarding direct instruction on the rules of grammar and writing conventions.

Table C

Do you think teachers of ELs should provide direct instruction to ELs on the rules of grammar and writing conventions?	N	%
Yes	104	89.65
No	4	3.44
Not sure	8	6.89
Total	116	100

The overwhelming majority of respondents (n=104; 89.65%) agree that ESL/ELD teachers should provide direct instruction to English learners on the rules of grammar and writing conventions. Table D presents educators' responses regarding their perceptions of ESL/ELD teachers' ability to provide direct instruction in the areas of grammar and writing conventions.

Table D

Do you think most ELD teachers have the grammatical knowledge and writing skills to provide appropriate instruction to their ELs?	N	%
Yes	50	43.10
No	59	50.86
Not sure	7	6.03
Total	116	100

As Table C displays, most respondents (n=104; ~90%) think ESL/ELD teachers should provide direct instruction to ELs on the rules of grammar and writing conventions; however, Table D shows that more than 50% of the respondents (n=59; 50.86%) do not think that most ESL/ELD teachers have the grammatical knowledge and writing skills to provide this instruction.

The next question focused on what educational experience best prepared the respondent to teach grammar and writing conventions to ELs. Table E presents the responses to this question. NOTE: Some respondents marked more than one response.

Table E

What educational experience <u>best</u> prepared <u>you</u> to teach grammar and writing conventions to ELs?	N	%
Undergraduate education	22	18.97
Teacher preparation program	18	15.52
Graduate program	46	39.65
Professional development workshops	18	15.52
Independent study	16	13.79
Other	35	30.17
Total	155*	N/A

*Some respondents marked more than one response to this question. Percentages were calculated based on the number of respondents (n=116).

As this table reveals, the survey respondents gained grammatical/writing expertise in different ways with the largest proportion of respondents (n=46; ~40%) citing “graduate program” as the educational experience that provided them the best preparation. The second most cited response was “Other” (n=35; ~30%). In the space for specifying what “Other” meant, respondents wrote about their experiences in middle school and high school as seminal in developing their grammatical/writing expertise.

The next three questions asked respondents to assess their mastery of grammar and writing conventions, their ability to convey this information to their students, and the support material they might need to help them present instruction on various grammar topics. The survey results are displayed in Tables F, G, and H.

Table F

How secure do you feel about your knowledge of grammar and writing conventions?	N	%
Very secure	52	44.82
Secure	49	42.24
Insecure	14	12.06
Very insecure	0	.0
No response	1	.86
Total	116	100

Table G

If a student asked you when to use <i>lay</i> or <i>lie</i> or <i>who</i> or <i>whom</i>, what would you do?	N	%
Provide impromptu lesson	67	57.76
Refer first to written reference	27	23.28
Refer first to an online reference	16	13.79
Discuss first with a colleague	6	5.17
Change the subject	1	.86
Other	10	8.62
No response	3	2.58
Total	130*	N/A

*Some respondents marked more than one response to this question.
Percentages were calculated based on the number of respondents (n=116).

Table H

For which of the following topics would you need support material to help you teach your English learners?	N	%
Irregular plurals	10	8.62
Mass nouns	8	6.9
Present perfect tense	10	8.62
Demonstrative pronouns	11	9.48
All of the above	38	32.76
None of the above	46	39.66
Other	10	8.62
Total	133*	N/A

*Some respondents marked more than one response to this question.
Percentages were calculated based on the number of respondents (n=116).

As indicated in Table F, the vast majority of survey respondents (n=101; ~87%) feel very secure or secure about their knowledge of grammar and writing conventions. It is not surprising then, as Table G shows, that more than half (n=67; ~58%) of the respondents are prepared to give an impromptu lesson on thorny grammatical issues. A few indicated they might also consult a written or online reference or talk to a colleague as a follow-up to their impromptu lesson. Only one respondent marked “change the subject.” Table H tends to confirm that the respondents generally feel comfortable teaching grammar and writing conventions. While ~40% said they did not need any support material, more than half indicated they would need support material. The wording of this question may have been ambiguous as the researchers would have expected a larger number to mark “none of the above” given the responses to the previous two questions. This is an area for future investigation and refinement.

The next two questions asked respondents to comment on their perceptions of currently available grammar and writing support resources and how they would

like to see future grammar and writing support provided to teachers. The results are displayed in Tables I and J.

Table I

How would you rate the current instructional resources available to help you teach grammar rules and writing conventions to your English learners?	N	%
Excellent	17	14.65
Very good	41	35.34
Adequate	39	33.62
Poor	15	12.93
Nonexistent	4	3.44
Total	116	100

Table J

Which of the following would be most helpful to you in teacher grammar rules and writing conventions to English learners?	N	%
Appropriate support integrated into an instructional program	57	49.14
Appropriate support integrated in a separate resource book	37	31.9
Appropriate support from a web site	35	30.17
Other	7	6.03
No response	1	.86
Total	137*	N/A

*Some respondents marked more than one response to this question. Percentages were calculated based on the number of respondents (n=116).

As indicated in Table I, most survey respondents are satisfied with current instructional resources available to help them teach grammar and writing conventions. Table J displays information about where respondents would like future grammar and writing convention support. Almost 50% (n=57) wanted the material integrated into an instructional program; 32% (n=37) wanted the material in a separate resource book and about 30% (n=35) wanted the information on a web site.

Question nine asked respondents to comment on the area(s) where their ELs have the most difficulty in terms of English grammar and writing conventions. Table K displays the survey responses to this question.

Table K

What do your English learners have the most trouble grasping in terms of English grammar and writing conventions?	N	%
Correct use of prepositions	33	28.45
Correct use of verb tenses	40	34.48
Correct use of idiomatic language	27	23.28
Correct use of pronouns	8	6.9
Correct use of punctuation	14	12.07
All of the above	46	39.66
None of the above	0	0
Other	10	8.62
No response	1	.86
Total	179*	N/A

*Some respondents marked more than one response to this question. Percentages were calculated based on the number of respondents (n=116).

As Table K reveals, the highest proportion of respondents marked “All of the above” in terms of challenging grammar and writing conventions confronting their ELs.

The final survey question asked respondents to express their degree of concern (if any) in ensuring that English learners receive instruction in “language functions and forms,” an emerging trend that is reflected in some state English language proficiency standards. Table L displays educators’ responses to this question.

Table L

How concerned are you about ensuring that English learners receive instruction in “language functions and forms”?	N	%
Very concerned	35	30.17
Concerned	45	38.79
Somewhat concerned	30	25.86
Not concerned at all	1	.86
Never heard the phrase “language functions and forms”	3	2.58
No response	2	1.72
Total	116	100

Most of the respondents (n=80; ~69%) said they were concerned or very concerned that English learners receive instruction in language functions and forms.

Discussion

One of the problems encountered with the survey is the lack of common terminology in the field. The researchers chose acronyms that they believed were widely accepted and understood. However, this assumption proved flawed. For example, many educators asked what “ELD” stood for as they had never heard of it or encountered it. Similarly, the acronym “EL” did not immediately resonate with some respondents. It would have been more effective to have included a listing of acronyms on the survey form itself. In addition, some respondents asked for clarification on some questions, leading the researchers to conclude that some of the questions could have been worded more precisely. Finally, the results might have been clearer if more stringent instructions had been included for respondents. For example, many respondents marked multiple responses on a few questions. By refining the wording of some of the questions and including specific instructions that respondents could mark only one response, clearer trends might have been evident.

The majority of respondents (~72%) had eight or more years of experience teaching English learners and about 40% are from the Northeast region. This information is not surprising given the context—the respondents were attending an international conference in one of the most expensive cities in the world and scarce funding for educational conferences often goes to senior educators. This could be a disadvantage in that longer term teachers may have very different perspectives than their junior colleagues; however, arguably senior educators have experienced more trends in education and are more apt to have a broader view and deeper understanding of what works best in educating English learners. Additional attention needs to be given to the issue of whether ESL/ELD teachers were educated during the “whole language” era. The overrepresentation of adult/university level teachers is more problematic. It is explained perhaps by the greater amount of funding for professional development at the adult/university level. However, it will be important to conduct additional research among teachers at the K-12 level. In addition, the data collected in this survey should be subjected to statistical analyses, including crosstabulation. For example, individuals who were trained when grammar was not part of the curriculum could be identified and then their responses separated out from the responses of individuals trained during different curriculum eras.

Summary and Conclusion

Researchers created and administered a survey to ESL/ELD teachers who attended the International TESOL Conference in New York City in April 2008. The survey was intended for educators teaching English learners in the United States. The purpose of the survey was to identify these teachers’ attitudes toward and perceptions of grammar instruction for English learners. Most of the

respondents were experienced ESL/ELD teachers and the majority currently teaches at the adult/university level. About 40% of the respondents teach in the Northeast region of the United States. The survey revealed that about 90% respondents believe that English learners should receive direct instruction of the rules of grammar and writing conventions. Moreover, most survey respondents consider themselves well-prepared to provide such instruction. However, slightly more than half said they do not believe that most ESL/ELD teachers have the grammatical knowledge and writing skills to do so. The respondents are generally satisfied with the current instructional resources available to teach grammar rules and writing conventions to English learners. Additional attention should be focused on ESL/ELD teachers at the K-12 level in terms of their attitudes and perceptions of grammar instruction. The researchers should refine the survey instrument with specific attention accorded to defining terminology, specifying instructions for completing responses, and refining wording. In addition, additional statistical analyses should be conducted on the data collected in this initial survey to determine whether any additional adjustments should be made. This survey is part of a broader, ongoing research study designed to examine the state of ESL/ELD teacher writing knowledge and use.

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About the Research Study

As part of an inquiry-based descriptive research study, the researchers have developed a comprehensive research plan aimed at: 1) describing the specific grammar and writing conventions ESL/ELD teachers must teach their students in grades 6-8; and 2) identifying the ESL/ELD teachers' knowledge of grammar and writing conventions. As part of the literature search, the researchers will investigate the extent to which other work has been done in this area.

At the outset, the researchers will conduct a literature review to identify research and data sources related to grammar and writing conventions ESL/ELD teachers are responsible for teaching their students and the extent to which these teachers have demonstrated mastery of these language skills. Attention also will be given to data that links teaching success in these areas with student outcomes. As part of the literature review, researchers will look at grammar/linguistics courses included in TESOL graduate programs, grammar support services, and grammar materials available for teachers. In addition, the researchers will organize a research team comprised of ESL/ELD teachers, language acquisition/second language experts, psychometricians, and other educators with strong experience in grammar, writing, and education issues. The researchers anticipate that the research study will focus on the following five research strands:

Strand 1: Analysis of selected state ELP and academic content standards related to grammar and writing conventions. This research will focus on the types of language learning and content area objectives students are expected to achieve with regard to grammar and writing conventions. In this strand, researchers will analyze state and national ELP standards, as well as state content standards (e.g., language arts/reading, science, math, and social studies) for grades 6-8 in 11 states, including Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia.

Strand 2: Analysis of ESL/ELD teacher perceptions of their expertise in grammar and writing conventions. The researchers will create and administer a survey to ESL/ELD teachers, which is designed to identify teacher perceptions of their expertise in grammar and writing conventions in terms of content knowledge and in their ability to convey this knowledge to students.

Strand 3: Analysis of ESL/ELD teacher writing samples. The researchers will analyze examples of ESL/ELD teachers' writing, including written notes to parents, written instructions to students, and other samples of real-life writing ESL/ELD teachers produce in the academic context.

Strand 4: Analysis of the results of ESL/ELD teacher knowledge of grammar and writing conventions as reflected on a writing proficiency test. The researchers will identify or create a writing proficiency test and administer it to ESL/ELD teachers. Subsequently, they will analyze the results and compare them with the results of the survey of teacher perceptions of their expertise in grammar and writing conventions. Researchers intend to involve the same teachers in Strands 2-4 and then to link the data.

Strand 5: Analysis of data from ESL/ELD teacher focus groups. The researchers will conduct focus groups with ESL/ELD teachers to cross-validate the results of the other four strands of research and fill in any gaps.

The researchers will analyze the data from the five strands of research as the basis for the research report and recommendations.

Appendix A

The Teacher Writing Center: Quick Poll
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1. Do you think teachers of ELs should provide direct instruction to ELs on the rules of grammar and writing conventions?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

2. Do you think most ELD teachers have the grammatical knowledge and writing skills to provide appropriate instruction to their ELs?

- Yes
- No

3. What educational experience best prepared you to teach grammar and writing conventions to ELs?

- Undergraduate education
- Teacher preparation program
- Graduate program
- Professional development workshops
- Independent study
- Other: _____

4. How secure do you feel about your knowledge of grammar and writing conventions?

- Very secure
- Secure
- Insecure
- Very insecure

5. If a student asked you when to use *lay* or *lie* or *who* or *whom*, what would you do?

- Provide a brilliant impromptu lesson
- Get back to the student after you have referred to a written reference (Which one? _____)
- Get back to the student after you have referred to an online reference (Which one? _____)
- Get back to the student after you have talked to a colleague (What is that person's experience? _____)
- Change the subject
- Other: _____

6. For which of the following topics would you need support material to help you teach your English learners?

- Irregular plurals
- Mass nouns
- Present perfect tense
- Demonstrative pronouns
- All of the above
- None of the above
- Other: _____

7. How would you rate the current instructional resources available to help you teach grammar rules and writing conventions to your English learners?

- Excellent
- Very good
- Adequate
- Poor
- What resources?

8. Which of the following would be most helpful to you in teaching grammar rules and writing conventions to English learners?

- Appropriate support integrated into an instructional program
- Appropriate support in a separate resource book
- Appropriate support from a web site
- Other: _____

9. What do your English learners have the most trouble grasping in terms of English grammar and writing conventions?

- Correct use of prepositions
- Correct use of verb tenses
- Correct use of idiomatic language
- Correct use of pronouns
- Correct use of punctuation
- All of the above
- None of the above
- Other: _____

10. How concerned are you about ensuring that English learners receive instruction in "language functions and forms"?

- Very concerned
- Concerned
- Somewhat concerned
- Not concerned at all
- I've never heard the phrase "language functions and forms"

Demographic Data:

Grade(s) you teach: K-5 6-8 9-12 Adult

State or Country where you teach: _____

Number of years of teaching experience:

1-3 4-7 8-12 13-19 20+

If you would like more information about the research study or the Teacher Writing Center, please provide your name and email address: