Grammar Teaching Challenges and Strategies for Refugees

Stephanie M. Beckerman

University of Missouri-Kansas City
Overview: Background

Teaching students English as a second language is a complex task involving a myriad of factors. Having taught refugees, who are considered a specialized subset of ESL learners, I knew there were additional considerations to be contemplated. Because of my experience, I was intrigued at the notion of researching the latest findings of refugee pedagogy. The findings are fascinating. My research led me on an international journey from refugee life and their teachers to their schools and classrooms. English grammar instruction and its implications for refugees are heavily interconnected with these topics. The challenges facing refugees and those who teach them grammar are many, but best-practices and their implementation could point to successful learning.

In 2008, the number of refugees worldwide was estimated to be 20 million, with another 12 million listed as stateless by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Woods, 2009, p. 2). These refugees from multiple continents and countries flee their homeland from fear of persecution due to race, religion, political association, and other causes. Although most stay within their country’s region, thousands of refugees are accepted into native English-speaking countries annually—many not speaking the language. My research focused on Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. For the growing number of refugees entering these countries, the challenges to learn the English language and grammar are enormous, but attainable nonetheless.

Literature Review: Challenges for Students

Most refugees have suffered significant trauma in their countries, during migration to other regions, and in refugee camps and native English-speaking nations. This trauma poses a
significant barrier to English grammar learning. Trauma includes post traumatic stress disorder and other psychological disorders often associated with witnessing kidnapping, torture, and homicides of family members and friends. When forced to flee their homes, refugees often live day-to-day in a constant state of fear, not knowing where they will go. If they make it to a refugee camp, uncertainty remains. Will they be able to go back home? Are they able to find all their family members? Multiple relocations from region to region and camp to camp are typical, and usually continue for years. This trauma usually persists if a refugee is accepted into a native English-speaking country, where the asylum seekers often face culture shock, discrimination, and exploitation.

All of these psychological factors have been shown to cause challenges for refugee students when learning English grammar. Disorganized and agitated behavior, depression, low self-esteem and motivation, poor concentration, memory problems, low attendance, and trouble with interpersonal relationships are just some of the consequences that can have a negative impact on their learning. In fact, school performance seems to be most affected in subjects that require higher levels of concentration, such as grammar (Hart, 2009, pp. 358-359).

There are multiple pathways to assist ESL teachers in teaching grammar to refugees who have suffered from trauma. Some characteristics that decrease the risk of adverse psychological responses to trauma include strong ties to cultural or religious belief systems, remembering good things about life in their home country, having high self-esteem, and feeling able to ask for help when things go wrong. Teachers building grammar lessons around these characteristics could aid in lessoning trauma risks and increasing the probability of student success. It is also important to note some refugees cope with adversity and do well in school without any psychological effects (Hart, 2009, pp. 355-356), and some scholars even criticized an
overemphasis on trauma experiences in refugees impeding a genuine analysis of their backgrounds and culture (Taylor & Sidhu, 2011, pp. 5-6).

The constant relocation lifestyle of refugees prior to permanent settlement in native English-speaking nations, along with the absence of education is a dominant finding in my research. Interruption in education and not having any education contribute to pre-literacy or significant low-literacy levels and other academic challenges when learning English grammar. Since the concept of Western education and expectations are foreign to them, many refugee students are placed in foundation classes, which teach students how to learn. Skills such as pencil and book holding, which would be assumed to have been learnt by a person in elementary school, have to be taught sometimes to students of high school age and older (Dooley, 2009, p. 7). Some research showed the failures of placing these students with no formal education into an ESL classroom without foundation classes (Roxas, 2011, p. 519). These foundation classes are critical in narrowing the gap between differences in curriculum, literacy practices, and technology.

Refugees face multiple challenges when learning English grammar in their new country including policy and political hoops, poverty, and employment, housing, and family difficulties. Baynham stated, these life challenges that often interrupt class time could be brought into grammar lessons spontaneously. He explained one circumstance in which a student had to answer the phone during class regarding a doctor’s appointment. When the student returned to the room upset, the teacher took the opportunity to turn the problem into a grammar lesson. The teacher, with the student’s agreement, brought the entire class into the discussion. Syntax was clarified, as well as context and meaning about when the doctor’s office was open and the rules of how to get a prescription in the United Kingdom (Baynham, 2006, pp. 30-31). I agree with
the use of this technique, as it not only solves a problem for the student, but helps the entire class understand the grammar involved in a common life occurrence, as well as builds trust with the teacher.

A portion of the research focused on teachers’ experience, knowledge, and attitudes, and how it all plays a significant role in the grammar teaching of refugees. Primarily, research shows that a holistic approach to teaching grammar to refugees is optimal (Due, Riggs, & Mandara, 2015, p. 5). Knowing the background and unique circumstances of refugees and promoting acceptance and diversity is critical to their success in the classroom. Many ESL teachers who weren’t knowledgeable of their students’ circumstances often misinterpreted their behavior and mislabeled them as lazy, uninterested, and difficult to teach, or they felt unprepared to meet their students’ needs. Teacher frustration was shown to manifest into low expectations for the students, which in turn produced those results (Omerbasic, 2015, p. 472). Furthermore, there were cases of teacher avoidance and open hostility regarding toward refugee ESL students.

Challenges for Teachers

Research also showed instances of teachers with a lack of grammar knowledge. Reeves conducted a study of two ESL teachers who lacked grammar knowledge despite having credentials. He explained, “Linguistic knowledge for teaching in the new sociocultural frame is teachers’ ability to use and teach language in ways that grant learners a full range of expression” (Reeves, 2009, p. 112). I agree it’s absolutely critical for ESL teachers to have grammar knowledge and communicate it to their students. Without it, students will lack a full and meaningful understanding of the English language.
Many teacher challenges were cited as barriers to teaching English grammar to refugees. Teachers mentioned lacking resources such as money to pay for the necessary teaching staff and critical professional training. With increasing numbers of refugees and constant enrollment, growing class size, inappropriate mainstream grade level mixing, and learning consistency were concerns (Taylor & Sidhu, 2011, p. 6). Also political policies had an impact on refugee English grammar learning as well. Changes to transportation assistance, for example, could drastically affect student attendance, which is sometimes dependent on students’ subsidized rides to and from school (Due, Riggs, & Mandara, 2015, p. 7). Consequently, English grammar learning is heavily impacted by schools’ budgets, and refugee education in Western society would benefit if it were a financial priority to its citizens.

**Implications Suggested by Reviewed Literature**

Several teaching implications were suggested encompassing the holistic approach. These implications include teachers making home visits and participating in school and community events, having community and school-based homework clubs, and increasing ESL teacher training with specialized populations such as refugees. The holistic approach, which was shown at times to be adopted not only in classrooms but by entire schools and districts, also included psychologists and links to multiple agencies with supportive services, and also focused on a welcoming atmosphere. As explained by Due, Riggs, and Mandara:

…it is important that refugee and migrant students are not only seen as benefiting the whole school through the resources and diversity they bring with them, but that the whole school also provides benefits to them through their inclusion in the school community
and their ability to shape and change the school environment. (Due, Riggs, & Mandara, 2015, p. 10)

I agree with this holistic approach, however, it seems to be implemented only in economically advantaged schools and districts.

The holistic approach to ESL English grammar teaching also supports placing refugees in mainstream classes and schools, a hotly contested subject in my research. While holistic schools combine their refugee students with that of their mainstream students and incorporate a feeling of inclusion and diversity, they are able to do so with more resources and advantages. These include smaller class sizes and teacher aides to provide more individual attention to students. Also, there are less age and program length restrictions in foundation classes and mainstream classes, so students can learn at their own pace. Other benefits the holistic schools and districts have are teaching training and support programs, financial and community support, and holding foundation classes on the same site as the mainstream classrooms for smoother student transition.

The pedagogical reality for refugees in most schools is in stark contrast to the higher economically advantaged schools and districts incorporating the holistic approach. Often without foundation classes and with limited class space, refugees are continuously enrolled into large, mainstream classes throughout the school year. They are often pre- or low-literate and are placed in grades based on their age. With the impossible task of keeping up with a mainstream curriculum, they are set up to fail. This failure often results in students’ low school attendance or them dropping out of school. There is a 12 to 18-month length limit for students to attend foundation classes, and students must enter the mainstream classes even if they’re not prepared. Age restrictions also exist. Refugees are forced to leave high school after the age of 18, and
must then seek education elsewhere. Many schools and districts incorporating refugee ESL students into their mainstream classrooms lack the resources necessary to properly educate their students. This mainstream integration is therefore problematic when the proper resources are not present.

Despite these challenges, there are some who demand refugee inclusion in mainstream education. Some argue that excluding refugees from mainstream classes is a mistake. They say it isolates and labels them, and they lack receiving a challenging, well-rounded curriculum (Dooley, 2009, p. 9). Moreover, equal access to technology and other resources is a concern as well. It is my belief that with the proper financial resources, training, and community support, integrating refugees into mainstream classes can be successful.

It comes as no surprise that research of English grammar instruction to refugees includes a fair amount of literature on teaching contextually and meaningfully. The need to teach students, as Dooley mentioned (2009), “…conceptually deep and critical tasks while helping them to acquire English and basic literacy skills” (p. 16), instead of lessons that are not relevant or engaging, is for what every teacher should strive. Baynham explained it as bringing the outside world into the classroom (Baynham, 2006, p. 38). Omerbasic and Roxas both focused on teaching English grammar with more cultural context. One stressed the importance of sharing refugee students’ pasts through digital mediums, while the other mentioned for teachers to link themes from students’ backgrounds and to slowly build onto lessons to make current texts palatable (Omerbasic, 2015) (Roxas, 2011).

Other research also focused on specific problems when teaching refugees grammar without context or meaning. The differences in curriculum and literacy practices from refugees’
country of origin versus their new native English-speaking country were a major theme, as well as students grasping difficult learning concepts. Sjolie suggested establishing a solid English grammar foundation through sentence combing. He said teachers must base their grammar lessons off of their students’ needs and provide a solid foundation for constructing sentences (Sjolie, 2006, p. 35). Dooley showed the literacy differences between the U.S. and Sudanese refugees where the native English-speaking lessons were too centered on regimented, decontextualised basic skills training and testing. The socially and culturally unfamiliar teachings failed to engage students, and the results were problematic (Dooley, 2009, pp. 9-10).

I agree contextual and meaningful teaching solutions must be implemented for effective English grammar lessons for refugees. With a large number of refugees having pre- or low-literacy levels, it’s important they be placed in foundation classes based on their educational level and allowed the necessary time to learn Western academic practices and concepts. There, they may work on technical vocabulary and complex grammar as the teacher provides culturally appropriate lessons to which they can relate. As stated by Woods (2009), “…there is a need to balance the provision of basic literacy and language, discipline content, and cultural content along with a space where reciprocal learning of the dominant and marginalized cultures is accessible to all students” (p. 2).

Suggestions for Future Research

Despite having disseminated through large swaths of research, I have many questions that remain regarding teaching ESL to refugees. In this vein, further research is needed in multiple areas. First, I would like to see more research on the holistic approach. Since budget concerns are a major consequence in refugees receiving quality English grammar instruction, are there
instances where holistic ESL education has been successfully implemented in economically challenged schools and districts? I would also like to know more about the links between economies and refugee English grammar success in other countries besides Western civilization. Another area of research interest to me is to explore more about the connection between the psychological adjustment to refugees’ new native English-speaking countries and successful English grammar learning.

Conclusion

The educational challenges that refugees, their teachers, schools, and communities face are staggering. Their high degree of interdependence regarding the successful teaching of English grammar can be concerning also. If there are deficits in one area, it seems the whole house of cards of learning can come crashing to the ground. Despite these challenges, refugees learn English grammar in native English-speaking countries every day. I hope to build on the best-practices I have learned through my research to become a better ESL teacher. As for my refugee students, perhaps it’s their finely honed survival skills that ultimately help them persevere and learn English grammar in their new homeland.
References


