

“If you fake it, they will know”: ESL Teachers’ Challenges and Perspectives on Teaching Grammar

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Grammar teaching has long been considered an important area of second language (L2) learning. It is also, arguably, one of the most challenging as teachers grapple with abstract concepts and complex structures assembled to express meaning across a range of contexts. Despite a wealth of research concerned with grammar teaching and learning, little is known about how teachers experience the challenges and how they develop the skills to meet them in the classroom context. This study addresses these questions in the adult ESL classroom in Ontario. Drawing on theorizing and research in teacher cognition, the study explored grammar teaching from the perspective of the teacher. Through semi-structured interviews, 10 ESL teachers shared their personal and professional experiences, described their classroom practice, and discussed reasons for their pedagogical choices. The findings suggest that how teachers perceive the demands and affordances of their individual teaching contexts plays a role in the pedagogical choices they make. The study highlights teachers’ perceived challenges and professional learning related to teaching grammar and underscores the need for a collective response to these challenges, one that involves investment from language teacher educators, employers, and professional associations, and a reflective, informed role for teachers.

L’enseignement de la grammaire est depuis longtemps considéré comme un domaine important de l’apprentissage d’une langue seconde. Il s’agit aussi, sans doute, d’un des domaines qui présentent des défis considérables, car les enseignants font face à des concepts abstraits et des structures complexes construites pour exprimer le sens dans un large éventail de contextes. Malgré l’abondance de recherches sur l’enseignement et l’apprentissage de la grammaire, on sait peu sur la façon dont les enseignants vivent ces défis et développent les compétences nécessaires pour les relever dans le contexte de la classe. Cette étude aborde ces questions dans le contexte d’une classe d’anglais langue seconde (ALS) pour adultes en Ontario. En s’inspirant des théories et de la recherche sur la cognition des enseignants, l’étude a exploré l’enseignement de la grammaire de la perspective de l’enseignant. Dans le cadre d’entretiens semi-dirigés, dix enseignants d’ALS ont fait part de leurs expériences personnelles et professionnelles, décrit leur pratique en classe et discuté des raisons de leurs choix pédagogiques. Les résultats suggèrent que la façon dont les enseignants perçoivent les exigences et les possibilités de leurs contextes d’enseignement individuels joue un rôle dans les choix pédagogiques qu’ils font. L’étude met en

évidence les défis perçus par les enseignants et leur apprentissage professionnel liés à l'enseignement de la grammaire et souligne la nécessité d'une réponse collective à ces défis, qui implique un investissement de la part des formateurs d'enseignants de langues, des employeurs, des associations professionnelles, ainsi qu'un rôle réflexif et informé des enseignants.

Keywords: ESL teaching, grammar teaching, teacher cognition

Despite shifting priorities and perspectives in language teaching and learning, teaching grammar remains an important feature of second language (L2) classroom pedagogy. It also continues to be a focal point for professional publications, a common component of language teacher education programs, and an enduring interest for many researchers. Much of the research concerned with grammar teaching has focussed largely on the impact of theoretically motivated interventions on learning outcomes, suggesting possible implications for grammar teaching (see Celce-Murcia, 2015; Hinkel, 2017; Ur, 2011). More recently, researchers have turned to a focus on the teacher as an individual making decisions about grammar teaching in the classroom. Much of this research has adopted a framework of teacher cognition concerned with understanding how teacher knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes play a role in teachers' professional lives (Borg, 2003, 2015). Grammar teaching in particular has been one of the most widely investigated areas of teacher cognition, providing evidence that what teachers know, believe, and feel in relation to grammar teaching has an impact on their practice, and that context is a powerful mediator of the relationship between teacher beliefs and their practice (Borg, 2003). This body of research has highlighted the complex nature of teacher decision making and underscored the need to understand how teachers perceive their work as situated in a professional context.

Notably, however, much of this research has been carried out in universities and school settings, and often in foreign language settings. Very little research has been situated in contexts such as settlement programs for immigrants and workplace language programs (see Borg, 2015). This issue has been noted more broadly in applied linguistics as problematic in that it neglects entire communities of adult learners and teachers (see Mackey & Gass, 2022). Universities and school contexts are institutional settings that are shaped by traditional structures and characterized by a great deal of homogeneity in both teachers and students. As such, this limits the potential for this body of research to be meaningful to teachers, learners, and other professionals working in a range of contexts.

The question remains, then, how does teachers' cognition have an impact on how teachers teach grammar in a range of contexts? This study investigated this question with ESL teachers in Ontario, a community that includes a range of contexts beyond the university and school-based settings that currently dominate research in second language teaching and learning.

Literature Review

Research in teacher cognition encompasses "the beliefs, knowledge, theories, assumptions, and attitudes that teachers hold about all aspects of their work" (Borg, 1999, p. 95) and is premised on the view that what teachers know, think (beliefs), and feel (attitudes) about their work has an impact on their practice (Borg, 2015). The focus on teacher cognition represents an important shift in how we see grammar teaching in relation to the role of the teacher. It is rooted in educational research that views teachers as "rational professionals who ... make judgments and carry out decisions in an uncertain, complex environment" (Shavelson & Stern, 1981, p. 456) and teaching as a process by which "curriculum is

interpreted and acted upon” within a psychological context of teacher thinking, planning, and decision making (Clark & Peterson, 1984, p. 1).

Much of this research has highlighted the complexity of this relationship. For example, researchers have observed that the relationship between what teachers *know* about grammar and what they *do* in the classroom is not linear; while grammatical knowledge, as subject-matter expertise, may inform what and how teachers teach grammar, a teacher’s *awareness* of their grammatical knowledge plays a critical role in how *what teachers know* influences *what they do* (e.g., Andrews, 2003). Awareness of grammatical knowledge has been found to contribute to teacher confidence, which in turn influences classroom practice by encouraging teachers to adopt certain approaches over others (Nazari & Allahyer, 2012; Sanchez, 2010). For example, Borg (2001) observed that how teachers *perceived* their knowledge had an impact on how willing they were to engage with grammar in their teaching and how they responded to student questions. In earlier work, Woods (1996) noted that teacher knowledge is not clearly distinct from concepts of assumptions and beliefs but rather functions as “points on a spectrum of meaning” (p. 195).

Interest in teacher beliefs, in fact, has dominated much of teacher cognition research. With regard to grammar teaching, some of this research has been concerned explicitly with investigating teachers’ beliefs in and preferences for specific approaches to grammar teaching, such as preferences for explicit attention to grammar over more meaning-focussed instruction (e.g., Askland, 2018; Azad, 2013; Bell, 2016; Borg & Burns, 2008; Canh & Barnard, 2009; Graus & Coppen, 2016; Valeo & Spada, 2015). A number of studies have also focussed on the connection between teachers’ beliefs and preferences about grammar pedagogy and actual classroom practice and found that they do not necessarily align (e.g., Adhikari, 2018; Al-Daoud & Bataineh, 2021; Badash et al., 2020; Chali et al., 2020; Ezzi, 2012); in some cases, teachers expressed a belief in or preference for one approach or strategy, but conditions and features of the teaching contexts led them to adopt another instead (e.g., Farrell & Lim, 2005; Sato & Oyanedel, 2019). Numerous studies have found that beliefs constructed through previous experiences as learners and through day-to-day teaching appear to have a greater influence on teacher decision making than those introduced in language teacher education (e.g., Jeurissen, 2012; Liviero, 2017; Nishimuro & Borg, 2013; Uysal & Bardakci, 2014).

Context has been recognized as an important mediator of both teacher beliefs and practices, though once again not in a linear manner. Sanchez and Borg (2014) highlighted how the relationship between grammatical knowledge and practice was mediated by contextual factors as they are *perceived* by individual teachers, contributing to a “teacher constructed context” (p. 52); different teachers in the same context may draw on their knowledge differently, and specific contextual features act as affordances or constraints influencing the decisions made by individual language teachers. Empirical work has repeatedly highlighted the complex interaction between beliefs, practices, and context (e.g., Andrews, 2003; Liviero, 2017; Nishimuro & Borg, 2013; Phipps & Borg, 2009), noting that this interaction may sometimes appear as tensions between beliefs and practices (e.g., Al-Daoud & Bataineh, 2021).

Relevant to this work is the role of affect and emotion: what teachers *feel* about their work and themselves, and how this may have an impact on practice. In language teacher education, it is recognized that beliefs are interconnected with emotions and that emotions play an important role in language-teacher decision making (see Barcelos & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2018; Golombek, 2015; Richards, 2022; Swain, 2013). Despite this, Richards (2022) notes that the role of emotions “has often been marginalized as a result of the focus on cognitive rather than affective dimensions of language learning” (p. 225). Emotions may be positive, such as feelings of confidence, passion, and satisfaction, or negative, including anxiety, boredom, and frustration. Given the contentious nature of grammar teaching, empirical attention to the study of emotion is surprisingly lacking. As an integral part of beliefs, emotion has emerged as a point of attention in some studies focussed on teacher beliefs, such as describing how anxiety encouraged or discouraged particular practices (e.g., Andrews, 2003). It has also been a focal point of other work such as

research by Watson (2012), whose interview data with teachers teaching grammar in a secondary school highlighted the intensity of emotions and the impact on their decision making about grammar teaching.

These studies, and others, confirm that teachers' cognition—what they know, think and feel—has an impact on the professional decisions they make. Research findings reveal the complex nature of teacher decision making and suggest that it is not enough to assess what teachers know, what they profess to believe, or how they describe their feelings in order to understand how they make decisions about their work. What has emerged is the need for a greater understanding of how teachers perceive their knowledge, beliefs, and feelings in relation to the context in which they work.

With relation to context, as described earlier, much of the research investigating teacher cognition in relation to grammar teaching has been carried out in university or school settings, characterized by greater homogeneity in both program features and, often, teacher backgrounds. In these contexts, learners share similar goals, challenges, and life circumstances (e.g., typically no work or family commitments), and in these institutionalized contexts they are often guided by standardized curriculum and policies. Teachers in those positions often also share similar educational and professional backgrounds and experience similar employment conditions. It therefore remains unclear how teachers perceive and respond to diverse features of context and how this influences their decisions as teachers.

This study was part of a larger project investigating how dimensions of teacher cognition and individual perceptions of their work and context play a role in the decisions ESL teachers make related to teaching grammar. The study adopted an alternative approach to much of the research on teacher cognition; rather than ask teachers to report on their knowledge, or declare beliefs about grammar teaching and learning, this study asked participants to share aspects of their professional and personal background and to describe how they approached their teaching and professional learning related to teaching grammar. Teachers were asked to describe and discuss aspects of their education and learning histories, classroom practices across various contexts, and professional learning, resulting in a rich data set. The purpose of this article is to report on findings that respond to two specific questions that emerged from the data:

- (1) What are teachers' cognitions and perceptions related to the *challenges of teaching grammar* in the adult ESL classroom?
- (2) How do these perceptions guide their decisions about their *professional learning* related to grammar teaching?

Method

Study Design

The study adopted a qualitative design guided by exploratory questions in order to understand the process and experience of language-teacher decision making about grammar teaching. While guided by an overarching goal, the emergent design of qualitative data allows the researcher to explore questions that presented themselves in the data (Dörnyei, 2011). This article presents and discusses findings related to two such emergent questions. Data collection and analysis were guided by a case-study design that was concerned with understanding individual perspectives and experiences in order to establish commonalities across participants as multiple cases (Cresswell, 2013).

Context and Participants

One of the goals of the study was to expand the professional contexts examined in previous research. Therefore, participants were recruited with the assistance of a professional association representing over 4,000 members working in a range of English language teaching and learning contexts in Ontario. The association was asked to distribute to members an invitation to participate in the study. In addition to the ethics review carried out by the researcher's university, the study proposal was subjected to an internal review process by the association. This recruitment strategy offered an opportunity to engage with a community characterized by some commonalities—all were ESL teachers in Canada—but also a great deal of professional diversity, working in a range of contexts and bringing diverse backgrounds and experiences to their work.

Most notable for this study is the range of teaching contexts in which members of this association work. When applying for membership, the association asks them to identify their work context, including over 16 different teaching program types and 13 different roles across seven organization types (TESL Ontario, 2025). Teachers in this community are employed in colleges and universities, private language schools, school boards, newcomer settlement agencies, community agencies, and workplaces, or are self-employed as tutors. In these contexts, they teach English for academic purposes (EAP) to primarily international students in credit or non-credit programs; ESL for newcomers to Canada in publicly funded language settlement programs (e.g., LINC—Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada); or in occupation-specific language instruction offered through publicly funded college programs or in private-sector workplaces. Some may also be teaching in school contexts and in foreign language settings (EFL) outside of Canada.

A total of 86 participants responded to the survey. Most participants self-identified as female, and just over 50% were over 50 years old. As expected, most had completed a TESL Certificate, a requirement for accreditation, but nearly half had more than one qualification, such as a CELTA or DELTA (Certificate/Diploma in English Language Teaching to Adults). In addition, nearly half held a graduate degree, a qualification that is not required for accreditation but favoured by employers in higher education. While all participants identified English as a dominant language, nearly a quarter identified one or more other languages as well. At the time of the study, most reported teaching in LINC programs, followed by teaching EAP to international students. Nearly one in three teachers, however, was teaching in more than one type of program at the same time, a well-documented feature of ESL teachers' employment in Ontario (see Kinzie, 2018; Valeo, 2013).

Data Collection

Data collection was carried out through an online questionnaire and individual interviews. The online survey gathered information about teachers' backgrounds and contexts, while the interviews explored individual experiences and perceptions.

The online questionnaire consisted of three sections. Section 1 asked participants to identify specific features of their professional and relevant personal backgrounds and experiences, including age, gender, education (including language teacher education), dominant language(s), and current and previous teaching employment. Section 2 asked participants to describe their teaching practices, and Section 3 asked participants to describe their experiences in their TESL certificate and their professional learning activities, and to identify the degree to which these experiences prepared them to teach grammar (see Appendix for relevant excerpts). The goal of these questions was not to gather comprehensive data but to provide a snapshot of the wider participant group and a platform for interview questions. Section 4 explored participants' beliefs and perspectives about the place of grammar knowledge and pedagogy in

language teaching and learning by asking them to complete a set of statements such as *Teaching grammar is like ... because ...*. This approach was designed to explore beliefs and conceptions by drawing on metaphorical elicitation and analysis previously used in exploring teachers' beliefs and conceptions (e.g., Sakui & Gaies, 2006). The survey ended with an invitation to participate in follow-up interviews. This article draws primarily upon the data gathered in Sections 1–3 of the questionnaire for the 10 participants selected for the interview (the data from Section 4 will be reported on in a future paper).

All but nine of the 86 teachers who completed the survey indicated their interest in the follow-up interviews, and, based on their responses to Sections 1 and 2 of the online survey, 10 teachers were selected to reflect the diversity that characterizes the community. The interview questions drew on survey responses to elicit more in-depth discussion of individual teachers' experiences, practices, and perceptions of their work. The primary focus was on responses to survey questions asking about preferred and usual approaches to teaching grammar, current and prior teaching contexts, and TESL education experience and ongoing professional learning. For example, individuals were asked to elaborate on why they made the choices they made in their teaching, how the specific context might have influenced their decisions, and how they believed their TESL education and other professional learning activities, in the past and ongoing, contribute(d) to their grammar teaching. All participants were also asked how they might advise a teacher new to the classroom and why they had chosen to participate in the study. In addition, the teachers were encouraged to take the interview in any direction they pleased, in order to elicit richer descriptions and perspectives. The one-hour-long interviews took place online and were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Each of the teachers was asked to select a pseudonym for the purpose of the study.

Analysis

The survey data were coded for content relevant to specific categories: educational background and experiences (including TESL education), teaching experience (length and program contexts), classroom practices, and approaches to professional learning. Individual responses were used to create customized interview questions relevant to individual teachers. Descriptive and comparative analysis was used to create individual profiles and identify commonalities and variation across individuals. The interview data were transcribed and analysed both for content relevant to the research questions, for example reported approaches to professional learning, and thematically, for themes identified in the existing literature and others that emerged across individuals.

Findings

The Selected Teachers

A brief summary of each of the 10 teachers' background and working context taken from the survey and interview responses illustrates the diversity of the group. Each of the teachers was encouraged to share details of their backgrounds and experience as relevant to grammar teaching and learning. Some focussed more on their educational backgrounds and others on their classroom experiences. All the teachers self-identified as female and ranged in age from less than 30 years old to over 60, with more than half (six of the 10) over 50 years old. All the teachers also identified English as their dominant language, and most (eight) reported having studied or learned other languages as children or adults. Four of the teachers had or were in the process of completing graduate degrees; three had completed a Bachelor of Education; and three had completed their bachelor's degrees outside of Canada, in the United States, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom. The following brief summaries further illustrate this diversity.

Alice had a very diverse linguistic background and extensive education. She identified Russian as a native language, was educated in Ukrainian, studied English and German in university, and learned Spanish while teaching for a school in Mexico. She completed a master's degree prior to coming to Canada, a master's in TESOL in Canada, and more recently a PhD in applied linguistics. She had taught in both ESL and EFL settings, including secondary school, briefly as part of her initial teacher education, occupation-specific classes in both Canada and Mexico, and EAP in university and college settings.

Bethany had completed her TESL Certificate a year before and was completing an MA. At the time of the study, she was teaching EAP in a university class as part of her graduate studies and taught civil servants in a government-funded language program. She had taught EFL in China for four years before completing her TESL Certificate. Bethany used English as a native language, had studied French as part of her Canadian education, and learned Mandarin while teaching in China.

Brit was educated and grew up in the United Kingdom using English as a native language and learned Italian while teaching in Italy. She had completed a number of TESL qualifications over several years before becoming accredited in Canada; her first qualification was completed immediately after her bachelor's degree over 20 years before. Five years later, she completed an additional qualification to teach children, and shortly after moving to Italy, she completed a DELTA. At the time of the study, she had been in Canada for seven years teaching ESL in a LINC program.

Caron had completed a TESL Certificate four years prior. She had immigrated to Canada from the United States with a bachelor's degree in English education and a qualification to teach ESL, completed 20 years earlier. Prior to immigrating to Canada, she had taught EAP in Syria and Jordan. In Canada she had taught LINC as a supply teacher, and at the time of the study she was teaching in the LINC Home Study program, an online one-on-one language program. Caron identified English as her dominant language but was familiar with Arabic as well from her time living in Syria and Jordan.

Cindy had completed a Bachelor of Education and had completed her TESL Certificate 12 years prior. She was teaching in a LINC program and had previously taught EAP in a college, and adult learners in a workplace preparation program. She identified English as her dominant language and did not report studying any other languages.

Emma grew up speaking Italian and English, studied French in school, and "picked up" Spanish from friends and colleagues before studying it in university. At the time of the study, Emma had been retired for six years, with a range of teaching experience that included EAP and LINC. She had completed her TESL Certificate over 20 years earlier.

Meredith completed her TESL Certificate after teaching for 10 years in Mexico, and at the time of the study was completing a PhD. After her TESL Certificate, completed four years prior, she briefly taught in LINC before taking on her current position teaching EAP in a college. She learned Spanish while living in Mexico and had studied French as part of her Canadian education.

Mye completed a TESL Certificate five years prior, followed by a Bachelor of Education. At the time of the study, she was completing an MA and supply teaching in elementary and secondary schools. She had taught English to adults in Italy and in an EAP program in a college in Canada. She identified English as her dominant language and spoke Kurdish as well.

Paulina came to adult ESL from a previous career as an elementary and secondary school teacher. She had completed a Bachelor of Education and a TESL qualification over 20 years before. She had taught in a range of programs, including an EAP program, an occupation-specific program for healthcare workers, a community program for German Mennonites, and a methodology course to language teacher candidates. Paulina had retired into private tutoring two years before the time of the study.

Trixie became an English language teacher as a second career after leaving her first employment to raise a family. She had completed a TESL Certificate program six years earlier and had been teaching in a LINC program since then.

This participant overview illustrates the diversity of personal, educational, and classroom experiences teachers brought to their work, a diversity that emerged as an important mediator of teachers' cognitions and practices.

Teachers' Cognitions and Perceptions

The research questions guiding this study asked (1) What are teachers' cognitions and perceptions related to the *challenges of teaching grammar* in the adult ESL classroom? and (2) How do these perceptions guide their decisions about their *professional learning* related to grammar teaching? Analysis suggested that teachers' cognitions and perceptions were highly individualized, situated in personal experiences and contexts, and that how teachers chose to pursue and engage with professional learning was mediated by these cognitions and perceptions. A cross-analysis of the data, however, revealed a number of common themes in relation to both. Five themes emerged strongly in the data: (1) the need to respond to context, (2) the importance of grammar knowledge, (3) the limitations and affordances of TESL education, (4) the value of community in ongoing professional learning, and (5) the critical role of classroom experience.

Theme 1: A Matter of Context—"Constantly adapting"

In discussions of classroom practice, the most common consideration raised was the type of program in which teachers were teaching, specifically the ways in which features of the program context either constrained their abilities to teach their best or demanded adaptation in their teaching, influencing how, when (if at all), and what grammar to teach. The teachers were well positioned to make comparisons across program types, as all but one had taught in more than one program at some point in their careers and half were teaching in two different program contexts at the time of the study.

Teachers reported adapting their grammar teaching across multiple program contexts with curricula that ranged from some that prioritize grammar teaching to others that included no grammar teaching at all. When asked about her practice, Cindy qualified her grammar teaching as "it depends." She focussed on learner needs in the LINC program but followed the prescribed curriculum in the EAP program. Having taught in a variety of contexts, Mye recalled having to "reset" her grammar teaching every time she taught in a different kind of program.

Teachers also found themselves making compromises in response to program constraints, often expressing frustration and regret. Bethany didn't have time in the highly structured and assessment-driven EAP program to exercise her preference for a less explicit approach; she described having to teach grammar often but recalls that she "didn't teach it well." In those contexts, her approach was explicit and direct because she was often "crunched for time," so they did not have the opportunity to "see the grammar themselves ... to notice it in the text." Caron was not able to teach grammar in depth because the LINC Home Study program in which she taught included so little time with each student, and for Meredith, teaching in a skills-based EAP program didn't allow her to focus on grammar as much as she would have preferred. Meredith expressed regret at how heavily she focussed on grammar when teaching in Mexico, believing she may have done her students "a disservice." She recalled that at the time it seemed an expectation, and activities such as grammar drills didn't seem out of place.

Others described resistance to context demands; when teaching EAP courses that were "strictly by the book" and "pretty dry," Emma would introduce stories to contextualize some of the grammar features required in the course and "snuck in a few things" to make grammar meaningful. When Brit found herself in a context that didn't have enough of a focus on grammar, she taught grammar nonetheless because she felt "they should know it."

Teachers also described how they successfully adapted to new program contexts. Brit recalled how when she began teaching in Canada, she embraced the less-structured LINC program as allowing her to enjoy using “real life” materials instead of the “very dry” previous approaches to grammar teaching. Alice considered grammar “an inevitable part of how you make meaning” and included it to some extent in every program context, modifying her approach to include more preplanned grammar explanations or alternatively “more sporadic” approaches to meet the demands of the program.

Some program features presented unique constraints. Cindy described how continuous enrollment in the LINC program, with new learners joining every day, made it difficult for her to plan her grammar teaching and required that she be “constantly adapting.” She also described the distraction of portfolio-based assessment mandated by the program that prevented her from making autonomous decisions about teaching grammar. Caron referenced the linguistic diversity of learners in ESL classes in Canada and described how teaching grammar in an EFL context had been less demanding because the learners all shared the same language and grammar needs. Alice described the limitations of “sporadic” attention in a workplace program where employees had to prioritize their work demands over attending the language class; this left her unable to sustain a focus on any specific aspect of grammar.

Theme 2: Grammar Knowledge as Expertise—“If you fake it, they will know”

Regardless of the context, the importance of a knowledge of grammar resonated strongly across all participants and emerged as a preoccupation for all but one of them. The teachers had clear expectations of themselves as experts and believed that learners shared them, namely that the instructor was responsible to make grammar accessible, and to do so they needed to have not only an adequate level of expertise but also an explicit knowledge of grammar. Many of the teachers were very critical of themselves, keenly feeling the pressure to *know* grammar; teachers expressed an awareness of their own gaps and the need to prepare intensively before every class. Brit was concerned about “losing credibility in front of the class” and still recalled twice failing a grammar test as part of an application process; Bethany expressed frustration because she didn’t know grammar “off the top of [her] head”; and Cindy sometimes avoided teaching grammar she wasn’t sure of and stayed on “safe grammar.” Caron described the experience of teaching grammar as “pulling nails from wood”; she had to review and study and generally didn’t feel comfortable teaching features she didn’t use all the time. Like Cindy, this had a direct impact on her teaching: she “would rather teach less grammar” because she had “insecurities” about her teaching.

The focus on metalinguistic (explicit) knowledge of grammar reflected a conviction among teachers about the important place of grammar in language learning. Despite her struggles, Caron believed that students “want to know *why* so the rules explain why, even when it’s not logical,” and when she can’t answer a question, she tells learners she’ll get back to them because “if you fake it, they will know”; in her view, a sound knowledge of grammar is important because “students will lose respect for you if you don’t know your stuff.” Grammar knowledge was the motivation for Bethany to complete a TESL Certificate after having taught for four years; she wanted to be able to not only explain grammar rules but also “tell them why.”

Mye expressed frustration when other teachers suggested telling students, “We didn’t come up with these rules, it’s the way it is.” She feels it’s important to “put students’ minds at ease when they ask what the reasoning behind this is,” and in her early years, when she couldn’t explain, she would “research for hours and never have an answer.” Out of these experiences, Mye advises novice teachers to “take the time to teach themselves.”

Theme 3: TESL Education—They need to “teach themselves”

The need to “teach themselves” emerged from their anxieties about grammar knowledge and rose again when teachers were asked about their language teacher education experiences. Teachers’ reports of their language teacher education varied in terms of the degree to which they felt it had helped them prepare for the classroom. They described program experiences that included grammar to varying degrees, from a great deal to none. Yet, while some did not credit their TESL education with a significant impact on their preparedness, all acknowledged that no language teacher education or training could adequately prepare them to teach grammar in *all* the contexts they might find themselves and that teachers needed to continue learning and had a responsibility to *teach themselves*.

Emma had completed her TESL Certificate over 20 years earlier and recalled being directed to grammar guides as the extent of her training. In contrast, Alice’s TESL Certificate had emphasized the connection between grammar and meaning and the role of context, providing a valuable foundation. She credits her continued professional learning to experience teaching in different contexts, designing curriculum, working closely with mentors, and volunteering. Bethany described how her TESL Certificate exposed her to a “good balance between understanding grammar rules and learning teaching strategies for grammar,” but she felt only somewhat prepared upon completing the program because “there are so many English structures.” She knew “what is correct, but [not] the rules off the top of my head.” She continued to self-study, to remind herself of the rules of grammar to become more comfortable explaining grammar.

Cindy’s TESL Certificate included a separate grammar course as part of the program, but she recounts being so anxious that she remembered little of it. She reported feeling unprepared when she completed her TESL program, “nervous about what kind of grammar questions they [the students] would ask me.” Meredith completed two courses focussed on grammar teaching as part of her TESL Certificate, which she appreciated, describing how it “gave me structure in terms of my grammar knowledge.” Yet she too maintained that a TESL Certificate cannot prepare anyone to teach all the features that are part of grammar.

Likewise, Paulina recalled appreciating a strong focus on pedagogical grammar in her TESL Certificate program, addressed in a separate course and integrated throughout. This focus on grammar aligned well with her own education at a time when grammar was taught to children, as they “had to parse sentences on the board.” In fact, she recalled having to write a grammar test before applying to her TESL Certificate program and going to the library “to brush up,” only to discover how much she didn’t know. She recalled how in her early career she struggled to answer “simple questions” and learned that she “would have to continue studying.”

In describing her TESL education, Trixie recalled a strong pedagogical grammar component that focussed on learning “the grammar functions and where the pitfalls are,” as well as how to teach grammar. She felt very prepared to teach grammar after this program and credits a specific instructor who introduced her to an outline, a “prescription” for how to teach grammar. Caron’s experience in her TESL Certificate included very little grammar teaching, described as having “just touched on it”; it seemed to Caron that the program assumed that teacher candidates already knew the grammar and needed to learn “how to present it to students in a fun way.”

Theme 4: Professional Learning—“Some good discussions”

When asked about how they addressed the challenges they described experiencing when teaching grammar, teachers typically identified searching online for resources, reading grammar guidebooks and texts, and, to a lesser extent, attending workshops; research was identified by only one participant,

Emma, who described reading a scholarly journal. She noted, however, that with the online format of many professional conferences, she missed the opportunity to engage with scholars whose work she read.

Cindy described accessing online resources that helped her explain a specific grammar point and develop teaching ideas, regularly participating in professional development workshops, accessing research, and continuing to review grammar books. She also regularly reached out to colleagues and supervisors for help and advice and valued the opportunity to meet researchers in person at conferences.

The appreciation for collegial support was expressed repeatedly. Brit would have liked to have participated in more professional development activities but felt frustrated at the prevailing online format; she “would prefer to go in person ... to meet people, not sit at the end of a computer.” Mye had made plans to meet with a colleague later that week to talk how they “should do more grammar ... [and] how best to incorporate it into lessons while meeting the learning goals.” While Paulina strived to develop expertise for specific grammar concepts by reading grammar books, she appreciated conversations with colleagues, which she recalled as “some good discussions around the table about how to do this.”

Theme 5: Classroom Experience—“When we teach it, we really learn it”

Some teachers credited their TESL education with laying a foundation for their practice. However, when asked to describe how their perceptions of their work and their teaching had changed, all described classroom experience as an important source of professional learning. Through experience, Cindy learned how to “wing it” and teach in a way that was “less programmed, not holding onto the answer key ... confident about being able to walk in and teach.” Experience contributed to Meredith’s confidence and ability to manage the unexpected in grammar teaching; she recalled how early in her career when she made a mistake, “it used to bother me because I don’t like to make mistakes,” but she now turns it into a “teaching moment” and praises students who catch errors. Early in her career, Cindy described teaching grammar as a separate component of language, but “with experience, I’ve learned to put them together.” Trixie’s knowledge of grammar, after completing her TESL Certificate, increased with experience; she stated, “when we teach it, we really learn it.”

Experience teaching learners of different proficiency levels appeared to be particularly valuable and was cited as a source of change. Teachers described how teaching different levels demanded that they learn about grammar features appropriate to that level. At each level, Trixie described how she would reflect on her teaching and then “go back and tweak and do better to fill in the loopholes.” Paulina’s confidence grew as she taught learners at different proficiency levels and encountered different grammar forms. Likewise, Cindy appreciated opportunities to teach different proficiency levels, allowing her to develop expertise in different grammar features. She described herself as “hungry and ambitious to teach different levels ... to develop and grow” and said that with each new level, she developed “explicit knowledge of the English language.” She “push[ed] [herself] to know the grammar” for each level she was assigned to teach.

Discussion

The overarching goal of this study was to understand how teachers made decisions about grammar teaching by investigating the interplay between teacher cognition, teaching practice, and context. The study uncovered specific findings related to how teachers perceived their individual challenges and needs in relation to grammar teaching and professional learning in the contexts in which they worked. Context, identified primarily as program type, emerged as a strong consideration, consistent with

previous studies (e.g., Liviero, 2017). Teachers described their experiences responding to change as they moved *across* contexts, adapting, compromising, and in some cases resisting program-specific demands. This experience was heightened when there was a disconnect between teachers' perceived beliefs and the demands of the program context.

Explicit knowledge of grammar occupied a unique place in the classroom for teachers in this study. Discussions about grammatical knowledge appeared fraught with emotion, echoing the findings of Watson (2012). Teachers' perception of their knowledge had an impact on their confidence, which in turn mediated their pedagogical decision making, a key finding in a number of previous studies (e.g., Petraki & Hill, 2011; Sanchez, 2010). The less confident the teacher felt, the more time they spent preparing and choosing safe areas to teach so they could control the use of grammar in the classroom and the students' responses, something observed in previous studies as well (e.g., Andrew, 2003). In this study, these findings were amplified as teachers moved across contexts and had to navigate changing demands. Their perception of their grammatical knowledge was in relation to the demands of the context; how teachers made use of this knowledge was mediated through a complex and integrated system of beliefs and emotions, as noted more widely by Woods (1996), rooted in and influenced by a myriad of highly personal experiences.

As in much previous research (e.g., Petraki & Hill, 2011), teaching experience appeared to exert an important influence on a teacher's beliefs and decision making. Classroom practice allows teachers to test and revise teaching strategies and approaches; however, opportunities for teachers to experience new challenges appeared to be important. Teachers credited opportunities to teach learners with different proficiency levels as important experiences. Others recalled the value of participating in curriculum design for the program in which they were teaching.

The degree to which TESL education prepared the teachers to teach grammar, not surprisingly, varied. Teachers' reports of their TESL education experience ranged widely, yet all acknowledged that no language teacher education or training could adequately prepare them to teach grammar in *all* the contexts they may find themselves. Teachers' professional learning beyond their TESL education emerged as a very significant mediator of their beliefs and their practice. Regardless of their career stage, they described how they continued to reach out and seek opportunities to improve their pedagogy and their classroom experience. Teachers repeatedly referred to studying grammar, reviewing the textbook, and having to "research for hours" to prepare for class, even after many years of experience. While this is not unique to grammar teaching, it was pervasive in these data and appeared to be mediated by their beliefs about grammar teaching and to have a direct impact on the decisions the teachers made in their teaching.

Many of the teachers pursued similar avenues for professional learning to support their grammar teaching. One source of professional learning, however, that has been relatively neglected in the literature and yet has emerged strongly in this study is the role of the informal professional community and colleagues in the workplace, where "good discussions" took place. This is notable in contexts outside of universities and schools, where faculty and staff provide a built-in community of colleagues. In some contexts, such as workplace programs and some LINC programs, teachers work in isolation and struggle to reach out to others. In response to their challenges teaching grammar, teachers described reaching out to colleagues and supervisors and avoiding online conferences and events in favour of in-person contact. This is highly relevant given ongoing trends toward more online teaching and professional learning that has removed teachers from the collegial staffroom environment and the in-person conferences where they can share their thoughts and experiences. Given the critical role of reflection, the opportunity to connect with others who may think differently can be a more powerful force for professional growth.

The findings of this study illustrate the value of examining teacher cognition, practice, and perception in different contexts. The study highlighted the impact of the unstable nature of employment for ESL teachers in Canada (see Breshears, 2019; Valeo & Faez, 2013). As teachers move across contexts in

order to secure stable employment, they face changing program demands related to learners, curriculum, policies, and possibly faculty and staff culture. Professional learning related to grammar teaching is also affected by this feature of employment. When teachers stay in one program for a length of time, they can sustain their learning of grammar knowledge in a stable environment and avoid more fractured experiences adapting to multiple contexts.

These findings also highlight the ways in which different programs present different constraints and affordances. Program features such as learner goals and constraints, curriculum expectations, institutional policies, and professional working conditions repeatedly emerged as mediators of both practice and teacher cognition. Universities and school-based programs provide built-in collegial communities for teachers, while in settlement language programs, teachers may work alone or in very small groups in a given location and have to create their own connections to reduce the professional isolation. In the classroom, EAP programs with a greater assessment focus may leave little time for grammar teaching, while policies in LINC programs may contribute to sporadic learner attendance that disrupts grammar teaching across lessons. In an EFL context, learners usually share the same language and have similar educational experiences and expectations, allowing teachers to better plan their decisions about grammar teaching. The learner diversity of many Canadian ESL classrooms challenges the teacher to identify the needs of learners with different educational backgrounds, learning goals, and language needs.

Conclusion and Implications

This study was inspired by an interest in understanding how ESL teachers teaching across a range of contexts made decisions about their teaching, specifically how their perceptions of their work, themselves, and their contexts influence their grammar teaching. The findings of this study have highlighted some intriguing aspects of grammar teaching from the perspective of the teacher, many of which are likely similar to those faced by teachers across contexts, but some of which appeared to be particularly salient for teachers working in specific contexts. Research and theorizing about teacher cognition provided a framework through which to investigate teachers' perceptions of what they know, think, and feel about grammar teaching. The findings of this study echoed many of the concerns raised in other studies but highlighted a complexity across contexts, suggesting that how teachers perceive features of their context at different points in their careers is key to understanding teacher cognition. The diversity of the community of teachers participating in this study made it possible to focus more intensely on the role of context. Teachers began and pursued their careers in very different ways and along different paths, many experiencing a great deal of change as they moved from one teaching context to another.

In drawing conclusions about these findings, however, a few limitations merit consideration. While the focus was on how teachers perceived their own practice, the nature of the data as self-reported may have revealed more about what teachers *believed* they did in the classroom than about what they actually did. This aligns with this article's focus on perception but does limit any analysis designed to report on teachers' actual practice. Classroom observation in future studies would mitigate this effect by documenting classroom practice and providing the teacher with an opportunity to reflect on their practice.

The recruitment strategy should also be noted. The teachers who participated in this study self-selected to do so, initially by completing the questionnaire and later by offering to participate in the interviews. This approach to recruitment may have attracted teachers for whom teaching grammar is a highly charged experience, suggesting that this may not be the case for the wider community. In addition, the snapshot nature of the study limited the ability to fully understand how teachers' cognitions changed

throughout their careers as they experienced different contexts and made different choices about their practice and professional learning. The opportunity to carry out a more longitudinal study might further illuminate aspects of teacher change and career development.

Nevertheless, the findings hold implications for teachers, learners, employers, policy makers, and professional associations engaged in adult language learning and teaching in general and concerned with grammar teaching specifically. While TESL education cannot reasonably be expected to prepare teachers for any context, a fact recognized by participants, there are areas that could be better addressed in TESL programs. Some of the challenges presented by context can be addressed by raising awareness of different programs and settings and the many features that distinguish different contexts. This approach may equip teachers to understand aspects that will have an impact on their teaching and to devise strategies to navigate those demands. This is not to say that teachers must be chameleons who adapt to whatever comes their way but that, given the conditions of the employment landscape, most teachers have little choice but to adapt. In addition, TESL education is well positioned to help teachers become aware of and prepared for the powerful role of affect in their work, particularly important for grammar teaching, which has traditionally been widely seen as structural and associated with an analytical perspective. This neglect leaves teachers to internalize their struggles, which in turn affects their classroom practice and, ultimately, the experiences of learners in the classroom.

Aligned with this awareness is an emphasis on reflection. Reflection is essential to adaptation and professional learning, and while many of these teachers reflected intuitively, it is not something that comes readily to all teachers early in their careers. TESL programs can foster both awareness of the value and process of reflection by integrating it into their programming. In addition, this stage of a career is the ideal time for teachers to learn how to create and sustain professional communities. TESL educators should address strategies for connecting and reaching out to other professionals, as a fractured landscape may not support this.

In terms of pedagogical content, the study suggests that TESL programs should address pedagogical grammar by focussing on teaching skills and resources to develop grammatical knowledge rather than teaching about specific grammatical forms. Teachers did not expect to learn all the grammar they needed to teach across contexts from their TESL experiences and studied on their own to prepare for different contexts.

Post-TESL education has the potential to support the continuous learning that is critical for grammar teaching. In this regard, professional associations are well positioned to provide access to post-TESL education opportunities for teachers to continue professional learning. As communities, they can also contribute by creating connections across the professional community, allowing instructors to share experiences, reflect on their teaching, and better understand their own teaching contexts.

Employers are powerful forces in professional learning when they are able to have an impact on teachers and their teaching in their own context. Some of this can be achieved in ways other than traditional workshops and courses. Teachers can be provided with opportunities to switch classes with colleagues, team-teach or observe each other in class, or contribute to curriculum development. Engaging teachers in a variety of ways would contribute to creating a more effective program. As this study and previous research suggest, teachers do not implement curriculum but rather “interpret” it, and when there is a disconnect between program expectations and teachers’ perceptions of their learners’ needs and their own abilities, they find ways to resist demands.

Researchers should see reflected in this study the need to expand their contexts and avoid defaulting to convenience sampling that limits them to participants in higher education. This approach hampers the meaningful impact of research and does a disservice to the many teachers who do not see their own realities reflected in research. Research concerned with teacher cognition can also build on this study to allow more complex relationships to emerge and be understood. For example, it may be confounding to compare language teacher education, teaching experience, and learning experience as

separate factors. In much the same way that Woods (1996) observed that beliefs and emotions do not exist in isolation, teacher learning is shaped and reshaped by experiences throughout a teacher's career.

In conclusion, at the heart of this study is the teacher. This study aimed to draw attention to the diversity of teachers' experiences teaching grammar in the classroom, an area of pedagogy often dominated by a prescriptive approach, and to better understand how teachers make choices about grammar teaching, inside and outside the classroom. For teachers, this study suggests the value of having an increased awareness of not only context but also their own development as they navigate change throughout their careers. Most teachers do not have the luxury of choosing a context, but by reflecting on what they do in the classroom and why, they can develop strategies to mediate the tensions and build on affordances that characterize the many teaching contexts in which they will likely find themselves teaching. The enthusiasm, dedication, and resilience shown by the many teachers who came forward to share their experiences for this study illustrated the desire and rewards of connecting with others for "good discussions."

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Section 2: Grammar Teaching Experience

1. In your most recent or current workplace, how often do/did you teach grammar?
 - At least once every lesson/day
 - Frequently
 - Often
 - Not often
 - Occasionally
 - Never
2. If never, why not?
3. How do you usually teach it? What approach or activities do you use?
 - Explicitly
 - Implicitly
 - Incidentally (as it comes up)
 - Planned grammar topic for the day
 - Presentation of grammar rules followed by application and practice
 - Other (please specify)
4. [If other] How do you teach it?
5. Before your most recent position, how often did you teach grammar?
 - At least once every lesson/day
 - Frequently
 - Often
 - Not often
 - Occasionally
 - Never
6. If never, why not?

Section 3: Teacher Preparation and Development

1. How important is it that a TESOL/TESL program prepares teachers for teaching grammar? Why?
2. How did your TESL Certification program address the teaching of grammar?
 - In a separate course specifically for grammar teaching
 - It was a part of different courses, integrated throughout
 - It didn't include how to teach grammar
 - It was mentioned briefly
3. Which aspects of grammar did your TESL program address (select all that apply)
 - Language and structures
 - Activities and tasks

- Accuracy
- Metalinguistic terminology
- Learning styles
- Spoken grammar
- Grammar in writing
- Assessing grammar
- Other

4. If [Other] please specify.

5. How did your TESOL/TESL Certification Program address the teaching of grammar?

- In a separate course specifically for grammar teaching
- It was part of different courses, integrated throughout
- It was mentioned briefly
- It didn't include how to teach grammar

6. AFTER completing TESOL/TESL Certificate, how prepared did you feel to teach grammar in an ESL classroom?

- Very prepared
- Somewhat prepared
- Neither prepared nor unprepared
- Somewhat unprepared
- Very unprepared

7. Since completing your teacher education, have you participated in any professional development outside of your workplace to help you teach grammar?

- Yes
- No

8. What was the most helpful activity? Please rank them in order of most helpful to least helpful. If there are activities listed that you have not experienced, please place them underneath "Never experienced..."

- Working with newcomers in the community
- Volunteering in a language classroom
- Other
- Attending conferences
- Presenting at conferences or workshops
- Never experienced...
- Attending individual workshops

9. If [Other] please specify the activity.

10. What specific aspect of grammar did the professional development activity address?

11. How prepared do you NOW feel to teach grammar in an ESL classroom?

- Very prepared
- Somewhat prepared
- Neither prepared nor unprepared

- Somewhat unprepared
- Very unprepared

12. Do you have any other comments on how your ability to teach grammar and your teacher development?

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