Honours Project

Program:　　　　　A4B036
Course:　　　　　　Honours Project
Course Code:　　　 EPA 4900
Tutorial Group:　　 01E
Tutor:　　　　　　 Dr. QIAN Haiyan

Student Name:　　　Ho Kit Man Jessie

Primary Teachers' Perspective on Pedagogical Strategies of English Grammar Teaching in Hong Kong Classrooms

Abstract

It is believed that some stimulating and innovative teaching methods can evoke students' interest in using and practising English grammar in authentic situations in which second language learners can choose to apply the appropriate language items for the real communicative purposes. Some of these teaching methods include the employment of authentic and personalised materials, the integration of language games and songs. However, English teachers in Hong Kong still normally cling on to their personal perception, teaching experience and belief to formulate an instructional plan. This study investigates teachers' perspective on the employment of these pedagogical strategies in primary classrooms in Hong Kong. It throws light on two questions (1) "How do primary teachers perceive the adoption of different pedagogical strategies such as using authentic and personalised materials, language games and songs to teach English grammar in their lessons?" and (2) "What factors impact teachers' decision on adopting particular strategies?". The present work is a qualitative study that employed semi-structured interviews to collect data from seven primary English teachers. The study found that teachers possess a set of complex feelings and opinions about applying these teaching methods. The attitude towards the adoption of the four pedagogical strategies is positive although they are facing certain constraints. It is believed that the investigation into in-service teachers' personal implicit pedagogical systems can contribute to a holistic understanding of grammar instruction in real primary classrooms in Hong Kong.

Table of Content

I.　Introduction

The nature of grammar teaching in the classroom can vary depending on language teachers' perspective, their grammatical knowledge background and prior professional experience of teaching English (Ezzi, 2012). Different teachers may adopt different pedagogical strategies in classrooms. Referring to the longitudinal research on second language acquisition, Ellis(1994) concludes that "it is probably premature to reach any firm conclusions regarding what type of formal instruction works best" (p.646). In the absence of any ideal pedagogical strategies yielding the best learning outcomes of second language acquisition from students, teachers normally resort to their personal perspective and decision on employing pedagogical strategies to formulate their grammar instruction. Therefore, although authentic and personalised materials, language games and songs are regarded as effective strategies by some educationists to stimulate students' learning motivation, different teachers possess various opinions on the effectiveness of these strategies when they are put into actual practice. According to the framework of the Central Curriculum ordained by the Hong Kong Curriculum Development Council (2004), it behoves teachers to teach grammar in a purposeful and communicative contexts instead of teaching one form after another in a linear process. Although there are clear guidelines stipulated for schools, teachers can adopt them to different degrees by varying the pedagogical strategies depending on the uniqueness of their students and teachers' style. Relative little empirical evidence can be found concerning which and how the different strategies are employed in primary classrooms in Hong Kong. There is a need to understand the underlying perception of in-service English teachers about the appropriateness, feasibility and effectiveness of the four pedagogical strategies including authentic and personalised materials, language games and songs when they are applied in pragmatic primary classroom situation in Hong Kong.

4

1.1   Purposes of the study

This study investigates teachers' perspective on the employment of pedagogical strategies encompassing authentic and personalised materials, language games and songs to teach English grammar in lessons. This research aims at collecting teachers' comments and exploring factors influencing teachers' decision on choosing the suitable pedagogical strategies to teach second language learners English grammar. It sheds light on the teachers' pragmatic instructional practice in the classrooms of a primary school. The rationale for the study stems from the need to gain teachers' perspective on certain pedagogical strategies of teaching English grammar and to examine the appropriateness, feasibility and effectiveness of these strategies applied in a Hong Kong primary school context. Teachers' individualised grammar instructions broaden the understanding of the nature of grammar teaching perceived by teachers. Two research questions are addressed:

1.   How do primary teachers perceive the adoption of different pedagogical strategies such as using authentic and personalised materials, language games and songs to teach English grammar in their lessons?

2.   What factors impact teachers' decision on adopting particular strategies?

With a view to answering these two questions, I chose to conduct an empirical study at my block practice school. Most students' English learning ability is low at that school. Only few of them are capable of comprehending and responding to teachers' English instructions. Most students also come from families of low socioeconomic status (SES) and their parents do not receive higher education. In other words, compared to students from higher SES

5

households, their academic skills are not well developed. Most students consistently fail to apply an appropriate grammar rule in speaking and particularly writing. There is a disconnection between recognizing the grammar forms and being able to apply those forms in a real situation. Therefore, there is a need to further investigate how teachers at such a school decide on applying the four strategies, namely, authentic and personalised materials, language games and songs in their classroom, even though these strategies are believed as effective to provide authentic and communicative opportunities for students to learn English grammar and improve their English proficiency.

II. Literature Review

2.1 About grammar teaching

The knowledge of grammatical rules, controlling the organization and construction of words and sentences for expressing proper meanings, are essential for students to manage the use of English with a view to achieving effective and successful communication with one another (Lee, 2003). As a result, grammar assists people to construct meaningful and clear expressions. Ultimately, students are deprived of the opportunity to see the relationship existing between form, meaning and actual usage, and students are hardly stimulated to learn. Grammar learning is not a simple linear process in which students are asked to manage and memorise one form after another. According to Scrivener (2003), "grammar is not just a dry list of facts and rules. It is in our heads and it is a living resource that gives us the ability to communicate our ideas and feelings and to understand what other people say or write to us." Therefore, English grammar should be learnt as a whole system instead of a discrete way.

Well-planned teaching strategies and interesting input employed in classrooms can

6

accelerate students' learning process. Input refers "to the language texts presented to students, who are expected to learn how the language is used from the input" (Lee, 2003, p.218). Therefore, the input should be attractive enough to learn and thus students can use it outside classrooms. It is believed that teachers need to sustain students' interest in learning grammar by using other stimulating and innovative teaching methods including the employment of authentic materials, personalizing teaching materials, integrating language games and songs (Lee, 2003; Paul, 1996).

2.2 Pedagogical strategies of teaching grammar

In Hong Kong traditional classroom, the input mainly comes from textbooks which typically lack the connection with the real world. Therefore, authentic teaching materials, providing genuine functions of grammar, should be applied in teaching process to supplement the contents of textbooks which are artificially written and not updated enough to stimulate students' motivation (Lee, 2003). Since grammar should not be treated as an isolated and singular knowledge, teaching grammar with authentic materials is prominent for students to realise the relationship among form, meaning and usage existing in grammar system as well as how it is able to be applied in a pragmatic situation (Lee, 2003). Successful communication in the real world boosts students' confidence and interest in learning English substantially. Lock (1996) also agrees that "learners need to be informed of grammar descriptions which reflect authentic language and shown how to make and exchange meanings in context through the choice of the appropriate grammar systems" (p.276). In other words, authentic materials provide students with the "genuineness of time, location, and people" (Lock, 1996, p.276). They can facilitate students' attainment of the actual functions of various grammar forms in the authentic world. Hall (1995) also added that people can communicate fluently in their second language through the process of

7

practising their second language "in situations where they have to use the language for some real communicative purposes" (P.9). Therefore, these materials ensure students obtain adequate opportunities to practise the actual use and application of grammar in the real world. Teachers can also explore more heated topics and current issues in society and apply them in the classroom. Through this strategy, students are able to explore and internalize the language form, meaning and usage of target grammar items, through practice, and apply them in appropriate communicative contexts. In addition, personalizing teaching materials is also one of the pedagogical strategies to arouse students' motivation effectively. This strategy is used to correlate the teaching materials and the students' personal lives (Lee, 2003). Therefore, students can be more familiarise with the learning materials. A good use of students' personal experiences, cultural background, opinions and feelings can stimulate students in their learning process. Higher level of motivation and interest are likely to result when students are asked about questions related to their personal things.

Additionally, language games are effective stimuli possessing a considerable pedagogical value in improving and raising students' motivation to learn. Rather than the memorisation of individual language forms, games provide meaningful and purposeful opportunities for students to learn and apply grammar in an effective communication context. Students can have an amazing ability to absorb language through games, especially young second language learners. Lee (2006) also mentions that language games consisting of the elements such as challenge, meaningfulness, amusement and surprise are applied in the process of teaching grammar, in which students can absorb and receive grammar knowledge efficiently through playing games and they would be highly motivated to learn. A stress-free and relaxed atmosphere constructed by language games can highly motivate students to learn grammar effectively. Wierus & Wierus (1994) also support that a relaxing atmosphere is "intensified and energized by using games, creating cooperation among learners and

8

presenting an atmosphere of fun, students remember things faster and better" (p. 218). Therefore, using games can construct a relaxing atmosphere in which students not only learn better but also increase their motivation, rapport, cooperation and social interaction. By the employment of games in lessons, students can be more active, autonomous, and energetic. Ample opportunities should be offered to students for gaining fun from the English learning process, becoming familiar with the language form and using it in a purposeful and meaningful way.

Songs can also be regarded as one of the authentic, memorable and motivating inputs. Paul (1996) agrees that the idea of teaching language by integrating songs into the process can highlight the target grammar items for students and they can gain fun simultaneously within a stress-free classroom environment. Thereby, playing songs in the classroom should not be merely considered as a relaxing enjoyment. Genuine study process can also exist in the lesson with the application of songs. Playing songs can provide students with a chance to learn the practical usage of grammar and the meaning in a relaxing and enjoyable way. Therefore, when students are provided with interesting activities, they will have motivation and confidence to use the target language with creativity and flexibility in the pressure-free learning environment.

2.3 Challenges of integrating these pedagogical strategies in classrooms

However, some educationists lack confidence in the effectiveness of these pedagogical strategies and students' readiness for these innovative grammar instructions. Murphey (1992) identifies that there are some concerns expressed by teachers about employing songs and problems they have encountered while integrating songs into English lessons. Some contemporary songs with poor vocabulary, slang and inappropriate grammar set an improper

9

example to students. Additionally, teachers need to choose the suitable songs corresponding to students' level. Lems (1996) adds that "songs for students should contain manageable load of vocabulary, limited total text length and should not be heavily embedded" (p.2). Therefore, teachers need to spend extra time on searching for the good ones containing rich vocabulary, appropriate grammar and meaningful messages, and most importantly those songs need to be suitable for students' English level. Regarding students' preference, teachers' choice of songs may not cater for every student's desire. It is, therefore, a real challenge for teachers to choose a song which students enjoy and prefer. Moreover, some older students may even perceive songs as a time-wasting and meaningless activity. They prefer learning from formal activities. When applying songs in classrooms, teachers need to be enthusiastic about the songs themselves with a view to passing on their enthusiasm and passion to students. Sometimes, students may not take songs as a serious learning process and thus they may lose control easily and create discipline problems. As a result, teachers are required to explain the aims of the song-based activities for familiarising students with the learning objectives and purposes before starting the activities. In other words, teachers' workloads are further overwhelmed.

With regard to the use of games in the classrooms, Pathan and Aldersi (2014) mention that although applying games is an effective teaching strategy, it possesses certain weaknesses when it is put into actual practice. Designing and choosing the suitable games for the lesson objectives would be more time-consuming than formulating a traditional structural grammar lesson. Extra workloads would be resulted in planning lessons. Therefore, due to the heavy workloads, some teachers prevent using games in the lessons. Also, since games involve a lot of relaxing and informal interaction between students and teachers, they may regard playing games as "unproductive busywork" (Pathan and Aldersi, 2014, p.217). Furthermore, time is limited and tight for every lesson. There may not have enough time to

hold a game in such a short lesson.

Quality is another prominent concern of the application of these innovative pedagogical strategies (Harmer, 2001). Teachers are normally required to design and produced some tailor-made materials for supporting their teaching and students' learning. However, compared with the materials provided by publishers, the degree of quality and the standard of design of different teacher-made materials may vary. Quality materials require teachers' considerable time to construct. If the teaching materials are poorly designed and chosen, contain errors, lack accuracy and durability, students' learning may be affected. Harmer (2001) added that "If the alternative is a collection of scruffy photocopies, give me a well-produced course book any time" (P.7).

2.4   Grammar Teaching in Hong Kong context

In Hong Kong classrooms with Chinese cultural customs, it was believed that traditional and structural teaching approaches were deeply rooted in Hong Kong teaching context in which students used to resort to a superficial approach such as sheer memorization and repetition of the grammar forms and rules without fully comprehending their real meaning and function (Biggs, 1996). Lee (2003) also mentions that Hong Kong students mainly learn English grammar through structural approach focusing on one particular grammar structure with the employment of repetitive drills and single isolated sentence exercises without paying attention to its communicative purpose. That traditional "chalk and talk" method is undoubtedly frustrating and boring, which merely presents students with mechanical drills and decontextualized words and sentences. Therefore, English teaching has been criticized for the lack of innovative pedagogical strategies for teaching grammar. However, since 1980s, there has been a paradigm shift in English grammar teaching methods from grammar-translation method and the audio-lingual method

to communicative approach and task-based learning. In other words, grammar learning has shifted to become "a process of natural growth of language ability rather than doing isolated drills of language" (Lu & Ng, 2013, p.289). Under the framework of the Central Curriculum Guide (2004), it further advocates that students should internalize grammar items by applying them repeatedly in different contexts, so that students can use the language form in a purposeful and meaningful way. As a result, schools in Hong Kong are encouraged to employ task-based approach to provide authentic and contextualized tasks in which "grammar can be shown as a means to convey meaning or achieve an outcome, rather than a set of items and rules" (CDC, 2004, p.160). However, some principles of communicative approach may run counter to the reality of Hong Kong when it is put into actual practice. The mismatch between this strategy and the Hong Kong classroom context may lead to the decline of the students' English proficiency (Lu & Ng, 2013). The learning process under communicative approach resembles the process of babies acquiring their first language through ample exposure. In other words, considerable time is required to develop their language skills naturally and indispensably in daily life. However, limited time is allocated for students to learn the target language in Hong Kong classroom. Explicit and concise explanation of linguistic features or grammar rules is still needed to help students get a quick grasp of the required knowledge before practising grammar items for communicative purposes under an authentic situation. Additionally, the Hong Kong education system inclines to exam orientation in which students' ability of producing accurate English is utmost important and sometime drillings still exist in Hong Kong classrooms. Therefore, explicit clarification is provided by teachers at appropriate stages to improve the grammatical accuracy of students (Lu & Ng, 2013).

As a result, the traditional teaching approach is not yet totally superseded by communicative approach and task-based learning in Hong Kong. In reality, the grammar

12

teaching in Hong Kong tends to include both the use of innovative strategies and the complementation of the traditional teaching method.

There are different pedagogical strategies of teaching English grammar, which carry both strengths and weaknesses. They are believed to benefit students in acquiring grammar form, meaning and usage in an authentic, motivating and effective way. However, there are also many concerns from teachers when applying these certain strategies in a pragmatic classroom context. Therefore, this research is carried out to investigate teachers' perspective on the employment of these four pedagogical strategies regarding their appropriateness, feasibility and effectiveness in a primary classroom context.

III. Methodology

3.1 Choosing Qualitative Research

This study was conducted with a qualitative approach for obtaining an in-depth understanding of the in-service English teachers' perception on grammar teaching in Hong Kong classrooms. Semi-structured interview is chosen as the prominent method to collect detailed and comprehensive information about teachers' perspective on teaching grammar with the use of the four proposed pedagogical strategies:

i.   Authentic materials

ii.   Personalised materials

iii. Language games

iv.   Songs

The interview contained open-ended items that invited teachers to describe and commented on these grammar strategies in detail as well as shared their past teaching experience. It also

13

allowed the interviewer to ask follow-up questions.

3.2 Participants

The participants of this study are 7 in-service teachers teaching English to students of different levels from primary 1 to primary 6 in a subsidy primary school in Hong Kong. One of them is responsible for teaching students with special education needs. They offered different opinions about classroom instructional planning according to different students' level and learning diversity. Most students' English learning ability is low in this school. A lot of amendments are made to adjust the school-based curriculum in order to cater for students' diversity by means of varying the teaching, learning and assessment strategies to scaffold their students for achieving the learning objectives.

Table 3-1 Background of 7 in-service English teachers

Participants (pseudonyms)	Sex	Teaching experience (Years)	Class teaching
Catherine	F	> 10	P.1
Flora	F	17	P.2
Christy	F	4	P.3
Brenda	F	3	P.4
David	M	> 20	P.5
Bella	F	> 20	P.6
Jennifer	F	> 10	*IRTP

* Intensive Remedial Teaching Programme

3.3   Data collection

In the interviews, two major categories of interview questions were designed to elicit teachers' point of views for satisfying two prominent objectives. Firstly, six questions aimed at eliciting teachers' responses on teaching experience of applying these four pedagogical strategies and their actual practices regarding the grammar teaching in a normal classroom. Secondly, there was one interview question for collecting factors concerning the adaption of these four strategies in a classroom (see sample interview questions in Appendix 1). This list of interview questions was used to allow the interviewer to follow the flow of conversation and facilitate the data analysis.

Seven local teachers teaching English as second language in that primary school were the participants of the research. These seven English teachers in the primary school have been interviewed with two major questions about their opinions about applying authentic and personalised materials, language games and songs as pedagogical strategies to teach grammar and the reasons for applying or not applying them. The interviews also intended to find out what factors affecting teachers to choose an appropriate pedagogical strategy to teach grammar effectively in class. Each interview lasted for about 30 minutes to an hour. The collected data is used for examining the appropriateness, feasibility and effectiveness of these strategies applied in a Hong Kong primary school context. All the names of teachers provided in this study are pseudonyms.

3.4   Data analysis

After the interviews, the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and translated into English for analysis. In the process of translation and transcription, the interview data was

slightly modified to improve the textual coherence and grammatical accuracy for facilitating the analysis. Coding approach was primarily applied to categorise and codify the interview transcripts through Burnard's analytical stages (1991). In stage one, some distinct concepts or themes were distinguished and extracted from the transcripts by jotting down notes in the margins for categorizing. In stage two, after the initial coding process, a list of various codes were identified and generated across the data. Immersion in the data by reading through the transcript with notes was carried out to refocus on the analysis for sorting different codes into potential themes. Some relevant codes sharing the similar meanings were collated and generated in a new list of categories as subheadings:

i.   Encouraging students' independent learning

ii.   Highly related to students' past experience and their living environment

iii.   Catering for students' individual needs

iv.   Arousing students' interest and interaction

v.   Low students' learning ability

vi.   Time consuming

vii.   Heavy workloads

viii. Understanding students' ability

ix.   Students' motivation

x.   The school curriculum and the context

xi.   Teachers' personal confidence and competence

xii.   Other factors

In stage three, the transcript was read alongside the new list of categories for ensuring the categories work in relation to the coded extracted. These themes were further classified and grouped into three major categories: effectiveness, constraints and factors impacting application of these four pedagogical strategies. Data was gathered under these individual themes to answer the research questions. The next section presents findings about teachers'

perception on the adoption and application of the four pedagogical strategies in a real primary setting; and the factors which affect teachers' decision on selecting suitable strategies to teach grammar.

IV. <u>Findings</u>

After interviewing seven in-service English teachers, task-based approach is the prominent feature of English language teaching in that primary school. Due to the internal examinations for the purpose of secondary school places allocation, teachers teaching senior classes seldom incorporate games and songs in English lessons because of the tight lesson time, but they incline to apply personalized and authentic materials more to motivate students. Teachers teaching junior primary students prefer employing language games and songs in classes to create a pressure-free learning environment and they sometimes rely on the teaching materials provided by the English textbook publisher. Therefore, these four grammar teaching methods are not equally adopted in that school. The findings in relation to the effectiveness, constraints and factors of the application of these four pedagogical strategies are presented and discussed in this section.

4.1 Effectiveness of the application of these pedagogical strategies

The interview data reflects that the overall opinions on the effectiveness, appropriateness and feasibility of these four pedagogical strategies used in the classrooms are positive although the teachers are facing certain of constraints. They all believe that these pedagogical strategies can successfully and effectively arouse students' motivation, increase their enthusiasm for and confident of learning English. The most important thing is that students are encouraged to learn English independently. In response to the evaluation of

17

the effectiveness of these four pedagogical strategies when adopting them in the classrooms, teachers mainly think that these strategies can (A) enhance students' independent learning, (B) connect with students' past experience and their living environment, (C) cater for students' individual needs and (D) arouse their interest in learning English grammar.

A. Encouraging students' independent learning

Students are encouraged to observe their surrounding environment. It is easy for them to discover some learning materials and opportunities by themselves in their familiar environment. With such limited lesson time provided, it is impossible for teachers to teach students all language knowledge. Therefore, it is essential that pedagogical materials should contain the element which can encourage and motivate students to learn a new language item by themselves. Students, in turns, possess advantages of language learning opportunities outside the classroom. Regarding to this, Flora made the following comment:

"Students are enthusiastic about discovering more examples and similar materials they can found in their daily life. For example, they are excited after they have successfully noticed the target grammar structures they have learnt in the classroom on instant noodles' packages or leaflets. It seems that I've acted like a model showing them how they can learn independently by observing their living environment. Also, they can easily look for their favourite English songs on YouTube to learn more extra grammar items outside the classroom. This can greatly cultivate their intrinsic motivation to learn more English."

From her experience sharing, it can be seen that it is significant to provide students with the confidence and passion to persist in their attempts to seek for more learning

18

opportunities by themselves. They can bear the grammar forms and usages in mind easily through the self-discovery process.

B.   Connecting with students' past experience and their living environment

With the integration of students' backgrounds, cultures and past experiences into their learning materials can strengthen the connection between their formal learning in the classroom and their daily living environment. In other words, what they have learnt becomes more pragmatic and practical. Students can practise the genuine functions of grammar. Personalised materials embed a *"personal touch"* to teaching by merging students' personal experiences. By asking her past teaching experience of applying personalised materials, Brenda recounted:

"We have taken students' pictures and then posted them on their worksheets, PowerPoint slides and booklets for demonstration and teaching. For example, last time, when I taught students action verbs such as RUN, JUMP, SWIM and so on, I invited some students to perform those certain actions and took them pictures for demonstration in the class. These personalized materials are familiar to students and they are interested to learn more since they can see their classmates' photos and even their own pictures on the learning materials. They can even be motivated to learn faster than expected. Besides, we have also asked students to produce an individual booklet by writing down their personal profile and recording their daily practice. Take P.3 classes as an example. They were learning the topic of Food Diary. Students were required to check what they had eaten at lunch for 3 days. They needed to jot down what ingredients were used in their lunch box, whether they like their lunch box or not and what suggestions can be made to have a health lunch box. They produce their

19

personal product which is different from one another."

Simultaneously, with the provision of the up-to-date and highly familiar topics in the personalised and authentic materials, students' learning interest can be provoked while the textbooks are normally artificially written and not up-dated enough. Flora mentioned that:

"I taught P.5 students the topic of pollution by giving them a real situation that their own school was facing some serious pollution problems since there was a construction site nearby. It would easily arouse their involvement and personal feeling as it was greatly related to their real life experience." She continued to add that "I have also used McDonald leaflet to teach comparison, package of instant noodles to teach imperative sentences and theme parks' flyers to teach relative clause. I fetch whatever it is useful and suitable for the topic."

Their comments reflect that students can be more capable of choosing the appropriate grammar forms and applying them in the real situation with the use of authentic materials while personalized materials make the distance between the use of grammar and students' lives closer and closer. Therefore, teachers can develop materials that incorporate elements of the students' learning background and culture in the teaching of grammar. Students can attain the knowledge faster.

C. Catering for students' individual needs

With the use of these four strategies, teachers expressed that they can have more opportunities to formulate teaching materials and select activities at exactly the right level of particular students possessing various aptitude and abilities, and ensure appropriate

20

challenges for more-able students and suitable support for less-able students. By taking more control over materials production, teachers can choose and design the most appropriate materials for teaching students English grammar. With the provision of suitable learning materials, a positive classroom climate can be established to facilitate effective learning process in the classroom allowing students to attain greater learning achievement. Catering for the diversity of students and tapping into the interests are likely to increase students' motivation and engagement in learning.

D. Arousing students' interest and promoting interactions

All teachers believed that songs are effective means to arouse students' interest towards learning English grammar. Songs can be used to teach students the vocabulary of days, months and the grammar items of prepositions and action verbs. Christy thought that:

"Songs are comparatively useful for junior students. Although some junior kids may not understand the meaning of the words, when they grow older, they will realize the meanings of the words. If students can sing properly, singing songs can help them learn better. Sometimes, there are some mnemonic phrases in songs. Students can internalize the language and be able to apply it in real situation easily."

Therefore, it accelerates the learning process and students can gain fun in the class.

Additionally, with the provision of a real situation in which students are required to interact and communicate with each other, they are capable of applying the target grammar items outside the classroom. Language games need to match with students' learning topic and themes. Nearly all interviewees expressed that a board game called snake game are

21

normally chosen and played in the classroom when they teach some vocabulary and grammatical items. This game aims at motivating students to use the target language items and have more chances to practise the use of grammatical form and usage through communicating with each other. This game is easily carried out in classrooms and it can successfully create a relaxing learning atmosphere.

4.2 Constraints of using these strategies

Across the seven cases, there are some common perceptions of the constraints shared among the seven teachers: lack of sufficient English competence, huge commitment of time and heavy workloads. It reflects that there are some limitations existing in Hong Kong context when applying these strategies.

A. Lack of sufficient English competence

These four pedagogical strategies are regarded to be beneficial to students' learning. However, due to their weak English level, explicit clarification of the grammar rules is necessary. David shared that:

"The learning aptitude and ability of my students are comparatively low. They are accustomed to be told the grammar forms and usages explicitly and directly. Once I played a folk song to my P.5 students and asked them to fill in the missing words in the lyric. However, just few of them could do that. Most of them just simply wait for my answers."

He continued:

"Normally, they would use Cantonese instead of English while they are playing an English game in the classroom. Their vocabulary bank is too limited to express themselves clearly. Besides, their confidence of speaking and using English is very low."

Therefore, the existence of their first language unavoidably plays a certain role to interfere the process of their second language acquisition. The purpose of encouraging students to use English to achieve the communicative purposes is lost. They refuse to use English proactively.

B. Huge commitment of time

However, most teachers spend considerable time on thinking, finding, selecting, evaluating, adopting and making materials for teaching English grammar. The whole process from generating an idea to producing a product is time consuming. Due to the long preparation time, some teachers would fall back on the textbooks providing rich teaching resources such as presentation PowerPoint, supplementary exercises, audio-visual technology materials and so on. Catherine said:

"There is limited time for me to prepare teaching materials. Most of my time is used for marking students' assignments and dealing with administrative work."

Another English teacher, David, also agreed that:

"It really takes time to search for materials. For example, if I search for a song, I need to look for one which is suitable for my students' level. That means the length of lyrics

23

needs to be limited and the load of vocabulary should be manageable. In addition, it is hard to apply songs in each topic since they need to match with the target grammar items. Therefore, it takes me long to look for a song which is appropriate for students' ability, matches the learning objectives and the most important is this song is in line with their preference. For senior students, I will choose some folk songs while pick some nursery songs for junior students."

C.   Heavy workloads

It seems that teachers also act as a designer and artist simultaneously to produce different artworks for teaching. Therefore, possessing creativity is necessary. Teachers also need to search for more resources for producing a wide variety of teaching materials. Jennifer mentioned that:

"Producing various teaching materials and designing more activities can effectively arouse students' interest. If the teacher keeps applying the same materials and carrying out the same activities in the classrooms, students may easily get bored. However, it greatly increases our workloads. Besides, some following up exercises are required after playing games or songs. Students need to be told what they can learn from the game or song explicitly and how they can learn independently."

In reality, under the constraints of time and heavy workloads, most teachers undertake materials design to modify, adapt or supplement a textbook, rather than starting from scratch, and this is probably the most realistic option for most teachers.

4.3　Factors affecting the use of these strategies to teach grammar

These four grammar teaching methods are not equally adopted in that school. Different teachers possess different preference and inclination. There are several factors emerging from the interview data that teachers took into account when deciding which strategies to be used in Hong Kong classrooms.

1.　Understanding of students' ability

Understanding students' ability should be taken into account when applying these four pedagogical strategies in the classroom. Students' learning process can be accelerated when the teaching materials are in line with their ability. Teachers need to be sensitive to students' learning diversity and cater for different students' needs. According to most of the interviewees, teachers should also "scaffold those who are lagged behind in the class and arrange the teaching materials which suitable for various students." Therefore, diagnosing students' ability is significant to help teachers choose an effective and comprehensive pedagogical strategy to teach English grammar. For example, Bella suggested that different sets of worksheets need to be designed and produced to cater for students' diversity. If the English level of students is low, Chinese explanation is allowed and simple English words for elaboration and explanation are required.

2.　Students' motivation

Students' motivation is another factor worth considering. According to most of the teachers' comments, teaching grammar to students with great variety can successfully increase students' motivation. In other words, repeating tasks can quickly turn to boredom.

25

However, students appreciate variety and the sense that there is something new to master. Innovative activities and learning materials evoke their sense of excitement from tackling more challenging tasks. Additionally, suiting for students' preference is also significant. For example, David and Brenda shared the same opinion that junior students prefer learning with the use of nursery songs while senior students prefer using folk songs. Depending on different students' personality, some of them may be more self-conscious, they may not want to sing the songs. Therefore, because of their passive attitude, the classroom atmosphere will be affected. As a result, students' preference directly affects their motivation and engagement in the classroom. Obviously, students' learning preference constitutes an influential factor for teachers to formulate their instructional plan.

3.   The school curriculum and the context

Many teachers are bound by the mandated school curriculum defining the content, skills and language items to be taught. Flora shared that a curriculum outlines the teaching goals and learning objectives for teachers to teach and "it is the teachers' responsibility to ensure that the objectives of the school curriculum should be fulfilled on schedule when designing lessons". Therefore, teachers, sometimes, are confined by the fixed and rigid school curriculum which provides limited room of flexibility to teachers to formulate their own teaching strategies. Ultimately, the school curriculum will significantly impact on decisions about different teaching strategies.

4.   Teachers' personal confidence and competence

Teachers' personal confidence and competence influenced by their teaching experience and personal style will directly determine an individual teacher's willingness to embark

26

upon applying these teaching strategies. Winnie shared that:

"I know playing songs is a lively way to teach grammar items. However, I am not good at singing songs. Therefore, I totally lack confidence to teach junior students English with nursery songs. It is a challenge for me."

Therefore, teachers normally lack confidence when teaching something they are weak in. Their willingness on the adaption of these strategies will be affected by their teaching style which is formed according to their teaching experience and personal style. With the employment of these innovative strategies, a certain level of creativity and artistic skills are required when designing teaching materials and adapting them in classrooms. As a result, if teachers possess more experience on applying these strategies, they will be more confident of teaching grammar in these innovative ways. Teachers' grammar instructional decisions are prominently shaped by their teaching experience and personal style.

5.   Other factors

Maintaining discipline is also a main factor. Tiffany shared that:

"Sometimes, students may not take songs as a serious learning process and thus they may lose control easily and create discipline problems. Especially for junior students, they get really excited when they are playing games and listening to songs. Some of them even argue with their classmates while they are playing the games. Therefore, chaos is easily created."

She continued to suggest that teachers are required to explain the aims of the

song-based activities for familiarising students with the learning objectives and purposes before starting the activities in order to better manage the class discipline. Moreover, the provision of resources and facilities in school also affects the application of these strategies. Most of the teachers thought that they must be realistic about what they can achieve in terms of materials design and production within the limitation of available resources and facilities. Access to resources will directly impact on decisions on designing teaching strategies.

V. Discussion

This study has presented a case study of a local government-subsidy primary school. It, therefore, could reflect the situation of schools possessing similar background and context in Hong Kong. The result presents that teachers are likely to encounter several constraints which mainly come from students' ability, overwhelming workloads and the scarce commodity of time. However, the attitude towards the adaption of the four pedagogical strategies is still positive. There are overtly some differences existing in Hong Kong context when these four teaching methods are put into actual practice. Many educators (Lee, 2003; Paul, 1996; Lock, 1996, et al.) believe that the four innovative teaching methods including authentic and personalized materials, language games and songs can successfully provide students with real communicative purposes for applying grammar in a holistic system in which its linkage between form, usage and function can be forged. However, a pedagogical strategy is chosen for use should not be attributed to its professional or theoretical popularity. Instead, it should be applied to suit for the realities of particular environment where students can learn efficiently and the uniqueness of students' learning styles. As a result, under the particular context in Hong Kong, the results show that English teachers would prefer using explicit instruction occasionally due to students' low English proficiency and ability. These four pedagogical strategies require students to possess a certain level of English proficiency

28

and vocabulary range to express themselves under real situations. Since some weak students lacking vocabulary range and life experience hardly express themselves clearly, they barely understand the purposes and meanings of the tasks. As a result, the meaning of encouraging students to use English to achieve the communicative purposes is lost. Therefore, Hong Kong teachers would sometimes switch back to employ the explicit form-focused instruction for clarification and explanation. Obviously, this traditional and structural teaching approach dose serves its purpose in Hong Kong primary classrooms. A cumulative research also exemplified that formal form-focused instruction does play a role to raise learners' awareness towards the target features. It further "facilities intake" (Larsen-Freeman, 1995, p.136) and "builds linguistic competence" (Rutherford, 1987, p.24-27) since the formal form-focused instruction can explicitly draws students' attention on salient grammatical mistakes. However, over reliance on it may lead to monotony and thus students are learning grammar in a discrete way. Therefore, Curriculum Development Council suggests (2004) that a balanced grammar teaching lesson is needed, in which innovative strategies are applied with the complementation of the form-focused instruction. Teachers can provide support by pointing out grammar rules explicitly at appropriate stages of learning to facilitate students' acquisition.

VI. Conclusion

This article has reported seven in-service English teachers' interviews in which the underlying perception of in-service English teachers about the appropriateness, feasibility and effectiveness of the four pedagogical strategies including authentic and personalised materials, language games and songs were identified and analysed. Though the study reports a limited sample of English teachers in Hong Kong, its findings can enrich our understanding of the positive and negative perception of English teachers towards the

29

application of these strategies in pragmatic primary classroom situation as well as the factors which teachers would consider when these strategies are put into actual practice. According to teachers' responses, all these four strategies possess more advantages than their drawbacks. Teachers thought that these strategies can commonly encourage students' independent learning; they are highly related to students' past experience and their living environment; cater for students' individual needs and effectively arouse students' interest and interaction. However, with the use of these strategies, heavy workloads are imposed on teachers' shoulders and they are considerably time-consuming. Teachers need to consider students' ability, their motivation, the curriculum and the context and teachers' personal confidence and competence beforehand when they apply these strategies.

In conclusion, through the result of this study, it is hoped that teachers can gain a clear picture of the real situation of grammar teaching in Hong Kong. They need to strike a balance between the use of innovative strategies and the complementation of the explicit form-focused instruction to cater for students with weak ability and assist students to get through this exam-oriented education system. Therefore, teachers need to apply innovative strategies simultaneously with the form-focused instruction to provide support by pointing out grammar rules explicitly at appropriate stages of learning for facilitating students' language acquisition.

References

Burnard P. (1991). A method of analysing interview transcripts in qualitative research. *Nurse Education Today, 11* (6), 461–466.

Biggs, J. B.(1996). Western misconceptions of the Confucius-heritage learning culture. In D. Watkins. & J. B. Biggs (Eds.), *The Chinese learner: Cultural, psychological and contextual influences* (pp. 45- 67). Hong Kong: The University of Hong Kong, Comparative Education Research Center.

Curriculum Development Council syllabus of English Language. (1999). *Place of grammar teaching in task-based learning*. Hong Kong: Curriculum Development Council.

Curriculum Development Council. (2004). *English language education: Key learning area curriculum guide.* Hong Kong: Curriculum Development Council.

Dornyei, Z., Schmidt, R.& Drnyei, Z. (2002*). Motivation and second language acquisition.* The U.S.A: University of Hawaii

Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ezzi, N. A. A. (2012). Yemeni teachers' beliefs of grammar teaching and classroom practices. *English Language Teaching, 5,* (8), 170-184.

Giles, H., Byrne, J. L. (1982). An intergroup approach to second language acquisition. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, (3), 17-40.

Gardner, R. C. (1985). *Social Psychology and Language Learning: The Role of Attitudes and Motivation.* London: Ontario: Edward Arnold.

Gardner, R. C.; Lambert, W. E. (1972). *Attitudes and Motivation in Second Language Learning.* Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.

Hyman, P. (2005). *1 out of 10: From downing street vision to classroom reality*. London: Vintage.

Harmer, J. (2001). Coursebooks. A human, cultural and linguistic disaster? *MET, 8* (4), 5-10.

Hall, D. (1995). Material production: Theory and practice. In A. C. Hidalgo , D. Hall & G. M. Jacobs (Eds.), *Getting started: Materials writers on materials writing* (pp. 8-14). Singapore: SEAMO Regional Language Centre.

Howard, J., & Major, J. (2004). Guidelines for designing effective English language teaching materials. *The TESOLANZ Journal*, *12,* 101-109.

Murphey, T. (1992). *Music & Song.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lee, J. F. K. (2003). Teaching and testing grammar in context. In G. Poedjosoedarmo (Ed.), *Teaching and assessing language proficiency*. Anthology Series 45, pp.215-229. Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.

Lee, J. F. K. (2006). Playing with words: Using grammar games in the classroom. *Modern English Teacher*, *15* (2), 27-36.

Lock, G. (1996). *Functional English grammar: An introduction for second language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lems, K. (1996). *For a Song: Music across the ESL Curriculum.* Chicago: Annual Meeting of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages

Lu, D., & Ng, J. Y. (2013). The Pedagogical Maze: Retrospection on CLT in Hong Kong. *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, *3*(4), 289-294.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (1995). On the teaching and learning of grammar: challenging the myths. In F. R. Eckman, D. Highland, P. W. Lee, J. Mileham & R. R. Weber (Eds.), *Second language acquisition theory and pedagogy* (pp. 131-150). Mahway, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Nunan, D. (1988). Principles for designing language teaching materials. *Guidelines, 10*(2), 1-24.

Paul, D. (1996). *Songs and games for children.* Oxford: Macmillan Heinemann.

Pathan, M. M. & Aldersi, Z. E. M. (2014). Using Games in Primary Schools for Effective Grammar Teaching: a Case Study from Sebha. International Journal of English *Language & Translation Studies*, *2*(2), 211-227. Retrieved from http://www.eltsjournal.org.

Rutherford, W. (1987). *Second language grammar learning and teaching.* London:

Longman.

Scrivener, J. (2003). *Teaching Grammar.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wierus, B., & Wierus, M. (1994). *Games in learner based teaching.* Oxford: Oxford

University Press.

Appendix 1 — Interview questions

Interview on Primary Teachers' Perspective on Pedagogical Strategies of English Grammar

Teaching in Hong Kong Classrooms

Interview questions:

1. Do you have any experience in applying the following pedagogical strategies to teach

    English grammar in your lessons?

    - Authentic materials

    - Personalised materials

    - Language games

    - Songs

2. What do these pedagogical strategies mean to you?

3. Why do you adopt or not adopt these strategies?

4. Do you think that these strategies are effective enough to motivate students to learn

    English grammar?

5. Are they appropriate for all students with different levels?

6. What factors do you consider when you adopt these strategies in your lessons?

7. Have you encountered any difficulties before when you applied these strategies in your

    lessons?