



What is Grammar for Pre-service English Teachers? Entrance and Exit Level Beliefs

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ABSTRACT

The present research aims to explore metaphors used by pre-service English teachers as evidence for their thinking about “grammar”. A cohort of 47 pre-service English teachers partook in the study. The metaphors were elicited both at the beginning and the end of four-year pre-service education and this interval paved the way for examining the potential change in participants’ beliefs over time. The metaphors were first clustered into two considering their suggested definition for grammar as *grammar as a phenomenon* and *grammar as a school subject*. *Grammar as a phenomenon* was further grouped into three sub-categories as *rule* (discrete rules, control mechanism, guideline for rules), *system* (system of smaller units, central construct of a larger system), and *function* (medium for meaning). The results suggest that pre-service teachers’ beliefs changed over time. By the end of pre-service education, *rule* metaphors decreased distinctively while *system* and *function* metaphors increased. It is revealed that pre-service English teachers adopted a more system-oriented perspective about grammar at the exit level.

Keywords:

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Introduction

For decades, it has been an unsolved discussion whether learning a language is through communication or through learning *lexicogrammar* (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999), and this dilemma has an important impact on our beliefs and attitudes about grammar. Indeed, it can be claimed that the role of grammar in language teaching has been affected by the developments in the field of linguistics and second language acquisition. After the onset of the 1970s, the communicative nature of language was highlighted by esteemed linguists. Particularly, Hymes (1972) introduced the term communicative competence suggesting that meaning might be beyond the form and it ‘may have to do with an attitude, norm of interaction, or the like’ (p. 291). The spread of this idea evoked a paradigm shift in the arguments about language and its nature as well as the debates regarding the role of grammar in language teaching. Indeed, these debates were based upon two central approaches. One is the grammatical approach which prioritizes the teaching of grammatical forms. The other is the communicative approach which emphasizes teaching the use of grammatical forms by considering their functions to express the appropriate meaning (Canale & Swain, 1980).

The aforementioned developments stimulated the birth of a widely acknowledged language teaching method named Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the 1980s. The motto of 'language learning is for communication' gained momentum. Existing theories and practices started to be criticized because language learners in classical grammar-based classrooms were simply not able to use the target language communicatively. In addition, the gradual spread and power of the English language as a common medium of communication around the world led to a natural need for developing communicative skills. This new trend triggered the spread of the communicative language teaching approach in educational policy documents in Europe (Council of Europe, 2001), in the Asia-Pacific region (Nunan, 2003), and many other countries around the globe including Turkey (eg. MONE, 2018). On the other side, the reign of grammar in traditional teaching contexts was claimed to be a strong factor that prevent learners to develop communication skills. Within the light of these discussions, grammar became a stigmatized phenomenon.

Despite of the voices against grammar-based teaching, language instruction in many classrooms has still been grammar-oriented. In addition, many English language teachers have prior language learning experiences in such contexts. All in all, the ambivalence towards the place of grammar in language teaching paves the way for teachers' inconsistent beliefs about grammar and grammar teaching as shown in various studies (eg., Andrews, 2003; Basturkmen, 2012; Borg, 2018; Farrell & Lim, 2005; Nishimuro & Borg, 2013; Underwood, 2012, 2017; Watson, 2015).

Grammar in a nutshell

The definition of grammar as a phenomenon is a complex task to achieve. In reputable dictionaries, it is simply defined as "the rules in a language" (Oxford Online Dictionary) or a "system of rules" (Merriam Webster Online Dictionary). According to Fromkin and Rodman (1998), it refers to "the sounds and sound patterns, the basic units of meaning, such as words, and the rules to combine them to form new sentences constitute the grammar of language" (p. 14). To put it in a nutshell, grammar has different manifestations in the relevant sources such as rules, a system of rules, and meaning-making structures.

Originally, the evolution of this phenomenon is interwoven with linguistic theories, dating back to the Traditional Grammar of old times. Until the emergence of Saussure's Structural Linguistics in the second half of the 19th century, grammar was mainly defined as the morphological and syntactic features represented in isolated sentences. This approach, which is also named Traditional Grammar, had a kind of prescriptive nature, and grammar was regarded as a set of rules that prescribes the desired language use. Together with the rise of structural linguistics, language started to be considered as a structured system that organizes arbitrary signs into meaningful units. Accordingly, the definition of grammar also changed into a kind of system. Later on, Chomsky's oft-cited theory of universal grammar turned this system into a cognitive entity inherent in all humans as a part of their natural resources. After the 1990ies, with the influence of functional grammar scholars started to envision "grammar as a meaning-making resource and to describe grammatical categories by reference to what they mean" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p.10). In other words,

grammar is not a "formal network but a communicative device" (Batstone, 1994, p.11) as well. For example, one can express the social distance between him/her and the interlocutor by preferring "Could you....?" cluster rather than "Can you...?" in his/her request (Batstone, 1994, p.17). In other words, the speaker's choice between the two modal verbs constructs the meaning conveyed through the utterance. Therefore, it could be claimed that the evolution of grammar started as discrete rules, then it turned into a system of rules. In its final stage, it reached out a functional nature. It could be claimed that the dictionary definitions provided above and the linguistics definitions developed in history are in perfect compliance. They both suggest three major features of grammar as a phenomenon which are being comprised of rules, constructing a system, and having a function.

English teachers' beliefs

Borg (2003), conducting a comprehensive review study on teachers' belief systems, claimed that teacher cognition, which refers to what teachers 'know, believe and think' (p. 81), is related to the issues of schooling, professional coursework, classroom practices including practice teaching and contextual factors. Excluding the latter, the contextual factors which are about the concerns related to the teaching environment, other three issues can also be relevant for pre-service teachers' belief systems. Schooling, for example, refers to teachers' experiences as learners and pre-service teachers come to teacher education programs with preoccupied belief systems rooted in their learner backgrounds (Richardson, 1996) through the apprenticeship of observation (Borg, 2004; Lortie, 1975). These early beliefs affect how they consider teaching and learning practices (Grossman, 1991) and have the potential to shape teacher candidates 'dominant model of action' (Johnson, 1994; p.450) during their pre-service education. Regarding pre-service English teachers' learner experiences concerning grammar, it can be stated that they were involved in grammar-oriented classroom practices because grammar instruction is still dominating language teaching and learning in Turkey (Hoş & Kekeç, 2014; TEPAV, 2013) as it is the case in many other countries (eg., Assahali, 2013; Farrell, 1999; Underwood, 2012). In addition, they must get a required grade from a reading and grammar-oriented university entrance exam to be able to apply for English teacher education programs. As a result, it is plausible that the majority of teacher candidates come to these programs as learners of grammar-oriented classrooms having observed many hours of lessons prioritizing grammar and vocabulary over other language components. Moodie (2016), expands Lortie's (1975) concept of apprenticeship of observation and claims that teachers sometimes learn from past experiences "what not to do as language teachers" (p.29). Therefore, it can be suggested that these observations might motivate the emergence of both positive and negative beliefs about grammar. Either apprenticeship or anti-apprenticeship of observation, it is tenable to argue that pre-service teachers enter English teacher education programs with a set of preoccupied beliefs about grammar and grammar teaching.

The second issue mentioned by Borg (2003), professional coursework, refers to the theoretical and practical courses studied during pre-service education. It is claimed that such coursework 'may affect existing cognitions' (Borg, 2003, p. 82). It should be kept in mind

that there can be a “mismatch between what students have learned in the past and what they are presented in the teacher education program” (Farrell, 1999, p. 1). Yuan and Lee (2014) claimed that pre-service English teachers’ beliefs about grammar could be affected by such an inconsistency between their grammar-oriented learner experiences and teacher training courses that prioritize communicative language teaching methods.

According to Borg (2003) classroom practices including practice teaching is another factor that has an impact on pre-service teachers’ beliefs about teaching grammar. As revealed in a study by Farrell (1999), for example, reflective practice can evoke pre-service teachers’ awareness of the effects of their past experiences on their beliefs about grammar teaching.

Although many research studies have been conducted regarding in-service or pre-service teachers’ beliefs about grammar, their mainly hold an instructional perspective. In particular, these studies are concerned about pre-service teachers’ beliefs about grammar teaching (e.g., Andrews, 2003; Değirmenci-Uysal & Yavuz, 2015; Dikici, 2012; Graus & Coppen, 2016; Kaçar & Zengin, 2013; Murniati & Riyandari, 2016), in-service teachers’ beliefs about teaching grammar (e.g., Sato & Oyanedel, 2019; Toprak, 2019), the relationship between pre-service teachers’ beliefs and practices (e.g., Johnson, 1994), the relationship between in-service teachers’ beliefs and practices (Farrell & Lim, 2005; Phipps & Borg, 2009; Uysal & Bardakçı, 2014; Watson, 2015). To the best of the researcher’s knowledge, there is no study conducted to shed light on pre-service teachers’ beliefs about grammar as a phenomenon itself. Therefore, the present study aimed to answer the following overarching questions:

1. What are pre-service English teachers’ metaphors for “grammar”?
2. Do the participants’ metaphors at the entrance and exit level show differences?

Methodology

Against the backdrop of the pertinent literature imbued with the findings suggesting that language teachers’ beliefs play an important role in understanding teachers’ pedagogical decisions, it is still a challenge to get a concrete definition of such a subtle and deep-seated personal trait. Researchers employed various methods to unearth this phenomenon, one of which is metaphor elicitation (Erkmen, 2012). After the seminal work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphors gained a down-to-earth definition which challenged the perception that metaphors are figurative devices peculiar to literary works. Moreover, metaphors used in colloquial language are claimed to reflect and shape our perceptions and “conceptual systems” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In as much as metaphors are used to understand abstract things (Yob, 2003), in educational studies, as suggested by Saban (2006), one of the functions of metaphors is being defined as a ‘research tool’. Thereby, metaphors have been heavily used by researchers to understand the complex nature of teachers’ belief systems (eg. Seferoğlu et al., 2009). Considering these, the motivation for using metaphors in the present study as a gate through pre-service English teachers’ beliefs about grammar is twofold. First, metaphors were quite suitable for investigating tacit beliefs as they provide deeper insights into pre-service teachers’ perspectives. Second, it was entirely practical to

collect data through elicited metaphors at the onset and end of pre-service teacher education and to have comparable data sets.

Sample

A cohort of 47 pre-service teachers enrolled in an English Teacher Education Department in Turkey took part in the study. Female participants (N=43) were outnumbering the males (N=4), which is parallel with the overall gender distribution in the department. During these four years, participants took several pedagogical courses and courses to develop their subject knowledge about the English language and culture. In the final two semesters, they went to schools for school experience and practicum.

Data collection

Participants responded to an open-ended questionnaire asking “If you are to use a metaphor for “grammar”, which metaphor would you use for it? Explain by giving reasons”. In this longitudinal study, the same questionnaire was given to the same participants twice. Participants were asked to write their names on the questionnaire. At the entrance level, pre-service English teachers responded to the questionnaire in the first month of their education. After completing four years in the department, they answered the same questionnaire right before they graduated from the program. The participants were first informed about the research and they took part in the study voluntarily. In the first phase, 47 participants answered the questionnaire. Since some of the participants transferred to other universities and some could not finish the program in four years, only 45 of these participants answered the questionnaire in the second phase. In the end, a total of 92 metaphors were compiled in the study.

Analysis

The data were analyzed and categorized by two different judges who are doing research on language teacher education. First, they categorized the metaphors on their own. Then, inter-coder reliability between these two researchers was calculated by using the formula suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) and found as $r = .88$. The steps for the thematic analysis of elicited metaphors are as follows:

- Reading all the metaphors and negotiating for potential themes
- Discussing on the emerging themes and establishing a set of thematic codes
- Sorting the metaphors under the thematic codes (each judge worked on the data individually)
- Calculating inter-coder reliability
- Identifying the divergent categorizations between the judges and negotiating to reach a consensus.

The categorization is made through a rigorous examination of the explanations suggested for each metaphor. Accordingly, the same metaphor could be put under different

categories based upon the participants' explanations. For example, when grammar is likened to a brain as the main controller of the body, this metaphor is listed under the category of control mechanism. When grammar is likened to the brain as the most important part of the body, this time it is put under the category of the central construct of a larger system. Metaphor skeleton is grouped under the category of medium for meaning when it is defined as a vehicle carrying the body and giving it a shape; on the other hand, the same metaphor is listed under the category of the central construct of a larger system when it is defined as the most important part of the human body. In Appendix, examples for metaphors and associated keywords are presented.

Results

Firstly, metaphors were clustered into two broad definitional categories as *grammar as a phenomenon* and *grammar as a subject*. Metaphors in the first category are describing the nature of grammar and the second type of metaphors define the term within a pedagogical frame. The number of metaphors in *grammar as a phenomenon* is considerably high and of great variety. Therefore, they are put into three sub-categories as grammar is *rule*, grammar is *system* and grammar is *function*. Later on, the first two of these are put into further subcategories. Accordingly, grammar is *rule* consists of three subtitles as *discrete rules* which take grammar as isolated rules, *control mechanism* which defines grammar as a set of rules for controlling language and *guideline for rules* which defines grammar as a set of guidelines that shows how to follow the rules. Grammar as a *system* has two subcategories as a *system of smaller units* that defines grammar as harmonious units or a complex system and the *central construct of a larger system* that considers grammar as the most important part of the language, the larger unit. Figure 1 demonstrates the categories of metaphors:

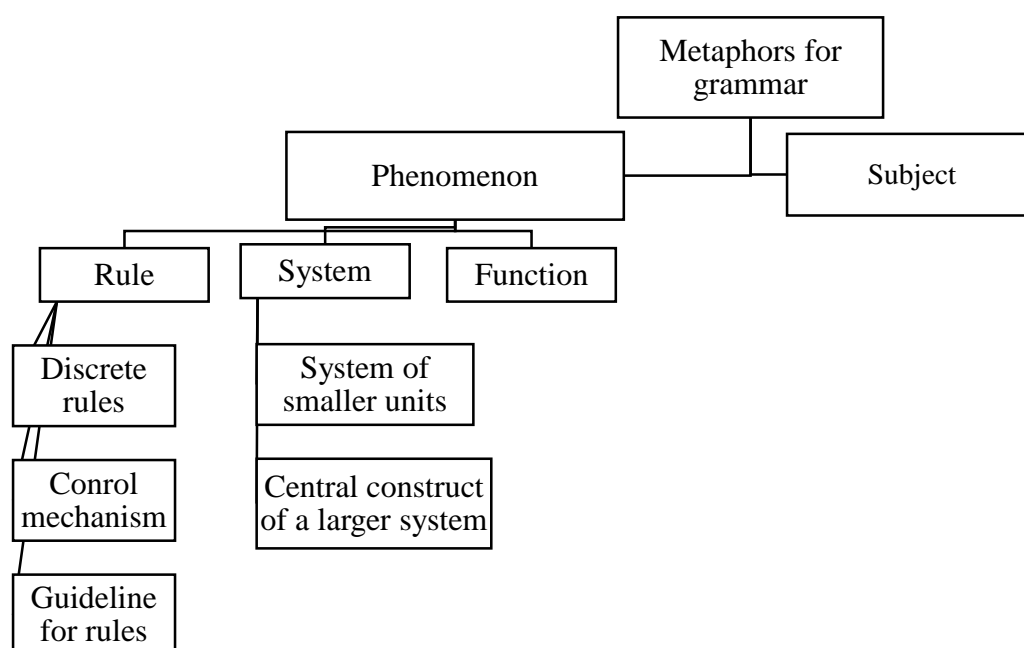


Figure 1. Categories of Metaphors

Grammar metaphors at the entrance level

As illustrated in Table 1, the majority of the metaphors elicited in the entrance level are listed under *grammar as a phenomenon* (f=45), and only 2 metaphors are listed under *grammar as a subject*. A cohort of 18 metaphors is suggested for *grammar as rule*. Specifically, 5 metaphors for *discrete rules* (i.e., traffic rules (f=2), driving rules, home life, medicine), 8 metaphors for *control mechanism* (i.e., brain (f=3), coach, policeman), and 5 metaphors for a *guideline for rules* (i.e., guide, road map, building project, recipe (f=2)) are identified. It is found out that the majority of the metaphors in this phase are under the category of *grammar as a system* (f=20). Within this category, most of the participants define grammar as the *central construct of a larger system* (f=14) (i.e., basis of a house (f=2), engine (f=2), heart (f=2), skeleton (f=2), door of house, salt, columns of building, essential piece of puzzle, family in society, brain). In addition, 6 participants described grammar as a *system of smaller units* (i.e., cell (f=2), puzzle, family, airplane, complex system of smaller parts). Finally, 7 metaphors (i.e., central electric unit, legs, steps carrying to the top, skeleton (f=2), roof, rhythm) are listed under *grammar is function*, in other words, medium for meaning. The two metaphors put in the category of *grammar as a subject* are a long road and love.

Table 1. Metaphors used at the entrance level

	Rule metaphors (f = 18)	Discrete rules (f = 5) (Traffic rules (f =2*); Driving rules; Homelife; Medicine) Control mechanism (f = 8) (Brain(f = 6); Coach; Policeman) Guideline for rules (f = 5) (Guide; Road map; Building project; Recipe (f = 2))
Defining Grammar as Phenomenon (f = 45)	System metaphors (f = 20)	System of smaller units (f = 6) (Cell (f = 2); Puzzle; Family; Aeroplane; Complex system of smaller parts) The central construct of a larger system (f = 14) (Basis of a house (f = 2) ; Engine (f = 2); Heart (f =2); Skeleton (f = 2); Door of house; Salt; Columns of building; Essential piece of puzzle; Family in society; Brain)
	Function metaphors (f = 7)	(Central electric unit; Legs; Steps; Skeleton (f = 2); Roof ; Rhythm)
Defining Grammar as Subject (f = 2)		(Long road; Love)
Total: 47 Metaphors		

*When the metaphors are used more than once the frequency of emergence is provided.

Grammar metaphors at the exit level

Nearly all of the metaphors, as illustrated in Table 2, are under the category of grammar as a phenomenon (f=44), and only one metaphor is used for grammar as a subject. A total of 5 metaphors are used for grammar as rule. Specifically, 2 metaphors are listed under discrete rules (i.e., driving, rules), 2 metaphors are listed under control mechanism (i.e., brain, king) and 1 metaphor is put under guideline for rules (i.e., recipe). The number of metaphors that define grammar as a system in the exit level is 29. A cohort of 6 metaphors is used for a system of smaller units (i.e., brick, orange, sea (f=2), back of the mountain, spider web). Metaphors listed under the central construct of a larger system are 23 in total (i.e., cement, milestone (f=2), heart, the key to VIP, kitchen, salt (f=2), backbone (f=2), root, stem (f=2), skeleton (f=3), water (f=2), atom, basis of a house (f=2), wheat, pasta of cake). Finally, 10 metaphors (i.e., stairs, skeleton, chocolate, eyeglasses, poem, ship, candle, baking powder, mother, sand) are employed for grammar is function. Only one metaphor, i.e., shark, is put under grammar as a subject.

Table 2. Metaphors elicited at the exit level

	Rule metaphors (f = 5)	Discrete rules (f = 2) (<i>Driving; Rules</i>) Control mechanism (f = 2) (<i>Brain; King</i>) Guideline for rules (f = 1) (<i>Recipe</i>)
Defining Grammar as Phenomenon (f = 44)	System metaphors (f = 29)	System of smaller units (f = 6) (<i>Brick; Orange; Sea (f=2*); Back of the mountain; Spider web</i>) The central construct of a larger system (f = 23) (<i>Cement; Milestone (f=2); Heart; Key to VIP; Kitchen; Salt (f=2); Backbone (f=2); Root; Stem (f=2); Skeleton f=(3); Water (f=2); Atom; Basis of a house (f=2); Wheat; Pasta of cake</i>)
	Function metaphors (f = 10)	(<i>Stairs; Skeleton; Chocolate; Eyeglasses; Poem; Ship; Candle; Baking powder; Mother; Sand</i>)
Defining Grammar as Subject (f = 1)		(<i>Shark</i>)
Total: 45 Metaphors		

*When the metaphors are used more than once the frequency of emergence is provided.

Comparing metaphors at the entrance and exit levels

In Table 3, the results of the two phases are presented together to provide a comparative outlook. It is observed in both phases that the participants tend to use grammar as phenomenon metaphors (45 in the entrance, 44 at the exit) more than grammar as a subject (2 in the entrance, 1 in the exit). The number of metaphors recorded under rule decreased at the exit level (f=5) when compared to the entrance level (f=18). Considering the subcategories for rule, it is understood that the number of metaphors in all sub-groups decreases distinctively. Specifically, metaphors used for discrete rules are 5 at the entrance level and 2 at the exit level; for control mechanism are 8 at the entrance level and 2 at the exit level; for a guideline for rules are 5 at the entrance level and 1 at the exit level.

On the other hand, in comparison with the entrance level, the number of metaphors listed under system (at the entrance level=20, at the exit level=29) and function (at the entrance level=7, at the exit level= 10) shows an increase at the exit level. Focusing on the subcategories of system, it is seen that the number of metaphors used for system of smaller units is the same both at the entrance level (f=6) and the exit level (f=6). A distinctive increase is recorded for the number of metaphors listed under the central construct of a larger system. In particular, although 14 metaphors are used at the entrance level, this increased to 23 metaphors at the exit level.

Table 3. Comparison of metaphors at the entrance and exit level

	Grammar as Phenomenon		Grammar as Subject	
	Rule=18	System= 20	Function=7	School subject=2
Entrance	DR (f=5), CM (f=8), CR (f=5)	SSU(f=6), CC (f=14)		
	Rule=5	System= 29	Function=10	School subject=1
Exit	DR (f=2), CM (f=2), CR (f=1)	SSU(f=6), CC (f=23)		

Abbreviations: DR: Discrete Rules; CM: Control Mechanism; CR: Guideline for rules, SSU: System of Smaller Units, CC: Central construct of a larger system

Discussion

The study reveals that the majority of pre-service English teachers suggested metaphors for grammar as a phenomenon in both entrance and exit levels. Grammar is not perceived as a school subject by them. In other words, they seem to have developed meta-awareness about grammar even before they entered the program and their beliefs remained same in years. On the other hand, our findings indicate that their beliefs about the nature of grammar changed over time.

First of all, the number of metaphors for rule shows a significant decrease, from 18 to 5 at the exit level. This decrease is observable in every sub-category of this group such that discrete rules from 5 to 2, control mechanism from 8 to 2, and guideline for rules from 5 to 1. In the same vein, the number of metaphors defining grammar as function, a kind of medium for meaning-making, showed a slight increase from 7 to 10. Moreover, grammar as system metaphors also rises from 20 to 29. As stated by Borg (2003), professional coursework affects pre-service teachers' belief systems. These findings indicate that pre-service English teachers changed their rule-oriented beliefs with more system-oriented ones. Nevertheless, it should also be considered that majority of the participants define grammar as a central construct of a larger system at the exit level ($f=23$) and this is nearly twice as much as the same kind of metaphors recorded at the entrance level ($f=14$). Although they showed a move from grammar as rule to grammar as a system, it is observed that they put grammar at the center of the language system even after four years of teacher education. In addition, functional approaches to grammar are not very common among teacher candidates.

The reason behind the observed belief change can be interpreted as an effect of pre-service training. The curriculum of pre-service English teaching departments in Turkey imposes communicative theories and supports the development of a holistic perspective towards language which unites grammar and other skills together within the larger language system. Therefore, it can be claimed that pre-service English teachers' beliefs about grammar at the very beginning resemble the claims of Traditional Grammar. However, during the pre-service education, they reconstruct their beliefs about grammar and begin to hold a more Structuralist and slightly Functionalist understanding of the phenomenon. All in all, the current study substantiates the previous researchers' claims (Farrell, 1999; Yuan & Lee, 2014) in the sense that pre-service education has an impact on prospective teachers' beliefs system.

Another interesting finding of the present research is the frequent emergence of rule and system metaphors at the entrance level. This situation can be explained by what Borg (2003) named schooling. Borg (2003) claims that teachers' beliefs are based upon their early learner experiences. Even though the local educational policies in Turkey promote learning English with communicative practices (MONE, 2018), in reality, as in many other countries, there is a way to reach these aims. Therefore, pre-service English teachers who partook in this study came to the department with preoccupied beliefs about grammar which are based upon the accumulated experiences of grammar teaching and learning practices. Although quite a few in number, there are three metaphors used under the category of grammar as a subject. These metaphors are listed as long road, love and shark. Considering the suggested explanations by the participants, it is found out that pre-service English teachers are pinpointing the hardship and toughness of grammar as a curricular subject. In this regard, our findings support the previous research reporting teachers' negative beliefs about learning grammar (Andrews, 2003).

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that pre-service English teachers' beliefs about grammar seem to evolve from rule to system and function with the effects of the pre-service curriculum. This underscores the role of pre-service education on the belief systems of candidate teachers. On the other hand, the effects of pre-service education cannot be ignored as it is observed in the present study that teacher candidates are affected by their learner experiences at the entrance level. Therefore, it can be suggested that when functional approaches to grammar become widely used in K-12 schools, future teachers would come to departments with this background. Put in other words, developments in school practices have the potential to facilitate training qualified English teachers in the departments.

Unearthing pre-service English teachers' beliefs about grammar at the entrance and the exit level, this study evidences that their beliefs are prone to change through pre-service education. Therefore, it can be argued that pre-service teachers' beliefs about grammar can be headed to a functional level utilizing conscious practices, such as reflection (Farrell, 1999). Such kind of a change in pre-service teachers' belief systems, in return, could help them develop better theories and practices of communicative language teaching. Finally, the findings of the present study point out a need for further research investigating the relationship between pre-service teachers' beliefs about grammar and how they interpret communicative language teaching.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.
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Appendix: Sample metaphors and annotated keywords

home of a family (has rules and is essential for the family)

basis of a house (essential for the house, it makes the building durable)

the substructure of a building (the most fundamental part of the language)

cell (building blocks of a language)

salt (very important for the meal)

road map (shows us how we can use the language to speak write etc.)

love (hard and requires time and effort)

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