EFL Teachers' Cognitions and Practices in Grammar Teaching: A Qualitative Multiple Case Study from Niger

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Abstract: This study examined EFL teachers' cognitions and practices of grammar teaching in Niger. The purpose of the study was to understand the beliefs held by EFL teachers about grammar teaching and the extent to which they put those beliefs into practice. The study also proposed to understand the contextual factors that affect those beliefs and classroom practices. The study was designed based on a qualitative multiple-case study framework, and four EFL teachers from four different schools constituted the main cases. Data were collected and triangulated through pre-observation interviews, classroom observations, and post-observation interviews. These procedures were implemented in a way the first led to the second, and the latter to the last. Afterward, thematic analysis procedures were used to generate understanding from the data. Findings revealed that most of the teachers consider grammar as an important pillar in teaching English. Most importantly, the study demonstrated the predominance of deductive approaches, mainly through the use of Grammar Translation in almost all the classes observed. It also highlighted compliance and mismatches between teachers' beliefs and the way they teach grammar. Moreover, insights are indicative of multiple factors that affect teachers' beliefs and practices. Those factors include students' low proficiency, negative attitudes toward learning English, large classes, curricular requirements, and teachers' previous learning experiences. These findings confirm the need for teacher education programs and systems to work towards monitoring teachers' beliefs and knowledge in order to ensure compliance with the communicative approaches required by the national curriculum.

Keywords: Teacher Cognition, English Grammar, EFL, ELT

1. Introduction

English language teaching (ELT) constitutes the career of hundreds of thousands of people around the world [1]. This also constitutes an area of research for many scholars. Teaching English successfully requires a lot from the teacher in EFL (English as a foreign language) contexts, as he/she is expected to support learners' academic and professional development [2]. It is also believed that an EFL teacher is supposed to be creative, patient, knowledgeable, and able to develop his/her practical knowledge to succeed in his/her career [3]. Interests in teacher cognition emerged from this and constituted a major area of inquiry in ELT [4]. "The mainstream educational research in the last 25 years has recognized the impact of teacher cognition on teachers' professional lives, and this has generated a substantial body of research" [5]. As such, researchers have tended to pay more attention to EFL teachers' knowledge and beliefs about English language teaching, learning, learners, and the effect of these on teaching and learning [6].

In Niger, the main context of this research, English is a foreign language. Like many other EFL contexts, English grammar seems to be extensively taught in this country in secondary schools. Despite this fact, the quality of learning is questionable in certain ways [7]. What are the reasons behind this? Is this linked to the teaching approaches and methods used by teachers? Is this a consequence of teachers' cognitions of English language teaching? Answers to such questions are necessary but may not be found until extensive studies are conducted. The current study emerged from this questioning and proposed to examine Nigerien EFL teachers' cognitions and practices in grammar teaching.

While there exists a range of empirical research on EFL teacher cognition in other countries, no studies focusing on

such issues could be found in West African contexts and Niger in particular. Library and internet searches were conducted about EFL grammar teaching and teacher cognition in Niger, but no studies could be retrieved, except one [8] that focused on EFL teachers' beliefs and training but did not include aspects of teacher cognition and practice of grammar teaching. Furthermore, most of the existing literature reflects issues relevant to American or Asian contexts. In the attempt to fill this gap, a multiple case study with four EFL teachers from different schools in Niamey (the capital city of Niger) was carried out to build answers to the following questions:

1. What are the cognitions of Nigerien EFL teachers about grammar teaching?
2. What are the characteristics of their grammar teaching?
3. What are the contextual factors that affect their cognitions and practices in grammar teaching?

These questions enabled the researcher to understand the cognitions held by participants in terms of grammar teaching and the way their practices connect to those cognitions. Answers also shed light on the contextual factors that affect, in one way or another, the four teachers' cognition and practices.

2. Conceptions of Teacher Cognition

Teacher cognition is of one the most difficult constructs to define. The mainstream literature is replete with diverse terminologies to explain this phenomenon [9]. Five terms are most commonly used in teacher cognition research. These include *teacher beliefs, cognitions, perceptions, pedagogical beliefs, and thinking* [9]. In other words, some studies simply used the term *teacher belief* in place of *teacher cognition* [10] which is defined as "the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching – what teachers think, know, and believe" [5]. Furthermore, the term cognition is not only a categorization of thinking, knowledge, and beliefs, but also a diversity of operational definitions of conceptions, assumptions, values, principles, decision-making, attitudes, and so on [11].

The most known conceptualizations of teacher cognition are generally attributed to [12] who tended to use the term *teacher knowledge*. The latter includes *content knowledge* which is made of three categories: *subject matter content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge,* and *curricular knowledge. Subject matter content knowledge* is defined as the amount of knowledge per se in the mind of the teacher. In terms of *pedagogical content knowledge*, it is a sort of content knowledge that goes beyond the knowledge of the subject matter; it takes the dimension of the knowledge for teaching the subject matter. It includes an understanding of what makes the learning of specific topics easy or difficult. Concerning *curricular knowledge*, it includes an understanding of the full range of curricula designed for the teaching of particular subjects and topics at a given level, the variety of instructional materials available about those curricula, and the set of characteristics that serve as both indications and contraindications for the use of particular

materials in different circumstances.

For the sake of consistency, this study adopts the conceptualization that defines *teacher cognition* in terms of what teachers think, know, and believe in English language teaching [5]. This conceptualization is tightly connected to a national education conference that took place in the US. Reports from that conference marked the start of a tradition of research into teacher cognition [13]. To understand teaching, it was argued that researchers need to study the psychological processes through which teachers make sense of their work. Teaching was no longer viewed as a simple but thoughtful behavior, and teachers were no longer viewed as mechanical implementers of external prescriptions but as active and thinking decision-makers who process and make sense of diverse information in the course of their work.

3. A Review of Research on Teacher Cognition

Teacher cognition of grammar teaching has recently become a key focus in the field of ELT and teacher education [13-14]. This section presents a review of research conducted in diverse contexts. The review covers *EFL teachers' beliefs about grammar teaching, the relationships between teacher cognitions and practices in grammar instruction,* and *the effects of contextual factors on teacher cognition and practice.*

3.1. Studies on EFL Teachers' Beliefs About Grammar Teaching

There exists an array of studies exploring the beliefs held by EFL teachers about how grammar should be taught. This is generally linked to the emergence of new methods and approaches in the field of ELT. One of such studies was conducted in Ethiopia [15]. It investigated EFL teachers' beliefs about explicit and implicit grammar instruction. It found that most of the EFL teachers believed that implicit grammar teaching was more viable, even though they tended to favor explicit grammar teaching in their classrooms. Furthermore, the analysis indicated that the participants' beliefs about grammar instruction were significantly different based on their teaching experience.

In another study from Argentina [16], the researcher administered a survey to fifty-five (55) EFL teachers about their beliefs on grammar teaching. The statistical analysis showed that most of the teachers favored the teaching of grammar deductively/explicitly. They tended to believe that students would communicate more efficiently when they mastered the grammatical rules. Furthermore, the researchers reported that most of the teachers were in favor of controlled grammar exercises, as they believed this practice counts for fluency. In addition, teachers indicated that most of the time, they make their students create sentences and complete exercises from coursebooks after presenting grammar rules. These findings are similar to [14] whose participants believed grammar to be the basis for communication.

Using a pre-course survey administered to 37 teachers, another study [17] attempted to explain teachers' beliefs about grammar teaching. Based on a statistical analysis, the researcher found that most teachers believed in teaching grammar through both prescriptive/descriptive and communicative approaches. They believed in learning grammar incidentally through intensive reading, context-situated learning, identification of what is correct or incorrect over time, and learning about rules and structures. These findings are in line with another study [18] conducted in a Singaporean context. Based on questionnaires, the study revealed that most of the respondents were willing to adopt various approaches to cater to the different needs of their students, as they believed in a combination of communicative and traditional approaches. Moreover, most of the teachers preferred the inductive approach rather than the deductive approach in terms of teaching new grammatical items.

As it can be observed, the above studies offer a diversity of findings, which mostly depended on their contexts. While deductive/explicit teaching of grammar is believed to be the most appropriate in certain studies, the opposite is reported by others. The next subsection looks into the relationship between those beliefs and what teachers do in their classrooms.

3.2. Relationships Between Teacher Cognition and Classroom Practice

Language teaching can be seen as a process characterized by dynamic interactions between cognition, context, and teacher experience [13]. It is a complex process in which teachers bring their experiences as learners [19]. "Teachers all have the common experiences of school and bring those experiences with them to their careers" [20]. They often have a comfortable set of beliefs about schools and could be unaware of the incongruence in their practices. Research on such issues has, therefore, tended to look into discrepancies between teachers' beliefs about grammar teaching and their classroom practices. In a recent study, the researchers [21] investigated the mismatch between EFL teachers' beliefs of grammar teaching and classroom practices based on a 12-item qualitative questionnaire and classroom observation. They found that most of the teachers believed in communicative language teaching (CLT) as the best method for teaching grammar. Paradoxically, none of them used it in their classrooms. They tended to teach based on grammar translation instead.

In a Pakistani context, another study [22] examined the correlation between teachers' beliefs about teaching grammar and their actual classroom practices. The researcher used classroom observations and interviews to collect data. The study revealed a strong contradiction between the teachers' actual beliefs about teaching grammar and their actual classroom practices. They claimed to teach grammar inductively, but they unknowingly tended to teach it deductively. Furthermore, those teachers demonstrated a lack of knowledge about grammar teaching approaches. Almost all the teachers indicated they were in favor of communicative and functional approaches, but their teaching reflected the structural approach.

Reasons for the above incongruity have been subject to multiple studies. Most of the latter have focused on the influence of contextual realities on teachers' cognition and practice. The next subsection provides a review of exemplary research on this.

3.3. Contextual Influence on Teacher Cognition and Practice

The contextual influence on teacher cognition and practice is also an important aspect to explore. It is believed that "the social, institutional, instructional, and physical settings in which teachers work have a major impact on their cognitions and practice" [13]. It is also argued that contextual factors can constrain what teachers do, especially in the work of novice teachers whose ideals about language teaching may need, at least temporarily, to be put aside while they come to grips with instructional and social realities they face in schools. Evidence of this is showcased by a range of studies. One of these [23] found six factors that deeply influence the transformation of teachers' beliefs regarding grammar instruction. Those factors include students' needs, level of proficiency, attitudes toward the language, learning styles, classroom environment, and teacher's poor development. The researchers concluded that some beliefs held by teachers are detrimental as they cause failure to address students' needs and expectations.

In another study [24], results revealed some mismatches between curricular guidelines and teachers' practices in class. The researchers indicated that the teachers predominantly preferred the traditional focus-on-form approach while the curricular goals required meaning-focused and communicative teaching. The researchers also found time constraints, large classes, students' low motivation, and the lack of special training for teaching English to young learners as additional contextual factors affecting teachers' cognitions and practices. These factors are different from a study [6] that administered a belief questionnaire to 130 EFL teachers and found their characteristics, such as educational level and work experiences, as the main factors that influence their practices. High qualifications and experiences tended to signal congruity between cognition and practice, regardless of gender difference.

4. Methodological Framework

To achieve its purpose, this research takes to the constructivist epistemological perspectives in which the researcher seeks to construct knowledge by interviewing and observing participants in their natural settings [25]. The goal of constructivist research is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views and beliefs of the situation being studied [26]. Questions asked in this kind of research are generally open so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation, typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons. In constructivist methodology, researchers

seek to understand the context by personally gathering information from the setting. In educational research, embracing a constructivist methodology requires "shifts from observational studies of what teachers do to ethnographic descriptions based on observations, descriptions, and interviews with teachers about why they do what they do" [25].

Considering the above positionality, the current study was conducted based on a qualitative case study approach. The latter involves the study of an issue explored from one or more cases within a bounded system [26]. Arguably, case study research can encompass one case, one case with multiple sites, multiple cases at one site, or multiple cases with multiple sites [27]. The latter applies well to this study. In alignment with this, it is argued that, in multiple case studies, the process must be replicated equally in all the settings [28].

All the cases were four (4) EFL teachers who were purposively selected from four (4) secondary schools in Niamey. Purposive sampling is typically used in qualitative research to identify and select the information-rich cases for the most proper utilization of available resources [29]. The 4 participants present diversity in terms of teaching experience and gender. Two of them have at least ten (10) years of teaching experience while the two others have less than that. Gender-wise, the study gave equal opportunity to both female and male teachers by selecting two from each category (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participants.

Participant	Gender	Experience	Qualification
Tambari	Male	13 Years	BA
Habou	Male	4 Years	MA
Didja	Female	15 Years	MA
Joyce	Female	4 Years	BA

Considering the above, pre- and post-observation interviews and classroom observations were used as the main instruments of data collection. These were used in a way each instrument opened the door to the next instrument. The pre-observational interviews, for example, provided information on the background and cognitions of the participants on grammar teaching. That information constituted a prerequisite for conducting classroom observations. In other words, confirmation about the stated cognitions and practices of the participants from the pre-observation interviews was attentively sought during the classroom observations to unfold congruencies and discrepancies between what was said and what was done. In addition, most of the post-observation interview questions emerged from the classroom observations. Those questions were necessary for understanding teachers' actions in the classrooms. More precisely, questions asked during post-observation interviews concerned teachers' decisions and the rationale behind them. This enabled the researcher to examine the compatibility and contradictions between their cognitions and practices.

To proceed with the analysis, the collected data were first made workable. This involved transcribing the recorded interviews, codifying the classroom observation notes, and correcting minor mistakes. Furthermore, the cleared data were subjected to the researcher's scrutiny to ensure familiarity. This process of data analysis is called thematic analysis [30]; it consists of identifying themes within the collected data. It is a demarcated, rarely-acknowledged, yet widely-used qualitative analytic method that encompasses six phases: familiarizing oneself with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. In this respect, data were categorized, coded descriptively, and grouped under relevant themes.

5. Data Presentation and Interpretation

This section presents insights that emerged from the multiple case study research that proposed to examine the cognitions and practices of four EFL teachers in terms of grammar teaching. The data collected from the four cases are presented separately as a way to construct the participants' portraits. More specifically, each case is presented through themes that display his/her cognitions about grammar teaching, classroom practices, and contextual factors influencing his/her practices.

5.1. Case One: Tambari

5.1.1. Tambari's Beliefs About Grammar Teaching

Grammar teaching is one of the most emphasized aspects of English language teaching in EFL contexts [9]. It is in this sense that Tambari sees grammar as central to English language learning everywhere. He believes that if students fail to master grammatical rules, they cannot become good writers or speakers of English. As a consequence, he believes it is necessary to provide his students with lots of grammar rules. However, he indicated that he does not rely on a specific method for teaching grammar in his classes.

> Well…. honestly speaking, I think there is no specific method in my classes. I do my best to make them understand the lessons. Most of the time the students ask me to translate the items, and I satisfy them. So, my approach is very simple, because I am simple to my students. For me, the most essential is to transmit the message to them and to see them understand the message. Sometimes, I first present the grammar rules and together we apply those rules so that every student can be able to use them. After the application, I give them exercises, sometimes in pairs or groups or individually, and homework (Pre-observation Interview).

While the above extract denotes a pure presentation-practice process, which is deductive, the participant indicated that grammar should be at the front line in every EFL classroom. In addition, he believes that grammatical errors should be immediately corrected.

> I do this the time they commit errors; I pretend not to hear or understand what they say. I ask them to repeat one time, two times, and three times until they realize their errors

and correct them automatically. If it is in written form, I read the passage that contains the errors one time, two times, and three times until they realize there is an error. Now they understand my method of correcting their errors; that is why as soon as I start repeating a sentence or word, they anticipate and interrupt me to correct the error themselves. (Pre-observation interview).

The situation above makes Tambari believe that teaching grammar and error correction leads to the student's success in English language learning.

5.1.2. Tambari's Grammar Teaching Practices

Based on the observation data, Tambari's practices of grammar teaching were consistently deductive. Grammar rules, forms, and examples were explicitly given to learners. This was depicted in his teaching of the *Present Perfect Tense* during which he was observed writing the *affirmative*, *negative,* and *interrogative* forms and giving examples. Furthermore, Tambari was observed in the fourth level (3e) explicitly teaching the *comparative of superiority* and *inferiority*. He directly wrote the rules and forms for students and gave some examples before involving them in some practical exercises.

Another interesting teaching characteristic that marked Tambari's teaching was the frequent use of learners' first language. This is an aspect generally attributed to the Grammar Translation method. The extract below highlights this perfectly.

> Student 1: Monsieur, je n'ai pas compris ce que signifie "your watch is prettier than mine."
> Teacher: qui va traduire cette phrase en français?
> Student 2: ta montre est très jolie que la mienne.
> Teacher: non, ça reste un peu. Qui va dire mieux?
> Student 3: ta montre est plus jolie que la mienne.
> Teacher: oui correct, "ta montre est plus jolie que la mienne." (Observation data)

Taking to the above, Tambari's practices, as observed, are well-aligned to his beliefs. Based on the post-observation interview, he underlined several reasons that explain his deductive grammar teaching practices and reliance on Grammar Translation. Firstly, he believes that the deductive approach increases students' participation. In other words, it allows students to know what the teacher wants them to acquire.

> Most of the time if I try to teach in English, students will just look at me without understanding what I am saying" (Post-Observation Interview).

The second reason raised by Tambari was about the large number of students in his classes and their low proficiency level. He argued that explicit grammar teaching seems to be the most suitable approach for teaching 6e and 5e classes due to their large number and their level of proficiency as beginners.

5.1.3. Contextual Factors Affecting Tambari's Cognitions and Practices

The contextual factor that seemed to have the most decisive and immediate effect on Tambari's grammar teaching practices

was his prior experiences as a learner. He asserted that his successful grammar teaching was due to his learning experience: his way of teaching English reflects the way he was taught in secondary school. He confirmed that he sometimes tries to copy the speech of one of his secondary school teachers, and he also runs his grammar activities the same way.

Another contextual factor that seemed to affect Tambari's grammatical teaching was students' negative attitude towards English. As observed, most of the students did not give much importance to English. Tambari himself admitted that:

> Some students are not interested in the course; you see, even by using French, we are just managing to make them understand (Post-Observation Interview).

There are instances from almost every observed class that support the above statement. In the 4e class for example, despite the teacher's efforts to correct students, some of them were intentionally mispronouncing English words the way they wanted to make their classmates laugh. Negative attitudes were also observed in a 3e class when Tambari asked students to work in groups. There was a complete disorder as students got noisy and distracted. This behavior affected Tambari's decisions and plans.

> I had to change my plan to see which group gets ready to present first (Post-Observation Interview).

5.2. Case Two: Habou

5.2.1. Habou's Cognitions of Grammar Teaching

Habou learned English through different teaching methods and approaches. Different teachers also contributed to shaping his current teaching career. As a teacher, he believes that choosing a method or approach depends on the level of learners. As he indicated, the use of deductive grammar teaching is unavoidable with beginners.

> I use the deductive method only in 6e and somehow in 5e because they are beginners in learning this language (Pre-observation interview).

The above statement presupposes that in other classes he uses the inductive approach. Moreover, he believes that grammar teaching should be integrated with the four language skills. He sees both language skills and grammar as complementary.

> Let us take the example of pronunciation. When teaching the simple past, I show my students when and how to pronounce the "ed" before a voiced and a voiceless sound. This is the integration of what? This is the integration of language skills in grammar teaching. It helps students to master the English language (Pre-observation interview).

About the above, Habou also believes that it is essential to teach students not only formal grammar but also informal grammar. The latter refers to the colloquial use of grammar through conversations.

> The language we are teaching should not only serve students in the academy but also their day-to-day life (Pre-observation interview)

5.2.2. Characteristics of Habou's Grammar Teaching

Based on my classroom observations, one of the most

noticeable features of Habou's grammar teaching was his use of the deductive approach. Evidence has shown how consciously he uses this approach to transmit grammatical knowledge to his students. In a Terminal D class, for instance, he wrote the different forms of the *comparative and superlative* sequentially on the blackboard. Each form was followed by different examples. Then students were involved in more practice. A similar instance was observed in a 3e class. At that level, he introduced the grammar lesson about *used to, to be used to, and to get used to* after briefly reviewing the previous lesson on *gerund*. He first presented the use of *used to* through elicitation; he asked students to tell what they did when they were children but that they no longer do today. After listening to the students, he wrote three sentences in *simple past* and explained to students how to transform the main verb into a bare infinitive when preceded by *used to*. Throughout the process, Habou tended to automatically correct his students' grammatical errors. On certain occasions, he would delay the correction hoping the students could correct themselves.

Another noteworthy characteristic of Habou's grammar teaching was his repetitive code-switching to explain the rules and forms being presented. This has been depicted in all the observed classes. For instance, in his class of 3e, he used the word *Gérondif* to explain the meaning of Gerund. In his Terminal class, he also used *le pire* to help his students understand the meaning of *the worst*.

About the observed predominance of the deductive approach in his grammar teaching, Habou indicated that it is more suitable for teaching lower levels.

> I always take students' levels into account. I like to see them expressing themselves, but most of the time they have poor language proficiency. Deductive teaching of grammar can be the best way to make students understand not only grammar but also the language. As I told you before, in 6e you cannot teach it inductively, because they have no prerequisite about what is going to be taught (post-observation interview).

The incongruity with the above statement is the fact that even in advanced-level classes, such as 3e and Tle, he was observed using the deductive approach.

5.2.3. Factors Affecting Habou's Cognition and Practice

Habou's cognition and classroom practices appeared to be affected mainly by negative students' attitudes in class. As observed in his Tle D class, which contains more than fifty (50) students, some of them appeared uninterested in the lesson. This was consistent in almost all the classes observed.

> Student 1: *Issa, kayi excercice kinan najiya?* (Issa, did you do yesterday's exercise?)
> Student 2: *Wane?* (Which one)
> Student 1: *Wanda mushen math yabada* (that of mathematics)
> Student 2: *Eh nayi, gashinan* (yes, I did, here it is).
> Student 1: *baninan* (let me see)

The extract above presents a conversation about a mathematic exercise, while the involved students are

supposed to pay attention to their teacher. This denotes a sheer lack of interest in English language learning. Arguably, this situation cannot justify Habou's deductive grammar teaching. On the contrary, it could be the consequence of the way he teaches. Students may feel uninterested as the teacher is not providing them with interactive tasks which could be possible when using inductive strategies to grammar teaching.

5.3. Case Three: Grace

5.3.1. Grace's Cognitions of Grammar Teaching

Grace attended one of the most well-known secondary schools in Niamey, and it was in that school that she, for the first time, started learning English. She was taught English from 6e to 3e by a unique teacher, who is currently a teacher trainer. As part of that experience, she learned English through Direct Method (DM) and Audio-Lingual Method (ALM). With that teacher, they practiced repetitions and drills to develop spontaneity about what was being presented.

> He taught us English grammar mostly by asking us to repeat what he was saying in English, everything was done in English (Pre-observation interview).

She added that to facilitate understanding, her teacher used to come to class with real-life objects/materials.

Moving from middle to high school, Grace encountered different teachers whose methods and approaches were different.

> In high school, I was taught by other teachers who explained lessons by using both English and French. In 2nde class, our teacher used to introduce the lesson and give us exercises. When teaching tenses, he gave us the rules to learn or memorize. He also gave some exercises for applying those rules before giving us homework (Pre-observation interview).

The extract above is indicative of the fact that Grace was taught English through Grammar Translation Method which fosters a deductive way of teaching grammar. In alignment with this, she confirmed that in her teacher training courses, she had been taught how the teacher could teach grammar through deductive and inductive approaches. In short, these experiences have shaped her cognition in terms of grammar teaching. She also believes that grammar teaching should be integrated with language skills and other systems, such as vocabulary and functions. She further indicated that she generally corrects her students' grammatical errors, and sometimes they correct each other before she does.

5.3.2. Characteristics of Grace's Grammar Teaching

As revealed by observation data, deductive grammar teaching was predominant in Grace's classrooms. For instance, when she presented a lesson on *past perfect* in one of her classes, she wrote the following on the blackboard:

> the simple past form of to have + the past participle of the verb.

After that, she gave them some examples and asked them to work on an exercise. At the end, she gave them some homework for the next class. Grace also tended to frequently correct her students' grammar errors. Similar to Tambari and

Habou, she was also frequently using French while teaching grammar. In her class of 1ere D, for example, almost everything was in French. This included the explanation of the *Past Perfect* forms: Affirmative, negative, and interrogative. As part of the post-observation interview, she indicated that she uses French to improve understanding.

I explain or translate almost everything in French to facilitate their understanding of the lesson (post-observation interview).

5.3.3. Contextual Factors Affecting Grace's Cognition and Practice

The contextual factors that affect Grace's grammar teaching are somehow similar to those presented earlier. Most of her classes reflected detrimental students' attitudes through their resistance to participate in classroom activities. This situation affects her decisions while teaching. For example, in one of her classes, she asked students to work in groups on an exercise, but they reluctantly started and stopped. Grace was forced to change her decisions and asked them to work individually.

Another contextual factor that affects Grace's grammar teaching is her students' low English proficiency. This was evident in all her classes, specifically in 2nde A and C. In those classes, students were observed on many occasions using French instead of English. It seemed to be a constraint for Grace rather than a choice.

If I explain the lesson in English, the students will just look at me; so, I am obliged to use French to let them understand (post-observation interview)

She further claimed that, in the beginning, she was using English as the language of instruction in her classes, but she was obliged to change her method due to some problems with the students.

In the beginning, I was using English in my classes, but, unfortunately, the students did not understand the language. So, I thought, it was of no use to continue using English while students do not understand at all. For this reason, I explain or translate almost everything in French to facilitate their understanding (post-observation interview).

From all the above, it seems that Grace prefers to teach English through English, but the proficiency level of her students forces her to teach through Grammar Translation Method which heavily emphasizes the use of the learners' first language.

5.4. Case Four: Didja

5.4.1. Didja's Cognitions in Grammar Teaching

As far as Didja's cognitions are concerned, she believes that her teaching is based on communicative language teaching (CLT) and Grammar translation methods. In other words, she believes that her teaching is based on both inductive and deductive approaches. She tied her use of the communicative teaching approach to two reasons. Firstly, it was the teaching method used by one of her teachers whose efforts, styles, and teaching approach impressed her when she was an EFL learner. As she indicated, that teacher could do his best to create interaction among students. The second reason is linked to the pressure from the school principal (a former English teacher) who pushes teachers to use communicative activities in class.

She always advises us to use the communicative approach in our classes; she participates in our UP (pedagogical unit) meetings and encourages us to use such method (Pre-observation interview)

Furthermore, Didja attributes an important place to deductive grammar teaching in EFL classrooms. She indicated that "if students do not master the grammatical rules, they may not be able to understand the sentence or the context in which the sentence is used." Therefore, the misusage of grammatical rules may affect meaning and communication. To reinforce this, she automatically corrects students' grammatical errors.

5.4.2. Characteristics of Didja's Grammar Teaching Practice

Deductive grammar teaching is a noticeable feature of Didja's teaching practices. This approach was consistent in most of her classes. In one of her classes, for instance, she presented a new lesson on *Gerund*, explaining its meaning and usage after *verbs* and *prepositions*. In each stage of the lesson, she would give direct examples before asking students to give their own. Similar instances were observed in the 6e and 3e classes. In 6e, Didja gave the structures and examples of the *simple present tense* focusing on verbs ending in "Y" and "O" before practicing some exercises with students. In 3e, she was also observed teaching a new grammar lesson through the integrative process of *presentation-practice-production* (PPP). In that lesson, she presented the lesson on the *comparative of superiority* with short and long adjectives. She provided the list of long and short adjectives and their structures on the board before moving to practice. In the end, the students were guided by the teacher to use the comparative of superiority in groups.

It was also noticeable that Didja tended to teach English grammar using multiple languages. This practice was mostly recurrent in the first-year classes. She confirmed that she uses English, French, and other native languages to teach, not only grammar lessons but also other aspects of the language. In her view, this makes her lessons more effective.

I am sure that if it is only in English, they will not understand anything, because they do not even have the basics (Post-observation interview).

However, in certain of Didja's classes, grammar tended to be taught in context. In this respect, Didja would create groups for interaction about grammar. In one class, she distributed cardboards that were made of sentence parts, such as subject, verb, and complement, and asked students to form correct sentences by respecting all the grammar rules recently taught to them. Each group designated three students to present the work. The purpose of the group work, in her view, was to make students communicate among themselves. She believes that, through group work, students could help each other construct correct sentences and correct each other's

grammatical errors.

5.4.3. Contextual Factors Affecting Didja's Cognitions and Practices

The national curriculum is one of the factors that influence Didja's classroom practices and cognitions. In Niger, teachers are required to use some textbooks. Didja claimed that teachers do not have a choice about what grammatical items to teach. Everything is in the syllabus:

We follow the chronological way as planned (Post-observation interview).

Didja also claimed that the syllabi are overloaded with grammar.

If we divide the syllabus into three parts, grammar will have two parts for itself (Post-observation interview)

Consequently, adherence to the syllabus restricts the teaching process to grammar almost all the time. This is worsened by the pressure of time. Didja would most of the time revert to the deductive approach because of the lack of time for implementing the annual syllabi. In other words, she tended to avoid the inductive ways of teaching grammar because these are time-consuming.

Students will take a long time before they understand (Post-observation interview).

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The current study has unveiled multiple insights into teachers' cognitions about grammar teaching. It has indicated the predominance of the deductive approach, either from the teachers' expressed beliefs or from the way they teach [24]. Most of the participating teachers believed that the deductive approach to grammar teaching is less time-consuming [21]. It was also believed that this approach is more convenient for low-proficiency students [9]. Furthermore, most of the participants were observed to be frequently using the Grammar Translation Method. It was revealed that those teachers were aware of the communicative approach, but they tended to prioritize Grammar Translation. Participants indicated that the latter is used not only to motivate students but also to facilitate understanding of the lessons [24]. Furthermore, the study has revealed, but minimally, that some teachers believe they teach grammar inductively, even though none of them was observed teaching through this approach [22]. Only the case of Didja revealed a near communicative approach through her board flashcards activity, which was still focused on form.

In terms of contextual factors that affect teacher cognition and practice, the study has demonstrated the extent to which *teachers' prior learning experiences*, *time pressure*, *students' low language proficiency,* and *lack of motivation* stand as real constraints for using approaches that are not deductive [10-14]. With particular reference to students' lack of motivation outlined in the current study, participants confirmed that most of those students attend English classes just to have grades. Other contextual factors concern the requirements of the national curriculum and large classes.

This confirms a study [24] that also revealed teachers' lack of special training in teaching English to young learners. Findings also support the claim that "the social, institutional, instructional, and physical settings in which teachers work have a major impact on their cognitions and practice" [13].

Considering the above discussion of findings, many implications could be drawn. The predominance of the deductive approach justifies the observable inability of learners to use the language. This approach only reinforces rote learning and memorization of rules without creating an environment for learners to interactively use the language. Furthermore, the fact that teachers situated deductive grammar teaching as unavoidable in their classrooms could be interpreted as a lack of pedagogical knowledge. This could signal weaknesses in the teacher education system which, for many years, has tended to cherish the traditional approaches to teaching [31]. Teachers trained through these approaches are likely to lack knowledge about how to teach grammar inductively or in context [32].

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