



Investigating EFL Teachers' Beliefs Concerning Teaching Grammar of "SUNRISE" Curriculum in Duhok High Schools

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ABSTRACT

This research studied English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' beliefs towards grammar teaching of Sunrise curriculum in Duhok high schools. The study aimed to investigate teachers' beliefs about teaching grammar of Sunrise curriculum, identifying the practices that English teachers prefer to use in teaching grammar, and the difficulties that they face in grammar teaching classes. The participants were in-service EFL teachers of Duhok governorate high schools. Questionnaires and interview were the two instruments used for data collection. The results showed that high school EFL teachers in Duhok do indeed possess a set of excellent beliefs, but their practices are not compatible with their beliefs for various complicated reasons.

Keywords: EFL teachers, beliefs, high schools in Duhok, grammar teaching, practices.

1. Introduction

Grammar is one of the essential pieces of any language. Grammar teaching has always been considered as a matter of controversy in second language teaching. Some believe that grammar is necessary for second/foreign language learning, whereas some others not. Without having information on grammar structures and their capacities in language, there is no proficient and competent language learning; therefore, considerable effort is needed in teaching grammar.

Various studies concerned about teachers' beliefs and it became a primary area of research in the field of applied linguistics within the last 20 years. Practical teaching gets an important significance by understanding teachers' beliefs. Considering the importance of teachers' expectations, in the present study, the researcher explored teachers' beliefs towards teaching the grammar of "SUNRISE" Curriculum in Duhok high schools. In this context, the study aimed at finding out teachers' beliefs about teaching grammar of Sunrise curriculum to see whether teaching grammar of Sunrise curriculum

improves students' English proficiency. This research is limited to EFL teachers who were teaching English in high schools of Duhok by using the questionnaire and interview as the two main research instruments.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The main aim of this study is to investigate teachers' beliefs about teaching grammar of Sunrise curriculum, identifying the practices that English teachers prefer to use teaching grammar and the challenges that they face in grammar teaching classes. It further aims to answer this question "What are EFL teachers' beliefs towards teaching the grammar of "SUNRISE" curriculum in Duhok high schools? To do so, this study is intended to investigate the perceptions of EFL teachers about their beliefs during their teaching of the grammar of Sunrise programs.

1.2 Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

- What are EFL teachers' beliefs towards teaching the grammar of Sunrise curriculum?

- How do teachers teach English grammar of Sunrise curriculum in their classes?
- What difficulties do teachers of English face in teaching Sunrise grammar?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Teachers' Beliefs

Within the class, the most influential factor in the learning process is the teacher (Edge, 1999). The teacher should be a good organizer in teaching the foreign language and should know what leads exactly to success because s/he is an organizer of all the procedures (Wang, 2010). Around the 1970s, research about teachers' beliefs and their relationships with academic *practices started* in America for the first time. The National Institute of Education of America (1975) shared a report which articulated the requirement for investigating teachers' belief processes more profoundly. The report expressed that "it is clear that what teachers do inside the class is directed to what they think" (Jackson 1968, 1). Since then, the link between teachers' beliefs and their practices has continuously attracted researchers' consideration.

Johnson (1994) prescribes that teachers' beliefs are neither easy to define nor study since they are not particularly observable. Expectations are attitudes about the world that people feel are true and depend on as a guide to personal considerations and activities (Richardson, 2003). Hinkel et al. (2002) defined beliefs as a perception reliably connected to an action. By affecting how we perceive reality, they suggest that ideas guide both our considerations and practices. Furthermore, Kagan describes beliefs as "Unconsciously held assumptions about students, classrooms, and the academic material to be taught" (1992, 65), and as compatible with teachers' opinions are harmonious with teachers' teaching style. Like Kagan (1992), Fang (1996) states teachers' beliefs affect how teachers perceive,

process, and act upon information in the classroom. Williams and Burden (1997, as cited in Thu, 2009) states beliefs are indicators of how teachers behave within the class. Richardson keeps up that expectations "... are an individual's understandings of the world and the way it works or should work, maybe consciously or unconsciously held, and guide one's actions" (1994, 91). From the field of second language (L2) teaching, Richards explains that teachers' beliefs are "... the information, attitudes, values, expectations, theories, and assumptions about teaching that teachers build up over time and bring with them to the classroom" (1998, 66). Farrell (2013) further prescribes that teachers should reflect-on-action, reflect-in-action, and intentionally think about their beliefs. Consequently, the significant of teachers' beliefs is huge since they influence teachers' practices, which they further influence students' academic performance. Teachers' beliefs can assume a significant role in their decision-making concerning the sort of materials, activities, and instruction they will use in their classes.

Meanwhile, without conviction in their beliefs about how students learn, it is hard to imagine teachers being successful in their teaching regardless of the approach they adapt. That is why the numbers of studies should be carried out in this area to give essential data to make a system of sorts to help teachers within teaching. Research on the beliefs of language teachers shows that their views are shaped by many factors including their experience as teachers, as students, and as members in teacher education programs. For example, Phipps and Borg (2009) found that teachers' experiences helped shape their profound belief in the significance of satisfying learners' desires. Some other Studies demonstrate that beliefs are predictors of a teacher's behavior in a classroom and a reflection of what a teacher gives within the class (Thu, 2009).

2.2 Previous Related Studies

Fossum (2015) investigated how Norwegian teachers and students at the upper secondary level view the role of teaching grammar and corrective feedback and how well-matched their views are. The results showed that the students and teachers value grammar teaching highly and agree with the communicative activities. Both groups agreed that written errors should be corrected. Deng and Lin (2016) did a comparative study on beliefs of grammar teaching between high school English teachers and students in China. The results of the study showed that teachers' grammar teaching tends communicative teaching while students' grammar beliefs have the characteristic of integration of communicative and traditional grammar teaching. Also, Morina (2016) analyzed teachers' beliefs and practices and their relationship regarding grammar teaching in Kosovo's public high schools. His found out that EFL teachers believe that grammar should be taught systematically, explicitly, and inductively.

Furthermore, a study examined university teachers' beliefs by Eltantawi (2012) about grammar teaching in EFL undergraduate university classrooms in the UAE. The findings revealed that the majority of the participants appreciated grammar's importance by a combination of both explicit and implicit methods for mastering language skills. However, they listed a number of difficulties that face teachers such as students' first language interference, students' low language level, and lack of motivation.

A qualitative descriptive study was done in 2016 by Azimi to explore the language teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning English grammar. The findings of this study showed that sometimes there was no compatibility between teachers' beliefs and their actual behaviors in the classroom. This study also revealed the importance of using native language in EFL classrooms.

There was a quantitative study by Azad (2012) to investigate teachers' attitudes and beliefs of Grammar Teaching in the EFL classroom in Bangladesh. In teaching grammar, explicit grammar instruction and contextualized use of grammar within communicative activities were preferred, and inductive approaches and corrections of errors were considered valid and helpful by the participants. In 2016, Issa's MA study entitled "English Teachers' Perceptions toward the Effectiveness of Using Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) In Teaching Grammar at Al Ain Public Schools" showed that English teachers at Al Ain public schools preferred using communicative activities in teaching grammar when using CLT. It also specified the activities that English teachers prefer to use and the challenges that they face in CLT implementation. Finally, some studies have been conducted to identify the main difficulties that language teachers face when teaching grammar in their classes. For example, the study by Dewi (2014) highlighted that teachers have various difficulties in teaching grammar such as teachers' methodology, grammar rules that should be taught, time limitation, and teachers' self-confidence.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Instrument

Mixed-Method research was used to conduct this study. Mixed method research has been defined as "the research paradigm that encourages the combined use of qualitative and quantitative research elements to answer complex questions" (Heyvaert, Maes & Onghena 2013, 2). Using of mixed-method would give a complete explanation of the situation. For answering the research questions, data were gathered through questionnaires and interviews. □

The questionnaire consisted of three parts that were based on the study's three main research questions. I did a pilot study by interviewing my supervisor and two

experts in the field of English language teaching and applied linguists. Some of the state items were adapted from Schulz (2001) and slightly revised. It included 28 statements. The questionnaire used for this study contained closed-ended questions. This part of the survey used a Likert-type scale (strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree) which is the most widely used method of scale construction because it is a simple, versatile, and reliable way. Also, there was a tick- table for the difficulties that teachers face during grammar teaching.

Ten EFL teachers from different age groups were interviewed to elicit their ideas, beliefs, and attitudes. They were performed in English. The interviews were conducted by meeting each teacher individually and were followed up via e-mail.

3.2 Participants

The participants of the study were a hundred teachers who were teaching English language (Sunrise of grades 10, 11 and 12) in Duhok high schools. They were chosen from 7 different districts of Duhok governorate. The participants were aged between 20 and 65, 61% of them were males, and 39% were females. The majority of the teachers held a bachelor's degree, while three of the totals held MA and two of them held PhD. 34% of the participants had a teaching experience between 1-5 years, 31% of the between 6-10 years, and 35% of the participants had more than ten years.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Teachers' Beliefs

4.1.1 Questionnaire Results

Figure (4.1) outlines questionnaire statements of EFL teachers' beliefs toward teaching grammar of Sunrise curriculum. It included nine statements of the questionnaire.

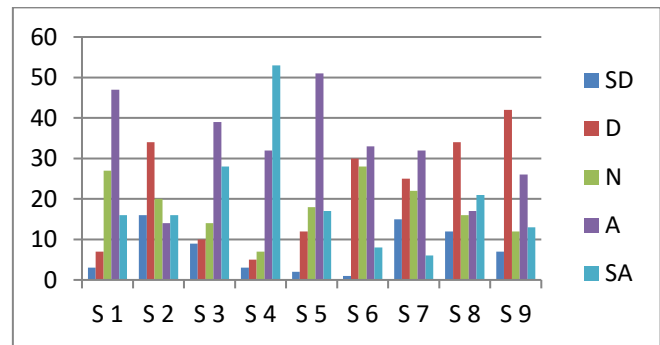


Figure (4.1): Teachers' beliefs towards teaching grammar

As it is shown in the above figure, teachers overwhelmingly agreed with the statement that *there should be a greater emphasis on grammar in the teaching of the English language*. Almost 63 of the participants agreed/strongly agreed. As for the second statement, the more substantial part (n=50) of the teachers disagreed with the claim that *grammar is the quickest way for students for improving their communicative abilities*. The respondents' beliefs seemed well-aligned to the statement that claims *grammar should be taught to all learners (i.e., beginners- intermediate and advanced)* as (67%) of them agreed with the idea. Moreover, the results demonstrated that most respondents (n=86) agreed with the fourth statement that the teachers were asked to respond to the claim that *it is more important for students to practice English in situations stimulating real-life than practice grammar rules*. According to statement 5, *grammar should be taught in English and can be studied a lot in a week*. Most of the teachers (n= 68) were in favor of teaching grammar in English. For the statements that relate to Sunrise curriculum; it was found out that (n= 41) EFL teachers agreed that *the grammar topics of the curriculum are satisfactory to the students*. The more significant proportion of the teachers disagreed with *the forms of grammar are good enough in Students Book (n=40)*, and *the grammar exercises are well-formed in the Activity Book (n=46)*. The final statement in the teachers' attitudes part is the ninth statement, which sought to discover whether

teachers thought that teaching grammar of Sunrise curriculum improves students' English proficiency, showed divided opinions. 50% of the teachers strongly disagreed with that statement. The other halves of the teachers were either agreed (39%) or neutral (11%).

4.1.2 Interview Results

There were three general interview questions:

a. *What is the definition and role of grammar?*

Large numbers of teachers were of the belief that the word grammar means a set of rules to construct well-formed sentences by connecting words together in both speaking and writing.

For incidental role of teaching of grammar for communication many teachers were with those who say that grammar has the central position of teaching language and gave positive opinion about the importance of grammar teaching because they thought that everyone has to know some rules so as to make and express sentences in a correct order while some other teachers denied the importance of teaching grammar and they were with those who said grammar had no role in language communication.

b. *What is your belief toward grammar teaching?*

The majority of the participants agreed that grammar teaching should help students communicate in a better way. Therefore, teachers should teach grammar in a way that students can get benefit from speaking and writing.

c. *Do you see that students get benefit from the grammar of Sunrise? If yes, how? If no, why?*

The majority of the teachers agreed with saying that "Students learn the rules of grammar, they can bring examples for each rule and pass on their exams, but they cannot apply grammar for communication."

4.2 Teachers' Practices

4.2.1 Questionnaire Results

Figure (4.2) outlines questionnaire statements of EFL teachers' practices in teaching Sunrise grammar classes. It included eleven statements that listed from 10 to 20.

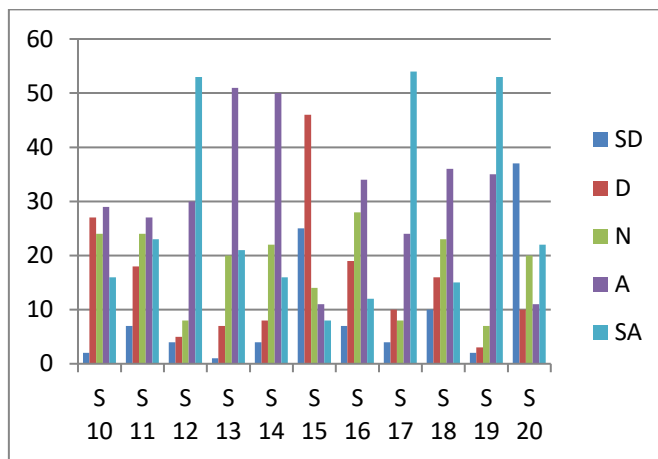


Figure (4.2): Teachers' practices

The tenth and eleventh statements focused on the Teachers Book that English teachers prefer to use in teaching grammar. As it is apparent in figure 4.2, the majority of teachers were with statement 10. Similarly, in statement 11, more than one-half of the teachers saw that Teacher's Book satisfies the teachers' requirements for teaching grammar. Statements 12 and 13 were about the material that teachers use during grammar teaching. As for statement 12, indicates the most substantial agreement of the teachers to this point (83 %). Likewise, Whiteboard is the most widely and gladly used teaching aid without which the students feel disturbed agreed by the majority of the teachers. Statements 14 and 15 asked teachers about the ways that they mostly teach grammar in their EFL classes. The teachers were asked whether they teach grammar deductively (i.e., Students study rules and then apply these rules to examples) or inductively (i.e., the teacher should help students discover the grammar in authentic materials and then give them the states). From the figure it is evident that the majority of the teachers teach grammar in a deductive way.

According to the teachers' opinions about the way they explain the lesson, the answer to statement 16 (Lessons followed a mainly traditional approach, with the explicit teaching of grammar rules and meanings and teacher-centered). (34%) of the teachers agreed that the lessons are based mainly on a traditional approach and (12%)

strongly agreed. Statement 17, which asserted that *it is necessary for teachers to correct students' errors in the class*, provoked some rather exciting results (see figure 4.2). The participants' opinions about error correction were explicit. Most of the teachers (78 %) agreed/ strongly agreed with the claim. In statement 18, the teachers were asked whether *they mostly teach grammar in isolation or not*. More than half of the participants agreed with statement 18 as (51%) agreed/ strongly agreed. These results indicates that the participants teach grammar in isolation,

The answers to statement 19 (*Teachers have to focus always on the factors of both individual students and the whole class*) showed the vast majority of the participants (88 %) agreed/ strongly agreed that they have to focus always on the factors of both. The last statement in part two was about *teaching students for getting marks in the exam and pass to the next grade*. The more significant number of the participants disagreed or even strongly disagreed (37%, 10%) with teaching students to get marks in the exam and pass to the next class.

4.2.2 Interview Results

As for the second research question, there was an interview related to the teachers' practices in class for teaching grammar. It stated, *"How do you teach English grammar, and what instructional activities do you use?"*

The interviewees' main instructional activity is using whiteboard. Few of them said they use projector, whiteboard, pictures, and videos. For the way they teach grammar, large parts of the interviewees followed the grammar exercises which are given in the textbook. Some of them said they use inductive methods to help their students learn to use grammar in communication. Some other teachers preferred deductive approach and believed that it saves time; it is natural, and traditional. They thought this is the best way to present grammar for a class having a large number of students.

4.3 Teachers' Difficulties

4.3.1 Questionnaire Results

Figure (4.3) contains questionnaire statements of EFL teachers' difficulties in teaching Sunrise grammar. It included eight difficulties.

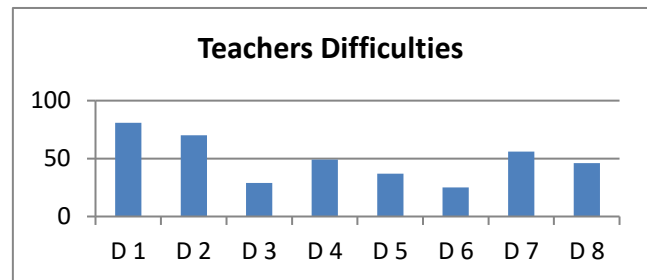


Figure (4.3): Teachers' difficulties in teaching grammar

According to the results given in figure (4.3), *"Students' low English proficiency, especially in grammar"* was the most common difficulty as (n=81) teachers have considered this item as a difficulty that hinders their efforts when teaching grammar. Additionally, *"Resistance to class participation: some students tend not to participate"* was another common challenge EFL teachers faced (n= 70). Also, *"large classes"* was another common challenge English teachers faced (n= 56). *"Time spent to prepare communicative activities"* considered one of the biggest difficulties that teachers faced in grammar teaching. Moreover, according to the participants, *"heavy teaching workload"* was a major difficulty that limited their contact to students (n= 46). However, only (n= 37) teachers perceived *"Complexity of the grammatical feature, for example, articles"* as a difficulty. The least number of responses was to the item related to professional development *"Insufficient communicative grammar exercises included in the textbooks"* (n= 29) and *"Teacher's self-confident"* (n= 25).

4.3.2 Interview Findings

The final question asked the teachers *"What are the difficulties that English language teachers may encounter when teaching Sunrise grammar?"* The majority of the interviewees complained that there are many

difficulties. One of the teachers said, "there are many problems that can't be counted." Most of the language teachers blamed the students. One of the teachers (T3) stated that "students are not familiar with parts of speech, tenses and even rules of grammar in the English language. (T4) stated that "one of the difficulties is that most of the students are coming from uneducated families, lack of home preparation and less English language exposure, so the students remain less competent in the language."

Teaching grammar implicitly or explicitly was one of the major topics discussed by most of the participants. T5 considered teaching implicitly "is the hard one for teachers" and (T7) considered teaching explicitly one as "simpler for the students." Another difficulty that some of the participants mentioned was teachers' self-confidence. (T1) said that "some EFL teachers do not have enough content knowledge, they ignore using teaching materials properly, they do not have lesson plans, and eventually lose class controlling and self-confidence."

Many of the participants argued that teachers' and students' use of native language (Kurdish) inside the classrooms hinders the learning of English grammar. (T2) stated that "grammar teaching is the second language for both teachers and learners. Kurdish interference hinders the learning of English grammar."

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate EFL teachers' beliefs towards teaching grammar of Sunrise curriculum in Duhok high schools. The research reported teachers' beliefs towards teaching Sunrise grammar, the activities they use, and the difficulties they face in teaching grammar. What follows is the discussion of the findings of this study.

5.1 Teachers' Beliefs

The first research question was about EFL teachers' beliefs concerning grammar teaching. The findings indicated that most of the participants preferred prescriptive grammar as one of them said, "I think

prescriptive grammar is better since it is about the rules and structure of language and as far as grammar-translation method is concerned in the teaching." Thus, for the importance and role of grammar teaching, it can be seen that teachers had different beliefs about the usefulness of grammar teaching and learning. The majority of the participants stated that grammar plays a vital role in language learning, while some others did not think so. Numan (1991) supported grammar teaching since grammar helps learners perform their target languages better. He additionally stated that students cannot communicate in the right way without having an essential level of grammar. With the statement that there should be a greater emphasis on grammar in the teaching of the English language, teachers suggested that there should be a greater emphasis on grammar in teaching English language.

The interviews gave further evidence about the importance of grammar. Those who provided a decisive role for grammar believed that paying more attention to grammar helps students become aware of how the language works. As indicated by Lin (2008), the role of grammar is to enable students to find the language nature. The participants thought that grammar teaching is necessary to improve students' writing and reading. Whyld (2003) expressed that both writing and speaking would benefit by understanding grammar. One of the interviewees (T10) stated that "If you know the grammar clearly, you will be able to organize your sentences so you can speak in a right way and people can understand." Moreover, Canale- Swain (1980) and Brown (2007) asserted that the use of language could become confused and might not be understandable without grammatical structure. Another participant (T2) believed that grammar has an important role, especially for writing as he said, "If your grammar is correct, you can write correctly." Another teacher (Q1, T6) mentioned that "teaching

language without grammar is just like building a house without basic needs." Also, he added, "no language can be acquired without learning grammar."

In contrary, some other teachers denied the importance of teaching grammar. As one teacher (T8) believed that studying grammar does not necessarily improves learners' communication skills when she said: "there are numbers of students who can do very well in the grammar part in the exam, but they cannot use their grammar knowledge while speaking." Another participant stated, "Most of the teachers teach grammar deductively, they usually explain grammar rules without using grammar for communication purpose." Students ought to learn new structures and rules in depth; they should feel that they can use what they have learned for everyday communication (Phillips, 1993). This study agreed with the Eltantawi (2012) findings as indicated that the majority of teachers appreciated the significance of grammar for mastering the language skills whereas it is not fully agreed with the findings of Azimi (2016) as his results suggested that language teachers believed that teaching grammar has no role in learning English. Data from the questionnaires showed that the majority of the participants believed that teaching grammar communicatively is more effective. This is also supported by the literature. Fossum (2015) revealed that the students and teachers value grammar teaching highly but agree that communicative activities are more important than practicing grammatical rules. Additionally, this result supports Deng and Lins' (2016) study, which showed that teachers' grammar teaching tends to be communicative teaching.

5.2 Teachers' Practices

In Sunrise curriculum, there is a Teachers Book for each grade that contains brief, easy-to-follow instructions to help teachers make plans and teach the lesson on the basis of the curriculum. According to the quantitative

findings, the majority of the teachers agreed that the Teachers Book satisfies the teachers' needs for teaching grammar. But some of the teachers said that they do not follow the Teachers Book due to having not enough time or well-equipped environment. However, in quantitative findings, the majority of the teachers disagreed with Activity Books' exercises of grammar while the qualitative results revealed that the majority of the interviewees follow the grammar exercises which are given in the textbook. Results showed that the majority of the participants used grammar translation approach in teaching grammar. Their classes were teacher-centered, and the learners used to remain passive listeners. However, few teachers used communicative approach. Most of the teachers advocated inductive grammar teaching rather than deductive which is student-centered. One major issue in Sunrise Curriculum is that the grammar is designed to be taught implicitly and inductively while many teachers still use traditional methods in the class.

Most of the participants believed that written and spoken grammatical mistakes of the students should be corrected so that they can learn from their mistakes. They stated that if teachers do not correct students' mistakes, learners would think that they do not have any and would, therefore, keep repeating similar mistakes. Teachers can recognize the errors in writing more quickly than speaking because they have the time to correct the writing mistakes, while when speaking; they are not able to remember all the mistakes the students may make. A similar finding of correcting errors was reported in Fossum (2015) to investigate how Norwegian teachers and students at the upper secondary level view the role of grammar teaching and corrective feedback and to see how well-matched their views are. Both groups agreed that written errors should be corrected, but an examination of their opinions on the correction of

spoken errors revealed significant discrepancies. Also, Azad's (2012) study revealed that correction of errors is helpful while teaching English grammar.

5.3 Teachers' Difficulties

The third research question focused on the difficulties EFL teachers faced in grammar classes. Literature on difficulties in teaching English grammar supports the findings of this study. In a study conducted in United Arab of Emirates, Issa (2016) found out that English teachers faced difficulties such as students' low English proficiency especially in grammar, large classes, insufficiency of communicative activities, and lack of appreciation of communicative activities. Moreover, the results of this study agree with the findings of Dewi Sari (2014) who identified three main difficulties facing grammar teaching, namely 1) Teachers method became a problem in teaching grammar, 2) Many rules that should be taught and the limitation of time to teach all the materials of grammar and 3) Teachers' self-confidence. Same difficulties are reported by the participants of this study. Furthermore, the difficulties that have been highlighted in Eltantawi (2012) study's about grammar teaching in EFL undergraduate university classrooms in the UAE are sufficiently found in the current study. His study pointed out that the challenges the teachers have faced when teaching grammar are the use of authentic material, students' native language interference, students' low language level and lack of motivation, in addition to the trouble of some structures. These difficulties make a significant influence on the process of learning the grammar of English language.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study showed that high school EFL teachers in Duhok do indeed possess a set of excellent beliefs, but their practices are not compatible with their views for various complicated reasons. Besides, the

teachers who participated in this study did not fully agree that grammar teaching of Sunrise curriculum improves students English due to several reasons and difficulties. However, the majority of the participants believed that grammar plays a significant role in developing and improving students' communicative competence, but it depends on the way the teacher teaches grammar in class. Added to this, the difficulties that face teachers make a significant influence on the process of teaching and learning. Therefore, to overcome these difficulties and improve teaching grammar, appropriate actions have to be taken. One of these actions could be adapting the teaching method to suit the actual teaching and learning environment. It is hoped that findings of this study would inspire teachers of grammar to do their best to develop their practices. The findings of this study might be helpful for in-service EFL teachers, pre-service EFL teachers, and trainees because as Borg (2003) stated, the reflecting work should be constant to gain more knowledge and practical skills.

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