

## How Teachers' Experiences Affect their Teaching and Testing of English Grammar in Zambia

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### Abstract

*Teacher cognition has been a thriving area of research for decades now. In the study of teacher cognition, the experiences of teachers are very cardinal because they shape the teachers' understanding and beliefs on given aspects in language teaching. The teaching of grammar is an area that has received much attention from second language acquisition and teaching researchers. However, the interpretation and application of grammar teaching and testing theories and methodologies is dependent on teachers' understandings and beliefs as shaped by their experiences. Therefore, the objective of this study was to examine how the experiences of teachers affected the teachers' understanding, teaching and testing of English grammar. The study sample consisted of six schools and from those schools 12 participants were drawn. The 12 participants included 2 teachers of English from each school. The research method used in this study was a qualitative descriptive research design. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and was thematically analyzed. The findings showed that the majority of the respondents learnt grammar explicitly from their past teachers. Their teachers used traditional methods to teach grammar and these are the methods the teachers used most of the time. Another influential aspect in shaping their grammar teaching cognitions was found to be tertiary education. The respondents stated that methodology courses widened their view of grammar and taught them the methods to use when teaching and testing grammar. The findings also show that the teachers have maintained the grammar assessment practices of their past teachers. Contextual factors also such as learner abilities and availability of materials affected how they taught and tested grammar.*

**Keywords:** Teacher cognition, grammar, understanding, beliefs and experiences

### Background

Zambia is a multilingual and multicultural country and English language is taught within this broader sociolinguistic context (see Mwanza, 2020; Iversen & Mkandawire, 2020). Teacher cognition has been a thriving area of research in language teaching for decades now. It is described as pre or in-service teachers' self-reflections; beliefs and knowledge about teaching, students and content; and awareness of problem solving strategies endemic to classroom teaching (Kagan, 1990). The self-reflections, beliefs and knowledge that teachers possess are shaped by their experiences. Therefore, in the study of teacher cognition,

teachers' experiences are very cardinal because experience shape the teachers' understanding and beliefs on how given aspects should be taught and tested. The teaching of grammar is an area that has received much attention from second language acquisition and teaching researchers. However, the interpretation and application of grammar teaching and testing theories and methodologies is dependent on teachers' understanding and beliefs as shaped by their experiences. Teacher experiences play a significant role in the way teachers understand, teach and test grammar. The experiences that influence teachers' instructional choices include; prior language learning experiences, pre-service education, the years spent as in-service teachers and all teaching experiences. These are the main sources of the teachers' cognitions on language teaching.

The teachers' own experience of language learning; the way the teacher himself learnt the language is very important in influencing the way teachers understand, teach and test grammar. For instance, Eisenstein-Ebbsworth and Schweers' (1997) state that in grammar teaching teachers' beliefs about grammar pedagogy are largely shaped by their previous learning experiences much more than by their method classes in teacher training courses and subsequent Continuous Professional Development programs in the long run. This explains why L2 teachers' grammar teaching approaches are often outdated as concluded by (Borg, 2015). It is believed that students when going to college already have their own conceptions of language teaching based on how they learnt the language themselves (Borg, 2003, Lortie 1975). This is best summed up in the following statement from Grossman (1991:260) who states, "Prospective teachers do not enter teacher education as blank slates; they arrive with an extensive apprenticeship of observation in teaching methods and with prior knowledge and beliefs about their subject area". Students arrive at college after having spent thousands of hours of observing and evaluating professionals in action. This is what is called the "apprenticeship of observation," (Lortie, 1975). Researchers state that sitting in classrooms provides socialisation into established traditions that in turn frame teachers' beliefs about what schooling should be like (Smagorinsky and Barnes, 2014; Kafusha et al., 2021).

The apprenticeship of observation considers all the personal life experiences of a teacher as a learner and their influence on the present. This is so because according to Schempp (1989 cited in Smagorinsky and Barnes, 2014) by being acculturated into orthodox schooling, prospective teachers have a difficult time imagining alternatives to what they experienced as learners. Therefore, teacher training programmes which ignore student teachers' prior beliefs may be less effective at teacher training, since teacher cognition and practices are mutually playing an important role in shaping student teachers' teaching experience (Borg, 2003). Borg (2015) also asserts that teachers' prior language learning experiences create cognitions which form the basis of their early conceptualisation of language teaching during teacher education and may continue to influence them throughout

their professional lives. However, Boyd, et al (2013) states that the apprenticeship of observation can be challenged, despite its intense effects on teachers. Teacher education programs just need to recognise the autobiographical experiences of students and find a way to mediate them in some way through coursework.

The second area of influence is experience at university or college. Many researchers in the field of teacher education agree that pre-service teacher education is the first important step in the teachers' professional careers. This area is investigated because at this stage student teachers' prior conceptions of language teaching and testing can either be cemented or discarded altogether. Although it is claimed that these beliefs formed are resistant to change, it is also true that they do change, but by integrating prior thinking and beliefs (Morina, 2016). One of the factors that is expected to help teachers in altering their tacit beliefs is the teacher education programs. These programs need to be developed in a way that helps teachers in their professional growth and improves their practices and roles in the language classrooms.

The last area of influence is the actual teaching context in which they find themselves. This refers to the actual situation on the ground that the teachers encounter. This could be the caliber of the learners or the learner proficiency in the language or prior exposure to the target language. This demonstrates that teachers' classroom practices are shaped by numerous interacting and sometimes conflicting institutional, pedagogical, personal and physical factors (Borg, 2003).

Although literature shows that teachers' experiences affect how teachers teach and test, it was not known how experiences of teachers of English in Zambia affected their teaching and testing of English grammar. The need for a contextual study is what led to this study.

### **The purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine how teacher experiences affected how teachers of English understood, taught and tested English grammar in Zambia.

### **Review of Related Literature**

Öztürk and Gürbüz (2017) in their study found out that the first factor that had an impact on the formation of the teachers' cognition was their very early language learning experiences. From the narrations of their subjects, it was clear that the teachers had constructed initial conceptualisations on how English should be taught or a good teacher should be based on their language learning habits and by observing their own teachers in the past. In line with numerous studies the impact of apprenticeship of observation and prior language learning experiences were noticeable in the formation of the teachers' cognition. However, there is no study in Zambia that has examined the effects of teachers' prior language learning

experiences on how they understand, teach and test grammar.

Boyd, *et al* (2013) studied the impacts of the previous and current learning experiences of the student teachers on their microteaching practices. They used ex post facto research to scrutinize the previous learning experiences and teacher cognitions of the participants and phenomenographic research to specify their current performance in microteaching practices. From their findings they assumed that the previous learning experiences and teacher cognitions of the student teachers might have had some undesirable impacts on shaping their teaching perception. However, it was not known whether the experiences of language teachers in Zambia in the teaching of grammar had a positive or negative effect on their teaching.

Moodie (2016) in a study of 18 in- service teachers found that participants' public school English learning experience served as anti- apprenticeship of observation because their public school teachers provided models of what not to do as language teachers. This actually means teachers will avoid behaviours of their former teachers that they did not approve of. From the above reviewed study, it can be seen that the apprenticeship of observation can sometimes have negative effects especially if the teachers did not enjoy the teaching habits of their past teachers. Therefore, this study sought to establish the effects of prior language learning experiences on the teachers' current grammar teaching and testing practices. The study also examined the teaching habits that teachers adopted from their teachers in the past if any as well as the habits that they discarded. This study also desired to find out the experiences of the teachers that acted as anti-apprenticeship of observation in the teaching and testing of grammar among teachers of English language in Zambia.

The second area of influence in the teachers' experiences is the area of their experiences in tertiary education. Several studies have been conducted to ascertain how methodology courses shape teachers' cognitions and their reproduction in their classroom practices. The following are the studies that the current study highlighted.

Öztürk and Gürbüz (2017) state that even though the participants highlighted certain insufficiencies regarding their programs, the participants' frequent narrations regarding the several aspects of their pre-service education showed that it was at the centre of their teacher cognition. Besides methodology courses in the program, teacher educators and the practicum experience were reported to be the most influential factors in this process. From the study reviewed above, it can be seen that most respondents cited pre-service education as the most influential aspect of their cognitions. Therefore, this study sought to find out the extent to which pre-service methodology courses, lecturers and teaching practice shaped the teacher cognition of teachers in Zambia in the teaching and testing of grammar.

Farrell (2006) examined the beliefs of three pre-service teachers in Singapore before, during and after the practicum experience with a purpose of making the already existing beliefs of pre-service teachers explicit through metaphor analysis. He collected the data via open-ended questions and journal entries. His study revealed several meaningful metaphors regarding the existing and changing beliefs of pre-service teachers on language teachers, language classrooms and language teaching. Farrell (2006:245) suggested that “language teacher education programs should therefore provide activities for pre-service teachers that can enable them to articulate their prior beliefs about teaching and learning.”

In Kenya, Ong’ondo, (2009) conducted an interpretive qualitative case study involving seventeen participants – six student teachers, six teacher educators and five cooperating teachers. Data was elicited through semi-structured interviews, observations and analysis of relevant documents. The findings from his study generally show that the English language student teachers’ practice was mainly focused on surviving the practicum and getting the desired grades to enable them graduate successfully. This meant that though they learnt some procedural pedagogical knowledge, they were not supported to develop pedagogical reasoning, which is supposed to be the main goal of Teaching Practice. Some of the issues that influenced teacher learning in this manner were: a weak link between coursework at university and practice in schools, the lack of a clear definition of the parameters of practice and inappropriate conceptualisation of support. However, his study did not explore the cognitions of the student teachers involved.

Manchishi and Mwanza (2013) conducted a study to establish the effectiveness of the University of Zambia school teaching experience. They used interview guides, observation checklists, and focus group discussions and included 80 serving teachers, 80 student teachers, and 10 head teachers drawn from 10 high schools in Lusaka District as respondents. In addition, 10 lecturers from the University of Zambia were also sampled. Findings from this study reveal that the design and delivery of the University of Zambia student teaching experience was not effective. For example, the six-week period meant that student teachers had little time to do the actual teaching because they spend the first week observing the serving teachers. In another study Manchishi and Mwanza (2016) sought to establish whether or not, peer teaching was still a useful technique in introducing student teachers to practicalities of teaching. A qualitative method was used and 16 teacher educators and 40 final year students were interviewed. The study established that while peer teaching was useful, its implementation was faced with a lot of challenges and inconsistencies which made it less effective. Therefore, it can be said that this was not enough time to discard their prior conceptions which were gained through thousands of hours in the apprenticeship of observation. This is because it is during the teaching practicum when pre-service teachers learn to teach by means of the personal experience they get in the field. Pre-service

teachers' experiences in the schools also shape their conception about teaching and learning in school contexts, as well as their attitudes toward their work and the children they teach (Hodge et al. 2002 as cited by Manchishi and Mwanza, 2013). However, these two studies did not address the cognition of the student teachers in order to ascertain whether their prior beliefs about language teaching and testing had been impacted or influenced by peer teaching and the practicum at the University of Zambia. It was for this reason that this study sought to address the effect of teacher training programs on the cognition of language teachers in Zambia in the teaching and testing of English grammar by highlighting how the teacher cognition is formed and reformed.

The last area of influence is the actual teaching context in which teachers find themselves. Öztürk and Gürbüz (2017) examined foreign language (EFL) teachers' cognitions, their classroom practices and the impact of institutional context on these practices. The findings show that the learner profile, institutional factors including the organizational atmosphere, testing and curriculum policies, and the participants' improvisational teaching acts were the other factors shaping their practices. It was also understood from subjects' utterances that their previous institutional contexts had also important roles in their development as teachers. It is for this reason that this study endeavored to establish the impact of institutional factors on the teaching practices of teachers of English in the teaching of grammar in Zambia especially that no study had been done in this regard from a cognitive point of view.

In line with this, Burns (1996) and Valencia (2009) also reported the noticeable impact of institutional elements on teachers' beliefs and practices. The studies yielded important findings on the role of previous institutional contexts on the teachers' professional growth. Walsh and Wyatt (2014) state that a supportive environment helps in the development of teachers. However, it was not known how supportive the teaching environment was for teachers in Zambia. Additionally, it was not known what role the particular schools the teachers were found in played in the teachers' professional growth especially in the shaping of their cognitions in the teaching and testing of grammar.

Jamalzadeh and Shahsavar (2014) did a study that used explanatory sequential design to investigate the effects of contextual factors on teachers' beliefs and practices. It measured the teachers' beliefs about language teaching context, teaching and learning of 30 teachers by administrating a self-developed questionnaire and comparing the questionnaires to their teaching through class observations. On the contrary, the yielded results revealed that the contextual factors did not highly affect teachers' beliefs on language teaching. However, this study endeavored to establish the extent to which the contextual factors affected and shaped the language teachers' cognitions in the teaching and testing of grammar.



In Zambia, Shwandi (2017) in a study to explore the experiences and challenges faced by teachers and pupils of large classes in selected secondary schools of Lusaka district of Zambia found out that teachers could not complete marking pupils' books and that there was too much noise and distractions in the large classes, a concern which was also echoed by the pupils. Therefore, teaching strategies employed by the teachers included the lecture and question and answer methods owing to large class size. However, her study only considered the experiences and the challenges the teachers faced regardless of the subject they taught. Therefore, this study desired to ascertain the extent to which the conditions teachers faced had an influence on the decisions teachers made in the teaching and assessment of English grammar from a cognitive standpoint.

The review has examined studies that focused on the experiences of teachers as learners, pre-service teachers as well as practicing teachers in their own unique contextual settings. It was established that the teachers own teaching practices are influenced by their teachers of English in the past, methodology courses as well as contextual factors. However, in Zambia no study was found that studied the above mentioned factors from a cognitive point of view. This is why this study was needed with paramount urgency in order to have insights into the experiences of teachers in the teaching and testing of English grammar and how best to support them.

## **Methods and Materials**

The design that this study employed was a qualitative descriptive research design. Qualitative descriptive research seeks to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process or perspectives and worldviews of the people involved (Caelli, et al, 2003; Wakumelo, Mwanza & Mkandawire, 2016). The qualitative descriptive design allowed the researcher to adopt a judicious blend of methods of data collection in order that the information that emerged could be compared, contrasted and triangulated to provide thick descriptions of the context. The sample size of this study included 6 schools. Twelve teachers of English language, two from each school were considered for oral interviews. This study utilised semi-structured interview guides. The interviews were employed to examine their experiences in the understanding, teaching and testing of English grammar. The data was analysed thematically.

## **Presentation of the Findings**

The question of how the teachers' experiences affected their teaching and testing of English grammar was answered through interviews. In the interviews, respondents were asked about their experiences of grammar learning from primary to tertiary education to see how these experiences shaped their grammar teaching behaviours.

### 5.1 How Teachers' Experiences Affect their Grammar Teaching: Interview Data

All the respondents remembered having learnt grammar at primary school except for only three who said they didn't remember learning any grammar. The majority, however, recounted their primary school grammar experiences. Some teachers stated that they were taught all the structures of the English language by their teachers and that their teachers were very particular with error correction. Here are some responses:

- T3:** *Yes, teachers told us how to talk about the past, present and the future using the correct verb forms. If anyone made an error in using the articles, teachers were very particular especially in earlier grades so that correct usage became a matter of habit.*
- T2:** *Yes, I learnt all the structures in the sector using first Oxford English readers for Africa, then Zambia primary course.*
- T4:** *Yes, I remember learning a lot of grammar using different English books and additionally Zambian educational books for grammar like prepositions, tenses, verbs, nouns etc.*
- T5:** *I still remember learning rules on plural, opposites and tenses. I had problems with certain words such as eggs, I could not feel the plural.*

The teachers were also asked to recount their experiences of grammar at secondary school. The majority of the teachers had similar experiences of grammar in secondary school as evidenced in the following responses:

- T3:** *It was a very good experience, although we did not understand very well what was meant by grammar.*
- T2:** *The structures at secondary school were literally a carryover from the primary sector and the grammar in this sector was a reinforcement.*
- T11:** *My experience of grammar in secondary school was quite interesting because I came across a lot of new words for the first time in my life and was very happy because I was able to construct new sentences correctly upon learning all the necessary rules.*

The teachers were asked how their experiences of learning grammar as learners affected the way they taught grammar and the responses were in two categories. There were those teachers who stated the positive impacts and there were those who stated that it didn't affect them in any way.

Firstly, most of the teachers stated that they were positively impacted by their grammar learning experiences as learners because they find themselves doing what their past teachers would do. They stated as follows:



- T3:** *I have also been influenced by some of such teaching because sometimes when I fail to find suitable explanations for some grammatical structure I just say that that is the way it is or that is how the native speakers of the language say or use it.*
- T2:** *I ensure that in oral communication, for example, I am as close as possible to Standard English both in pronunciation and general approach.*
- T11:** *I was affected positively because we were given more work as learners however even as I teach my learners I have to do the same so that they learn more.*

Secondly, two out of the twelve teachers interviewed stated that their learning experiences did not affect them in any way. They indicated as follows:

- T1:** *It doesn't affect me very much because I remember very little about it as a pupil.*
- T7:** *Not very much in the sense that things keep changing as a result I also change and move with time....*

The teachers were also asked to state which grammar teaching practices they avoided from their past teachers and why they avoided them. The responses were varied, each teacher had their own practices they avoided. For instance, some teachers avoided giving too many compositions because of class sizes, others avoided the use of mechanical drills and tables and others avoided simply just testing the learners without teaching. Some of the verbatim has been outlined below:

- T1:** *I avoid giving too many compositions because my classes are too large. I avoid teacher exposition so that the Learners are more involved in my lessons. It's the reason I don't remember much from secondary school because I wasn't involved.*
- T3:** *I try to avoid using tables or mechanical exercises to practice grammatical structures.*
- T2:** *I avoid asking children to simply open a page, read and answer questions. This practice does little to inculcate the knowledge the Learners need.*
- T5:** *I avoid grammar practices that are totally abstract.*
- T10:** *I try to avoid teacher centered practices and involve the Learners. Also avoid having favorites in class.*

There was only one teacher out of the twelve interviewed who indicated that there was nothing she could have pointed to have been wrong with her teacher's grammar teaching practices and she actually wished she had paid more attention. Here is what she indicated:

**T7:** *I had a very good teacher and I used to enjoy his lessons as a result I can't finger point at any bad practice. In fact, if I had known I was going to become a teacher of English I would have paid more attention.*

The teachers were also asked to indicate the grammar teaching practices from their past teachers that they applied in their own lessons because they proved effective in their learning. The teachers listed a number of techniques used by their teachers. The techniques mentioned included; question and answer, class discussion, group work, teacher exposition and the use of oral exercises. For instance, T3 said the following:

**T3:** *The use of oral exercises, asking Learners to produce sentences orally before they are given an exercise. Although this exercise is effective, there are some Learners with poor background knowledge of grammar that find these exercises difficult.*

Another point worth noting is that some teachers copied their teachers' involvement in the lesson and the teachers' keen interest in the subject. The teachers indicated as follows:

**T2:** *Teacher's total involvement, standing before the eager class with teaching aids around to drive home a point.*

**T4:** *Teacher's keen interest in the subject and paying high levels of attention when in class.*

After this, the researcher sought to establish how helpful pre service teacher education was in shaping the teaching behaviours of the respondents. The majority of the respondents indicated that methodology courses and the teaching practice were very helpful. The stated that it was from college they learnt how to go about the teaching of grammar and the different methods that can be employed in the teaching of grammar. Here are some examples:

**T2:** *Helpful indeed in that at both primary and secondary school, methods befitting each sector were taught almost exhaustively.*

**T7:** *They (methodology courses) were very helpful, initially I had no idea of how to go about teaching until I did methodology and finally went for teaching practice.*

**T11:** *The methodology courses were very helpful because that's the starting point when it comes to delivering a lesson in class. You can only deliver a lesson successfully after learning the methods to use.*

However, most of those who studied from a particular institution unanimously agreed that not all methodology courses were helpful and that the teaching practice was too short. The following are some of the responses recorded:

**T1:** *The teaching practice was too short.*

**T3:** *Not all methodology causes were helpful. I had to teach and reteach some grammatical concepts that learners had not learnt. Most of what I learned was through self-discovery of the learners I was teaching.*

**T8:** *Not much because the methodology courses were too theoretical for me to have any influence on me.*

**T10:** *Methodology courses did not really teach on how to teach grammar but what really helped was the teaching practice and my mentor.*

When asked what they learnt about the teaching of grammar from the methodology courses and their lecturers, the teachers indicated that it was in methodology courses they learnt that grammar teaching be learner-centered, based on the application of grammatical rules, error correction by the teachers to be avoided and that grammar should be practiced orally in class as well. Some responses are outlined below:

**T1:** *Emphasis was put on a lesson being learner centered and a teacher to only be a facilitator.*

**T3:** *For example, I was taught to avoid correcting errors and help learners come to a realisation of their errors by using other learners.*

**T4:** *I learnt that the knowledge of grammar has important rules that must be followed hence learners should benefit from every lesson taught to cement their understanding.*

**T6:** *I learnt how to use the learner centered approach both in oral and written activities.*

However, there was one teacher who stated that teacher training affected her grammar teaching behaviour because according to her she never really paid attention to it because she didn't want to study English in the first place. Here's what she said:

**T10:** *I never really paid attention to grammar learning and I never even wanted to study English in the first place.*

The teachers were asked if the lecturers or the tutors who taught them at college had impacted them in any way concerning the teaching of grammar. In response, most of the teachers indicated that their lecturers had impacted their grammar teaching. Here are some selected examples;

**T1:** *During teaching practice, the lecturer went step by step planning the lesson with me after a failed first attempt. This helped me greatly and still helps me.*

**T2:** *Through the lecturers' efforts in methodology of teaching grammar, I learnt and I'm glad I have stuck to teaching new words with either live or dry aids to drive the point home.*

**T12:** *My lecturers made me realize that there are so many ways of delivering content to the Learners.*

**T6:** *I got exposed to new approaches and methodologies which have helped to enhance my approach when teaching grammar.*

**T9:** *From my experience I was taught the best way of teaching grammar and have used the same style or methods to teach grammar today.*

The researcher probed the teachers' experiences of grammar teaching from the time they were posted as novice teachers until now. Most teachers said that they had gained and developed additional abilities as a result of their teaching experience. Here is what they said:

**T9:** *I have learned a lot from other experienced teachers how to go about teaching other components of grammar.*

**T5:** *I have developed tolerance, empathy and more eclectic in my teaching.*

**T6:** *the nature of the learners has made me exploit other avenues of teaching grammar effectively.*

**T12:** *It has helped enough especially with the use of the study kits, pamphlet and other relevant materials to the full capacity and the school has been very supportive as the staff have always been on the go and ready to welcome challenges and what not.*

Based on the findings, the teachers recounted that their past teachers taught them all the structures of the English language and were very particular with error correction. They stated that they found themselves using the techniques the

past teachers would use such as teacher exposition, question and answer, group work and oral exercises. However, they also stated that there were also grammar teaching practices they avoided using from their past teachers such as simply testing the learners without teaching, giving compositions to test grammar and using mechanical drills and tables to practice grammar. The teachers also stated that teacher training was very instrumental in teaching them how to go about the teaching of grammar. Also, their teaching settings helped them to become more eclectic, tolerant and empathetic when teaching grammar.

### 5.2 *How Teachers' Experiences affected how they tested English Grammar: Interview Data*

Teachers were asked how their experiences as learners and as teachers had affected how they assessed grammar. They indicated that their past teachers were mostly strict and they considered everything from spellings, punctuations and grammatical rules. Regarding the common types or forms of assessments they experienced as pupils and how their teachers approached grammar testing, the respondents stated the following:

- T2:** *Through exercises and marking, checking spelling, omissions and strictly following world standards.*
- T8:** *Debates, composition writing, tests on various structures.*
- T10:** *Monthly tests, quizzes and class to class debates.*
- T1:** *Rewrites were often given. Focus was on grammatical competence.*
- T2:** *Immediate correction with recap of only areas that the learners got wrong and extra exercises given for reinforcement.*

The teachers were also asked if their grammar assessment practices were in any way similar to those of their past teachers. The majority of the teachers indicated that their assessment practices were similar to those of their past teachers. They explained that certain skills were enhanced through the use of same assessment practices and that they also focused on the same areas as their teachers. Here are some of the responses:

- T6:** *Yes, because certain skills can only be enhanced through the use of the same practices mentioned.*
- T11:** *It's similar because I put into practice what I learnt from my previous teachers.*
- T8:** *Yes, because they all seem to focus on the same areas.*

Secondly, the teachers were asked in what ways their grammar assessment practices differed from those of their teachers and most of the teachers indicated that they did not differ at all. They said they did not differ and they had emulated their past teachers in grammar assessment. Here is what some respondents indicated:

**T1:** *They do not differ.*

**T2:** *I have emulated my old teachers copycat style.*

A few teachers indicated that their practices differed in some way. They explained that they emphasised communicative competence more than grammatical competence. Also, about three teachers indicated that they used less of oral assessment and their assessments were mostly written. Here are other examples:

**T3:** *In a few ways because I do not consider grammatical competence more important than communicative competence. However, as a teacher of language I wish my learners knew how to use grammatical structures correctly.*

**T6:** *The level of questioning has been enhanced due to a whole range of material and experiences e.g. the use of social media.*

**T9:** *Nowadays we put so much emphasis on the written assessments.*

The teachers were asked if having gained experience their grammar assessment had changed in any way and one teacher responded that it had changed as he had become more lenient to grammatical errors. And another said that he was now including more oral exercises to ensure learners thought on their own and not coping from friends. However, the majority said they had maintained their grammar assessment practices.

The findings show that the teachers were themselves tested through the use of fill in the blanks and complete the sentence exercises as well as transformations. The teachers have also maintained the grammar assessment practices of their past teachers.

## **Discussion of Findings**

How Teachers' Experiences affected how they taught and tested English Grammar In the study of teacher cognition, the experiences of teachers are very cardinal because they tend to shape the beliefs of teachers and also increase the teachers' knowledge and understanding. In line with numerous studies (Öztürk and Gürbüz, 2017, Boyd, et al, 2013, Moodie, 2016) the impact of apprenticeship of observation and prior language learning experiences were noticeable in the formation of the teachers' cognitions. The findings indicated that the teachers' early language learning experiences were instrumental in the shaping of their grammar teaching behaviours.



From the narrations of the teachers in the interviews, it was established that the respondents had created initial perceptions on how English grammar should be taught based on their language learning habits and by observing their own teachers in the past. For instance, T2 stated that he ensured that he was as close as possible to Standard English both in pronunciation and general approach because that is what his teachers did. The teachers also indicated that their past teachers assessed grammar mostly through written class exercises which included transformations and fill in the blank exercises. They indicated that their teachers were mostly strict and considered everything from spellings, punctuations and grammatical rules. The past teachers' assessment practices really influenced them to an extent where they said that their own grammar assessment practices did not in any way differ from those of their past teachers. What this means is that through observing their teachers in action learners form initial conceptions of what teaching and testing is. This is what Lortie (1975) termed as the apprenticeship of observation. The apprenticeship of observation recognizes that prospective teachers do not enter teacher education as blank slates but they arrive with an extensive apprenticeship of observation in teaching methods and with prior knowledge and beliefs about their subject area (Grossman, 1991). Therefore, the participants formed their own conceptions of what grammar teaching and testing was and tried as much as possible to emulate their past teachers.

From the narrated experiences, it was noted that the teachers were taught explicitly using grammatical terminologies. Not only that but their teachers also emphasised grammatical correctness and errors were corrected to ensure correct usage. For instance, T3 stated that his teachers taught them how to talk about the past, present and the future using the correct verb forms. He added that if anyone made an error in using the articles his teachers were very particular especially in earlier grades so that correct usage became a matter of habit. From this we can see why T3 has continued to view language learning as habit formation as he stated: I correct them myself there and then because language learning is habit formation. This is what the majority of the teachers were observed doing in their own classes. Form was at the centre of their grammar lessons. They taught grammar using metalanguage and instantly corrected errors. This shows how their experiences of grammar as learners had influenced their grammar teaching beliefs. This attests to Borg's (2015) assertion that teachers' prior language learning experiences create cognitions which form the basis of their early conceptualisation of language teaching during teacher education and may continue to influence them throughout their professional lives.

The teachers indicated that their past teachers used question and answer, teacher exposition, the use of oral exercises, mechanical drills, group work, class discussions and pair work as their grammar teaching techniques. They stated that they liked the methods their teachers used in teaching grammar and confessed

to emulating them in their grammar teaching. For instance, T7 indicated that if she had known she was going to be a language teacher, she would have paid a lot more attention to her teacher's grammar teaching methods because she liked them. The same practices that the teachers mentioned to be their past teachers' grammar teaching techniques are the same ones they were using in their own grammar lessons. They did not conceal the fact that they were copying their own teachers' grammar teaching practices. This shows how prior learning experiences can influence the beliefs of teachers to an extent where they become resistant to change. This is so because according to Schempp (1989) as cited in Smagorinsky and Barnes (2014) teachers have a difficult time imagining alternatives to what they experienced as learners.

However, two teachers seemed to have adopted grammar teaching approaches that directly contrasted with the way in which they themselves had been taught the language. For instance, T1 and T10 tried to avoid the teaching methods of their past secondary school teachers. T1 had stated that he did not like his teacher's teaching style because it was purely teacher centered and that was what made him not to remember anything about grammar as a pupil because in the first place he wasn't involved. Even in assessment he stated that his teacher loved assessing grammar using composition, a practice he now entirely avoids. On the other hand, T10 said she avoided error correction in class because her grammar learning was not pleasant because of the teacher's constant correction of her errors. This was compounded by the fact that she came from a poor background and for this reason, she felt the teacher favoured other learners instead of her. These findings just confirm that sometimes past learning experiences act as anti-apprenticeship of observation as found out by several other studies (Mohammed, 2006, Moodie, 2016; Mwanza & Mkandawire, 2020) who found that their participants' English learning experiences served as anti-apprenticeship of observation because their public school teachers provided models of what not to do as language teachers. As can be seen from the narrations of teachers in the face to face interviews, the teachers chose some grammar teaching behaviours of their past teachers to avoid. For instance, they mentioned that they avoided using tables and mechanical drills. They also avoided simply testing learners without teaching. Also, they avoided teaching grammar in abstract. Others avoided giving too many compositions and so on. These practices modeled what not to do when teaching grammar. This shows how negative experiences can positively shape a teacher's cognition.

Apart from being influenced by experiences as learners, the teachers' beliefs were also influenced by experiences as pre-service student teachers. The findings of this study reveal that the teachers in this study were greatly influenced by methodology courses in tertiary education. The respondents indicated that methodology courses were very helpful in shaping their grammar teaching practices. The participant teachers' indicated that it was from the methodology courses they learnt that

grammar teaching should be learner-centered. They also stated that they learnt that grammar teaching must be based on the application of grammatical rules and that error correction by the teachers should be avoided but instead teachers should use other learners. Consequently, the aforementioned practices were observed in their lessons. These findings are directly linked to the findings of (Öztürk and Gürbüz, 2017; Mumba & Mkandawire, 2020) who found that the several aspects of their pre-service education were at the centre of the teacher cognition of the participants in their study.

The teachers in this study also stated that their initial conceptions of grammar teaching did not change even after being exposed to tertiary education. The teachers stated that what they were learning in school on grammar is what they found in college and that methodology courses actually provided them with more knowledge on how to go about inculcating that knowledge in the learners. These findings are in line with the assertion that beliefs that are established early on in life are resistant to change (Borg, 2003). Further, the consistency in the view of grammar from primary, secondary and tertiary education suggests that ideologically, transformational generative grammar is the norm of language teaching in Zambia. It also suggests that it is also the expected norm of language usage in Zambia.

Lastly, on the experiences of teachers in grammar teaching and testing the objective considered the teaching context itself. The participant teachers in their narrations indicated many factors that influenced their grammar teaching according to their teaching contexts. It was discovered from their experiences that the teaching and assessment practices and choices of the teachers were determined by several factors such as sizes of their classes, the caliber of the learners and the learners' prior exposure to the language, the availability of the teaching materials and also the infrastructure. Upon observation the researcher found that the sizes of their classes determined what assessment they gave. It was noticed that they gave complete the sentence exercises, fill in the gaps and transformations because they were easier to mark considering the number of their learners. This proves the fact that teacher cognition is context sensitive. The decisions that teachers make in the process of teaching and testing grammar are dependent on their own peculiar classroom contexts. This confirmed Borg's (2003) assertion that teachers' classroom practices are shaped by numerous interacting and sometimes conflicting institutional, pedagogical, personal and physical factors. Teachers' understanding of their classrooms and their own actions are both context dependent and subject to continual reorganization in interaction with the environment (Borg, 2006).

The findings show that the experiences of teachers as learners are very influential in their teaching and testing of grammar because they formed their initial conceptions of grammar. The initial conception or beliefs also tend to be resistant to change and will continually be depicted in their own classrooms. Also, their experiences as pre-service students are at the center of their grammar teaching and testing. This is because teacher training introduced them to the dynamics of a

classroom. Finally, their experiences of their own teaching contexts also influence the decisions they make in class. A teacher may know something or hold a certain belief but its execution will be subject to the exigencies of the classroom.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined how the experiences of teachers affected the teaching and testing of English grammar. The findings show that the majority of the respondents experienced traditional grammar from their past teachers and teacher training. Their teachers used traditional methods to teach grammar and these are the methods the teachers stated that they found themselves using most of the time. Another influential aspect in shaping their grammar teaching cognitions was found to be tertiary education. The respondents stated that methodology courses widened their view of grammar and taught them the methods to use when teaching grammar. The findings also show that the teachers have maintained the grammar assessment practices of their past teachers since most of them stated that methodology courses did very little to prepare them for classroom grammar assessment. However, contextual factors such as learner abilities, availability of materials, infrastructure and supportive school environment all affected how they now taught and tested grammar.

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