A Case Study of the Influence of Prior Learning Experiences on English Language Teachers’ Beliefs

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ABSTRACT

Teachers’ beliefs are integral aspects of teaching. Beliefs define the most fundamental aspects of an individual’s personality which usually resist change. The aim of the present study was to investigate the influence of prior learning experiences on English language teachers’ beliefs as reflected in a higher secondary school in Bangladesh. Research was carried out from an interpretivist paradigm using a case study approach. Methodology and procedures used were qualitative in nature. The findings reveal a regular pattern of consistency in teachers’ beliefs based on the underlying features of prior learning experiences, administrative and education policy, students’ needs and requirements. The limitations of the study rest in the narrowness of its scope. Further large-scale studies may lead to a better understanding of teachers’ beliefs and their impact on teaching and learning.

Introduction

Teachers’ beliefs, decisions, course planning, classroom practices, previous language learning experiences, education, training, and assumptions are the different aspects of teacher cognition (Borg, 2006). To understand how learning takes place we have to understand how teaching is carried out from the teachers’ perspectives. The cognitive as well as the affective aspects of teachers’ lives have to be taken into consideration as beliefs and practices are outcomes of cognitive and affective factors of an individual’s life.

Beliefs of foreign language teachers regarding their teaching of a foreign/second language can be understood from their views and practices in class. Beliefs and assumptions teachers have are associated with their knowledge, teaching-learning experiences, classroom situations and socio-cultural aspects including the role of the teachers as self. These beliefs do not exist in isolation. They always exist in sets and are part of larger belief systems (Green, 1971). There is a strong relationship between teachers’ beliefs and their planning, decisions and practices (Pajares, 1992). This study focused on the influence of prior learning experiences on teachers’ beliefs.
The research was carried out with teachers teaching English as a second language (henceforth referred to as L2) in a higher secondary college in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh.

**Background of the study**

In Bangladesh English is the only foreign language being studied in the curriculum and is a compulsory component of the syllabus at all levels of schooling. English has been introduced at the tertiary level too. It has been noted that even after twelve years of formal English instruction students still lack proficiency in English. Students achieve the lowest scores in English in the secondary school public examinations (Khatun & Begum, 2000). The reforms introduced through the introduction of CLT approach, new textbooks and curriculum, teacher training programmes have not shown any desirable results (Rahman, 2009).

The importance of the HSC exams is higher than the SSC exams because it determines the course of future study, it is the gateway to tertiary education (Khan, 2010). But there is a wide gap between the proficiency of students at the HSC level and the proficiency required for entrance into tertiary study (Rahman, Kabir & Afroze, 2006). The percentage of failure in English shows that majority of students fail their HSC exams due to failure in English. At the HSC examination held in 2017 the total percentage of examinees failed was 30.26% and out of which 23.34 % failed in English, the results of the previous years have the same trendii.

I have been working in second language (L2) teacher education for many years. Interest in this study has arisen from my professional encounters with teachers who come from various parts of Bangladesh to take training. Researchers and teacher educators need to understand teacher beliefs in order to understand how successful teaching and learning can take place.

**Research questions**

The study investigated how teachers’ beliefs about L2 teaching are outcomes of their own learning experiences. The study was guided by the following research questions:
1. How do teachers’ prior learning experiences influence their beliefs about L2 teaching in a higher secondary school in Bangladesh?

2. What are the teachers’ beliefs about the use of L1 for L2 instruction?

3. What are teachers’ beliefs about the use of explicit grammar instruction for L2 teaching?

**What are teachers’ beliefs?**

In research, different terms are used by different researchers for the same construct (Clandinin & Connely, 1987) and often in confusing and contradictory ways (Crotty, 2003). In educational research and cognitive psychology the distinction between knowledge and beliefs is blurred. Nisbett and Ross (1980) propose that people have a vast store of knowledge to guide their actions and judgments. And “some of this knowledge may be represented as beliefs or theories, that is, reasonably explicit ‘propositions’ about the characteristics of objects or object classes” (p. 28). It is these beliefs which influence teachers’ thinking, planning, interacting and teaching. Beliefs represent people’s thought processes (Nespor, 1987). Beliefs exist within larger belief systems and are held by individuals through their personal experiences.

The distinction Pajares (1992) makes between beliefs and knowledge is that “belief is based on evaluation and judgment; knowledge is based on objective fact” (p. 313). Woods (1996) refers to beliefs as certain propositions which cannot be demonstrated but which can be disagreed about. Teachers’ beliefs are a structured set of principles which, they derive from experience, schooling, personality, theories, reading and other sources (Richards, 2008).

**Research on L2 teacher beliefs**

Research in teacher cognition was stimulated by Shulman’s (1987) contention that understanding of teachers’ beliefs was crucial for understanding how learning takes place (Calderhead, 1996). It is important to study teachers’ beliefs because teachers’ practices are influenced by both cognitive and affective factors such as, knowledge, attitude, perceptions, judgments, decisions which all inform their beliefs. Borg (2003) streamlines research in language teacher cognition into three major themes: i) Cognition and prior learning experience; ii) Cognition and teacher education; and iii)
Cognition and classroom practices. The current study falls under the first category of research.

**Influence of prior learning experiences on teachers’ beliefs**

Teachers enter the teaching profession with an “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975). As students they go through many hours of observing their teachers and this is an experience they carry with them into their lives as teachers. The influence of prior experiences has been found to be very strong in shaping teachers’ beliefs (Johnson, 1994). Johnson found that teachers’ beliefs originated from their formal and informal language learning experiences, images of themselves as teachers, and images of the teacher preparation programme. The formal language learning experiences had both positive and negative effects on teachers’ beliefs about L2 learning. In the images of the teacher preparation programme it became evident that their prior learning experiences influence their teaching methods.

The autobiographical writings of seven foreign language teacher learners and a teacher educator were investigated by researchers (Bailey, Bergthold, Braunstein, Fleishman, Holbrook, Tuman, Waissbluth & Zambo, 1996) who asserted that the teachers taught as they had been taught and if teachers are conscious of their past experiences it may be able to help them change their practices.

Studies (Almarza, 1996; Breen, 1991; Gatbonton, 1999: Woods, 1996) affirm the influence of prior learning experiences on teachers’ beliefs. Breen’s (1991) study reveals that teachers’ beliefs are informed by their own past experiences and their consideration of students’ cognitive abilities. Almarza (1996) asserts that student-teachers possess knowledge based on a rich store of diverse previous experiences and it is evident that their prior learning experiences guided their beliefs and practices. Woods (1996) in a longitudinal ethnographic study with eight ESL teachers reveals how teachers’ beliefs are outcomes of prior experiences and present situations too. Gatbonton (1999) study concludes that teachers’ pedagogical knowledge and thoughts could be acquired through teacher education programmes and by their own teachers.

**Teachers’ beliefs about explicit grammar instruction and error correction**

Change in methodologies of L2 instruction has brought about different views of the importance of teaching L2 using explicit grammar instruction with a
focus on form. However, studies (Borg, 1999; Burgess & Etherington, 2002; Eisenstein-Ebsworth & Schweers, 1997; Golombek, 1998; Numrich, 1996; Schulz, 2001) reveal that prior experiences have more influence on beliefs than introduction of innovative approaches and methodologies.

Teachers in Numrich’s (1996) study revealed that their language learning experiences were carried over to their teaching techniques too. They used or avoided strategies in their classroom teaching according to their own positive or negative experiences. Golombek’s (1998) study also reinforces the finding that teachers’ negative experiences of error correction in L2 classes make them hesitant to correct students’ errors.

The use of grammatical terminology and explicit grammar instruction can pose problems for some teachers in class but conversely, some teachers believe explicit instruction facilitates L2 learning (Burgess & Etherington, 2002). Puerto Rican teachers in Eisenstein-Ebsworth & Schweers (1997) study were more in favour of formal grammar instruction. They believed in the efficacy of grammar instruction as this worked for them when they were language learners. Peacock (2001) cites different research studies (Horwitz, 1985; Roberts, 1992; Kern, 1995, and Peacock, 1999) to affirm that “student beliefs about language learning originate from their second language learning experiences, particularly in secondary school” (p. 187).

The use of L1 for L2 learning has been the cause of much debate (Ellis, 1985). From the 1980s onwards importance of the facilitative role of the L1 in L2 instruction has gained predominance. Current developments in second language learning pedagogies propose the use of L1 for L2 instruction (Cook, 2001).

The studies reviewed above provide the theoretical framework of the present research paper and will help to analyse the research findings of the study.

Research methodology

The research took the form of a case study. Case studies attempt to investigate some complex social activity in real life situations with real people involved and try to give meaning to that activity instead of just abstract theorizing (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Stark & Torrance, 2005). The advantage of using a case study strategy in this project was that it provided an in-depth analysis of the proposed research questions. The techniques and topics used for inquiry in the present study were interpretivist
in approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) which helped to identify and understand how teachers’ beliefs are influenced by previous experiences.

Samples of the study were two English L2 teachers from a college in Bangladesh. Participants were chosen from a site where I had easy and convenient access and personal contact with the gatekeepers (Punch, 2005). I got permission to conduct my research at the first college I visited. Two teachers agreed to participate in the research project. They felt extremely privileged and took part in the study happily. Verbal consent was taken from them before the research began. It was made clear to them that their participation would be treated with absolute confidentiality and anonymity.

Data were collected through interviews and classroom observations. The data collection started with interviews which were conducted in English. Each participant was interviewed three times. There was an introductory interview at the initial stage mainly to build rapport with the participants. All interviews were audio recorded. Following the first two class observations there was one interview and then after two more class observations a final interview was taken. Discussions were generated through semi-structured interview which allows the questions to be included or omitted as necessary (Robson, 2006). The techniques and objectives of data collection have been presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Techniques and Objectives of Data Collection

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<th>Data Collection Techniques</th>
<th>Objectives</th>
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<td>Interviews</td>
<td>• Introduction and rapport building</td>
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<td>• Elicit information about teachers’ previous learning experiences</td>
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<td>• Elicit teachers’ beliefs about L2 instructions</td>
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<td>• Gain in-depth and detailed information of teachers’ professed beliefs about L2 instruction</td>
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Observations

- Link professed beliefs with prior experience and practice
- Record use of L1 for L2 instruction
- Record use of explicit grammar instruction
- Observe teacher-student interaction

Data analysis

Data collected through observations and interviews were analysed qualitatively. The audio recordings of interviews were fully transcribed verbatim using the authentic language of the participant teachers. The themes under investigation were assigned codes to identify and mark themes in the transcribed texts. The transcriptions were read and re-read to identify the themes as issues emerged which answered the research questions. Personal feeling, biases, preconceptions were put aside and data was viewed and analysed as objectively as possible.

Teachers’ beliefs emerging through interviews and observations

The main focus of the study was how prior learning experiences influence L2 teachers’ beliefs with specific attention to the use of L1 and grammar instruction for L2 teaching. The sub-theme of formal and informal learning has emerged from this main theme. The second and third research questions of the study have been brought under the second main theme which is the influence of prior learning experiences on beliefs about language teaching. Exam oriented teaching is a new theme which emerged but as this is related to other beliefs it has also been discussed within the main focus of the study. The two teachers are referred to as Teacher 1 (henceforth referred to as T1) and Teacher 2 (henceforth referred to as T2). In the discussion reference has been made first to T1 and then to T2 with extracts from the interviews.

The main themes and sub-themes have been categorised in Table 2

**Table 2 Teachers’ Beliefs**

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<th>Main Themes</th>
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<td>Formal and Informal Learning</td>
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Formal and informal L2 learning
The formal learning experiences of T1 were based on the Grammar Translation Method (henceforth referred to as GTM). When asked how he learned and improved his English he answered that talking with friends outside the class he improved his English and he ‘felt better in speaking English’. Talking about his formal education he said:

   In my school life my teachers and my [sic] also taught me to go through the books ... that is why I think from the very initial stage of my life my grammar foundation was strong enough to handle anything .... When I was a student ... I learnt from grammar translation method. So grammar, structure is my base ... Ok for them they are also from GTM, the present students they are not from the communicative environment.

The experiences of Teacher 2 were very different. He is a graduate of English literature and has a Masters in English Language Teaching. He has been in the teaching profession for six years. When asked about his schooling he answered:

   My teacher motivated me how to speak, how to write, especially my English teacher, she had the biggest contribution and inspiration towards me for learning better English. ... I started in a missionary school and in my school English was emphasised. So I developed a very positive attitude towards English.

T2 said that they were taught extra books apart from ones prescribed by the national curriculum board and this helped him to learn English better. The method of instruction for English teaching was grammar based. As T2 said:

   Yes, grammar was taught ...grammar classes were more in number... the way we were taught we were made to understand grammar is part and parcel and we learnt English through learning grammar.
The influence of prior learning experiences was also evident in T2’s belief about his own teaching. He was very positive and assertive in admitting the influence of his learning on his own teaching. He said:

*I can never say it does not have any influence. It influences definitely. Maybe I am not aware of the fact even sometimes but it influences my teaching sub-consciously. I learnt English through grammar still I find I have a notion to go for grammar because I was taught that way.*

Besides his formal learning he said he learnt English by taking part in extra-curricular activities. They had the opportunity to speak in English outside the classroom. It is his love for English which made him choose teaching as a career and also the fact that his parents were teachers. About his own teaching he said that he used a combination of GTM and CLT: *because I try to bring spontaneous participation in class... and a bit even the traditional because sometimes I focus on grammar.*

T2 is younger than T1, he has had his ELT education and some trainings as well. This has brought a change in his outlook. Even if beliefs are resistant to change, raising awareness can change beliefs. The difference between the two teachers in this study points to this fact. T2 was optimistic for the future because he said “a change is coming now I find teachers are getting conscious.” He realizes that raising consciousness and awareness of teachers could improve the teaching-learning situation of the country. This is the influence of his ELT education.

Beliefs expressed by both teachers support previous research on teacher cognition which have established that prior learning experiences influence teachers’ beliefs. Teachers of the current study professed the strong influence of their previous learning experiences both in school and outside school on their beliefs of L2 teaching. The images they have of themselves as teachers are very strong and positive (Johnson, 1994). Findings of this study are reinforced by the findings of previous studies (Almarza, 1996; Bailey et al., 1996; Gatbonton, 1998; Woods, 1996) which have revealed the strong influence of prior experiences on shaping teachers’ beliefs. The participant teachers expressed that it was natural to imitate their own teachers and teach like them.
Beliefs about the use of L1 for L2 instruction

The importance and necessity of the use of L1 for L2 instruction was a consistent theme throughout the class observations, interviews and narratives. Class observations revealed that teachers used L1 for L2 teaching profusely. Teachers identified five reasons for using L1. These are:

i. cognitive ability of students
ii. teaching of grammar
iii. making classes interesting and interactive
iv. explaining vocabulary
v. socio-economic status of learners

T1 said, he used L1 because:

*When I speak English I find that most of my students they do not understand me, they just look at me without understanding in that case my class becomes insipid, tasteless ... that's why sometimes I use Bangla....and they understand and they enjoy my classes.*

When asked if he learnt English with the help of Bangla, the teacher said that he used Bangla to learn English vocabulary because “certain words in English cannot be thoroughly understandable in English but in Bangla the clear identification is there” and also he learned grammar topics in Bangla and if he uses Bangla for teaching grammar it helps his students to understand. For teaching grammar, teaching vocabulary T1 emphasised the importance of the use of L1. He believed in explaining every thing in Bangla for easy comprehension of students.

T2 said about his own school that Bangla was used more than English and it helped him, English teaching was bilingual and he says he also uses Bangla because:

*... the institution, the level of the students and the background of the students all in fact compel me to use my L1 and since their family background is not supportive for English I use Bangla but I try to give the inspiration within them. I try to grow a positive psychological attitude towards English in them.*

When asked how much he should use L1 for teaching, he said:
Well I have to speak very truly that here we have to use Bangla considering their socio-economic situation…we mingle English with Bangla…say for example when I use Bangla sometimes instructions get much clearer to them… it helps their better understanding.

A specific focus of investigation of the present study was: What are teachers’ beliefs regarding the use of L1 for L2 instruction? This is a new area in the field of L2 teacher cognition research. The present study revealed teachers’ beliefs to be affirmative towards the necessity of the use of L1 for L2 instruction. Findings discussed reflect and confirm these beliefs. These findings also reinforce the influence of prior learning experiences on teacher’s beliefs. Even though the teachers identified several reasons for using L1, the most consistent theme emerging for the use of L1 was their own L2 learning experiences. Use of L1 for L2 instruction has been strongly advocated by Cook (2001), the use of L1 may improve teaching methods and bring innovations in methodology.

**Beliefs about the use of explicit grammar instruction**

The importance of teaching and learning of grammar was a consistent theme in the interviews and classes. Even though the syllabus requires that the course is taught using the communicative approach the whole teaching-learning situation makes this impossible. T1 said he could not use the communicative approach in the classroom because students want: “the grammatical background; that’s ok for them to pass the examination”. T1 was not very confident about the applicability of CLT in classes which were too large with high discrepancy between the teacher student ratio.

T2 was more positive in his attitude. He believed he could mix the traditional method and CLT for teaching his classes. In two classes observed T2 taught grammar. When T2 was asked how much importance he gave to the learning and teaching of grammar he had the same answer. He said: *Our system compels us to do that ... because they are facing the exam. Since NCTB has introduced grammar in the syllabus we need to teach it specifically.* He expressed the influence of his ELT learning which made him think he should teach grammar implicitly but the influence of his schooling made him use grammar explicitly as well.

**New theme:** Exam oriented teaching emerged as a new theme but since it is inter-related and exists as part of the belief system (Green, 1971; Tercalioglu,
2005) of teachers this warrants a brief discussion. T1 said he had to teach grammar because students were tested on grammar in their examinations and they wanted explicit grammar instruction. T2 also emphasised the pressure to complete the syllabus and that his teaching was geared towards exam achievements, “...here let me be very clear, most of our students are exam oriented in fact we the teachers too”. Catering to students’ requirements and demands teachers have to be aware of what may be beneficial or detrimental to successful language learning (Horwitz, 1988) and teachers felt it was their moral responsibility to prepare students for exams (Golombek, 1998).

**Conclusion**

The influence of prior learning experiences on teachers’ beliefs has become evident from data derived from the interviews and class observations which have supported each other. The patterns of beliefs which emerged were regular and consistent. The findings further suggest the notion that teachers’ beliefs about L2 teaching remain similar across diverse cultures, socio-political systems and educational contexts.

**Pedagogical implications:** The pedagogical implications of the study are manifold. Teachers need to be made aware of their beliefs and how these beliefs influence their classroom practices. Excessive use of L1 and explicit grammar instruction may be detrimental. There has to be a check and balance on the use of L1 and explicit grammar instruction to make L2 learning successful.

**Teacher education:** The current study has identified a direction for teacher education. Teacher education programmes can introduce significant components around teachers’ beliefs for teachers to become more aware and conscious of their teaching techniques. This would enable them to progress into their profession being informed. In Bangladesh recently most private universities are introducing M.A. ELT programmes. Curriculum designers of these programmes and teacher educators could take into account aspects of teachers’ beliefs in the teaching practicum (Numrich, 1996) and try to help teachers overcome their detrimental beliefs. It is hoped this research will contribute significantly to the field of L2 teaching and learning in the country and will open up tentative avenues for further improvements and enquires.
References


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¹ The terms foreign and second language have been used interchangeably in this study.
² This information was collected through personal visits to the office of the controller of examinations.