ESL/ELD Teacher Attitudes toward Grammar Instruction: A 2012 Snapshot

By Patrice Gotsch and Roberta Stathis
Executive Summary

Researchers created and administered a 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 Philadelphia, PA in April 2012. This survey mirrored a survey that was conducted in 2008 at the International TESOL Conference in New York City. The purpose of the follow-up survey was to identify current ESL/ELD teachers’ attitudes toward and perceptions of grammar instruction for English learners. The survey, preliminary at best given a limited sample size, revealed that the overwhelming majority of respondents believe that English learners should receive direct instruction in the rules of grammar and writing conventions; most deemed themselves well-prepared to provide such instruction. Just over half said that the current instructional resources to teach grammar are adequate to poor. While respondents indicated the need for grammar resources across all language levels, the majority cited the “early intermediate or beginning level” as the level at which they saw the greatest need. These findings are consistent with the results of the 2008 study. About half of the 2012 respondents said they believe grammar instruction is more important today than they thought it was five years ago, or that their attitude about this issue had not changed. A small minority said they think grammar instruction is less important than they did five years ago. This survey is part of an ongoing inquiry regarding the state of ESL/ELD teachers’ attitudes toward grammar instruction as well as their ability to effectively teach grammar to their students.

Introduction

English language development educators are overwhelmed by a wide-ranging assortment of demands and challenges. In addition to state and district content standards, English language proficiency (ELP) standards, Common Core State Standards, high-stakes achievement tests, and classrooms overflowing with diverse student populations, today’s teachers are taking on more administrative and reporting responsibilities, addressing greater demands to utilize new technologies, and feeling increased pressure to move English learners into mainstream programs more efficiently. Importantly, all these challenges and demands have converged during an era of unprecedented budget reductions.

In the classroom, English language development teachers are also being asked to heed the call of educational researchers and instruct students on the rules of grammar and writing conventions. Researchers point to direct grammar instruction as a critically important way to help English learners achieve language proficiency. As such, it is essential for English language development teachers to have the background knowledge and instructional resources to provide this instruction.

Gotsch and Stathis’s 2008 survey examined several questions related to this topic: How well do ESL/ELD teachers in the United States grasp grammar rules and writing conventions, skills that are 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? The 2012 study focused on teacher responses to these same questions.
Results of the 2008 Survey

The researchers administered a survey to ESL/ELD teachers at the 2008 International TESOL Conference in New York (April 2-5, 2008). The survey, consisting of 10 multiple-choice questions, was 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. In addition to multiple-choice questions, space was provided for respondents to make additional comments.

The researchers invited all interested educators to participate in the survey, but for purposes of this report, the analysis was limited to those survey respondents who were currently teaching in the United States. A total of 116 usable surveys were completed. Most of the respondents were experienced ESL/ELD teachers; the majority were adult/university level teachers. More than a third taught in the northeastern United States. The survey revealed that about 90% of respondents believed English learners should receive direct instruction regarding the rules of grammar and writing conventions. Moreover, most survey respondents considered themselves prepared to provide such instruction. The respondents indicated that they were generally satisfied with the instructional resources available to teach grammar rules and writing conventions to English learners.

Results of the 2012 Survey

The researchers used the 2008 survey as the basis for the 2012 survey, but more clearly defined terminology, specified instructions for completing responses, and refined some wording. The updated survey was administered to ESL/ELD teachers at the 2012 International TESOL Conference in Philadelphia, PA (March 28-31, 2012). The survey, consisting of 11 multiple-choice questions, was designed to identify teacher perceptions of their expertise in grammar and writing conventions, their assessment of resources to teach this content, and their ability to convey this knowledge to students. In addition to the multiple-choice questions, space was provided for respondents to make additional comments.

The researchers invited all interested educators to participate in the survey, but for purposes of this report, the analysis was limited to those survey respondents who are currently teaching in the United States. A total of 24 usable surveys were completed. This small response, a reflection of the reduced attendance at the conference, limited the researchers’ ability to compare the results to the 2008 findings in a meaningful way. However, the researchers noted that the 2012 demographics were remarkably similar to the demographics of the 2008 sample. For example, most of the 2012 respondents described themselves as experienced ESL/ELD teachers, and most teach at the adult/university level in the eastern United States. As was found in the 2008 survey, a majority (23 of 24) of the 2012 respondents believe that English learners should receive direct instruction regarding the rules of grammar and writing conventions. Moreover, echoing the 2008 respondents, most 2012 survey respondents consider themselves prepared to provide such instruction. While most 2008 respondents indicated that they were generally satisfied with the instructional resources available to teach grammar rules and writing conventions to English learners, most 2012 respondents said the resources were poor, non-existent, or adequate.
A new question on the survey asked respondents whether their current attitude toward direct instruction regarding the rules of grammar and writing conventions to English learners has changed in the last five years. About half said they believed grammar instruction is more important today than they thought it was five years ago, or that their attitude about this issue had not changed over the past five years. A small minority indicated that they now think grammar instruction is less important than they did five years ago.

Discussion

The major problem encountered with this survey was the limited sample size. This is not surprising, perhaps, given the economic challenges facing the country in 2012. Educational institutions across the United States have seen unprecedented budgetary cuts that have drastically reduced resources available for teachers to participate in conferences and other professional development activities.

Similar to the 2008 findings, the majority of 2012 respondents had eight or more years of experience teaching English learners, most were from the eastern United States, and most currently teach in adult education settings. As was pointed out in the 2008 study, additional attention should be focused on teachers in other parts of the country, and especially on ESL/ELD teachers at the K-12 level in terms of their attitudes and perceptions of grammar instruction. In addition, research is needed with regard to teachers with fewer than eight years of teaching experience. The oversampling of more experienced educators probably reflects the fact that attending an international conference is an expensive proposition and scarce funding for educational conferences often is directed to senior educators and/or program administrators. These more experienced teachers may have very different perspectives than their junior colleagues.

Summary and Conclusions

Researchers created and administered a survey to ESL/ELD teachers who attended the International TESOL Conference in Philadelphia, PA in March 2012. The survey was a follow-up to a survey conducted at the same conference in 2008. The 2012 survey revealed that most respondents believe that English learners should receive direct instruction regarding the rules of grammar and writing conventions. Moreover, most survey respondents consider themselves prepared to provide such instruction. The respondents reported some dissatisfaction with the current instructional resources available to teach grammar rules and writing conventions to English learners. About half said they believe grammar instruction is more important today than they thought it was five years ago, or that their attitude about this issue had not changed over the past five years. A small minority indicated that they now think grammar instruction is less important than they did five years ago. Given the limited sample size, at best, this report provides a snapshot view of teacher attitudes and perception of grammar instruction for English learners. Further inquiry with a larger sample size is required in order to generalize the results.
References


About the Authors

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