

TEACHER BELIEFS AND PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES IN TWO
MALAYSIAN YOUNG LEARNER ESL CLASSROOMS

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A project report submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree of
Master of Education (Teaching English as a Second Language)

FACULTY OF EDUCATION
UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MALAYSIA

DECEMBER 2013

DEDICATION

With obeisance and reverence upon God Almighty,
I dedicate my work to my parents,
Rajeswari Tharmalingam and Jeyasingam Navaratnam,
Without whom my existence would be incomplete,
To my beautiful siblings,
Inbam and Prabha,
Who have been my support team and cheering squad,
And
To my rock,
Diren,
Without whom my sanity may not have been in check,
My sincere gratitude to all of you for your prayers, support and love.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In preparing this project report, my first and foremost sincere gratitude and appreciation are extended to my supervisor, Dr. Zairus Norsiah Azahar, without whom this report may never have been. Her guidance, support and encouragement throughout the completion of this report was most imperative and of paramount. Perseverance and self-belief are two traits I learnt from her through this experience.

Furthermore, I must take this opportunity to thank all lecturers of the Language Academy and Faculty of Education for their guidance and support. Not forgetting my friends and fellow postgraduate students for their continuous motivation and support. Unfortunately, it is not possible to list all of them in this limited space.

Last but not least, my sincere gratitude to Nuur and Anna for consenting freely to be participants in this study. Finally, my heartfelt appreciation to everyone who has been my support and guide in completing this project.

ABSTRACT

Farrell (2007) says that investigating teachers' beliefs and the corresponding classroom practices can proffer insights on what teachers need to change, improvise and improve in their approaches towards language teaching and learning. The focus of teaching and learning in this time of age is on processes and practices that are situated in meaningful activity and not cognitive capacities alone. In view of that, this mini case study seeks to explore teacher beliefs and their pedagogical practices in young learner ESL classrooms through a sociocultural perspective within the Malaysian context. Another central focus of this study is in discerning the interrelatedness of stated beliefs and enacted practices of teachers teaching young learners. Two participants from a rural primary school in Johor were selected. Semi-structured interviews were carried out to identify the beliefs of the teachers in teaching and learning in young learner ESL classrooms. Classroom lessons were recorded and then transcribed to discern the pedagogical practices of the teachers. Furthermore, stimulated recall interviews were carried out to gain more insightful data on teacher beliefs, pedagogical practices and the interrelationship of the former and latter. Four main themes were generated on teacher beliefs, namely teaching practices, classroom communication, roles in the classroom and teaching of grammar. Three main themes were generated to identify the pedagogical practices of teachers teaching young learners. These themes are classroom interaction, learning styles and motivation. Results show that teacher beliefs and practices may not occur in a linear fashion. Convergence and divergence of stated beliefs and enacted practices reveal the complex, intricate and 'symbiotic' relationship of teacher beliefs and practices. Findings from this study may bring to attention the importance of exploring teacher cognition in contributing towards policy making, syllabus and material design, lesson planning and teaching methodologies and approaches for the Malaysian English classroom.

ABSTRAK

Farrell (2007) berpendapat bahawa pengkajian terhadap kognisi dan kepercayaan guru dan amalan pedagogi mereka dapat memberi pendedahan tentang perkara-perkara yang perlu diubahsuai, ditambahbaik dan ditingkatkan dalam kaedah pengajaran dan pembelajaran di dalam kelas. Fokus pengajaran dan pembelajaran di dalam era ini adalah pada proses dan amalan yang terletak dalam aktiviti yang bermakna dan bukan bertumpu pada kapasiti minda kognitif semata-mata. Dengan mengambil kira perkembangan tersebut, kajian ini dijalankan bagi meneroka kepercayaan guru dan amalan pedagogi mereka di dalam kelas pengajaran Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua bagi kanak-kanak menerusi perspektif sosiobudaya dalam konteks Malaysia. Sehubungan itu, perkaitan dan perhubungan antara kepercayaan guru dan amalan pedagogi mereka juga menjadi fokus utama kajian ini. Dua peserta atau responden telah dipilih daripada salah sebuah sekolah berkategori luar bandar di Johor bagi menjalankan kajian ini. Temubual separa berstruktur telah dijalankan bagi mengenalpasti kepercayaan guru-guru dalam pengajaran dan pelajaran dalam kelas Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua. Proses pengajaran dan pembelajaran dalam kelas telah dirakam menggunakan video dan seterusnya transkripsi interaksi antara guru dan murid didapatkan bagi mengkaji amalan pedagogi guru-guru. Kemudian temubual ingat dirangsang atau 'stimulated recall' telah dijalankan bagi mendapatkan data yang lebih menyeluruh tentang kepercayaan guru-guru, amalan pedagogi mereka serta perkaitan antara kepercayaan guru dan amalan pedagogi mereka. Empat tema utama diperolehi yang merangkumi dapatan tentang kepercayaan guru ialah amalan pengajaran, komunikasi dalam bilik darjah, peranan guru serta pengajaran tatabahasa. Tiga tema utama diperolehi yang merangkumi dapatan tentang amalan pedagogi guru ialah interaksi dalam bilik darjah, stail pembelajaran dan motivasi. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa perkaitan antara kepercayaan guru dan amalan pedagogi mereka adalah kompleks dan rumit. Dapatan ini dapat menyumbang kepada penggubalan dasar, pembinaan silibus, bahan dan rancangan pengajaran, serta metodologi dan pendekatan pengajaran bagi kelas Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua di Malaysia.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A	-	Anna
CF	-	Corrective Feedback
CLT	-	Communicative Language Teaching
COB	-	Classroom Observation
CoP	-	Community of Practice
EFL	-	English as a Foreign Language
EIL	-	English as an International Language
ELF	-	English as a Lingua Franca
ELT	-	English Language Teaching
ESL	-	English as a Second Language
FOF	-	Focus on Form
IRF/IRE	-	Initiation-Feedback-Response/Evaluation
KBSR	-	<i>Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Rendah</i> (Integrated Curriculum for Primary Schools)
KSSR	-	<i>Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Malaysia</i> (Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools)
L1	-	First Language
L2	-	Second Language
LINUS	-	Literacy & Numeracy Programme
MBMMBI	-	<i>Memartabatkan Bahasa Melayu, Memperkasakan Bahasa Inggeris</i> (To Uphold Bahasa Malaysia and To Strengthen the English Language)
MOE	-	Ministry of Education
N	-	Nuur
R	-	Researcher

S1	-	Student 1
S2	-	Student 2
SCT	-	Sociocultural Theory of Learning
SR	-	Stimulated Recall
SS	-	Students
T	-	Teacher
TESL	-	Teaching English as a Second Language
TPR	-	Total Physical Response
UTM	-	Universiti Teknologi Malaysia
ZPD	-	Zone of Proximal Development

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

This study is conducted to investigate teacher cognition and their pedagogical practices in two young learners' ESL classroom. Consequently, this study seeks to explore teacher beliefs about language teaching and learning and its links with teacher classroom practices. The interrelationship of teacher beliefs and their pedagogical practices in the L2 classroom make up the core elements to be studied in this research. Hence, this introductory chapter consists of several major sections to provide a framework for the study. These sections are the introduction, background of the study, the statement of problem, objectives of the study, research questions, the significance of the study as well as the scope and the definitions of key concepts and terminologies.

1.2 Introduction

It is an established fact that the ability to speak and communicate in English is a major factor that contributes to the development of an individual and a nation. Yet, for people of countries such as Malaysia where English is a second language, mastering the language may not be as easy as it seems. Long (1985) and Van Lier (1996) state that comprehensible input is best gained through interaction with speakers of the language.

Hall and Verplaetse (2000: 289) affirm that “interpersonal connections” developed in classroom interactions “nurtured student engagement and provided numerous opportunities for language learners to use and extend their knowledge of the target language.” Therefore, classroom interaction and practices spearheaded by the teacher is a pedagogical vehicle that provides learners with opportunities to gain comprehensible input through social interaction. Socioculturalists such as Vygotsky (1978) also advocate social interaction as the force that drives learning and hence construction of knowledge.

From the perspective of second language learning, L2 learners depend almost entirely on their teachers and the language that transpires in the classrooms to gain as much comprehensible input as possible. This is because for most L2 learners, they do not grow up or live in circumstances where they are constantly exposed to or have much access to language input that is English. Therefore, English language teachers and their language classrooms are undeniably at the forefront of providing learners with aforementioned access and exposure to the English language. It is indeed an important role that language teachers in this country shoulder. It is also certainly unquestionable how well placed English language teachers are in the education system to make a difference in the lives of their language learners. Therefore, how teachers teach and what drives their schools of thought take centre stage. Essentially, what teachers “know, believe and think” reflect on what they “do and practice” in their language classrooms (Borg, 2003).

In line with this view, socioculturalists like Vygotsky (1978) and his associate Leontiev (1981) advocate learning through social interaction. The role of the teacher within this framework is as a guide and an expert who steers learners accordingly through the language learning process. According to Vygotsky, interaction provides scaffolding, the means through which one person assists another one who cannot perform independently. External scaffolding includes modeling, coaching, and providing feedback (Ziglari, 2008). The teacher as the expert guide is able to coach, model and provide feedback, among others, to scaffold the novice learners' language learning process. This scaffolding (Bruner, 1978) is pitched in the learners' ZPDs whereby the coaching that is provided by the expert (teacher) enables learners to eventually internalize and self-regulate their own learning. Thus, the language teacher plays multi-faceted roles in her quest to teach her learners. In realizing these enormously significant roles, teachers are guided and driven by their beliefs, attitudes and thoughts of what is right, important and necessary for their learners.

In achieving a socially-interactive and functional language classroom, teacher education plays a central role in honing teachers and their teaching methodologies to cater to the needs of their language learners. Over the years of teaching English, teachers also develop an understanding and knowledge of their learners' language needs through experience. Consequently, teachers are driven to teach based on what they know and feel what their language learners need; i.e. teacher beliefs. Teacher beliefs are the driving factor that is a great influence on how and what teachers teach (Borg, 2003; Richards, Gallo and Renandya, 2001). Inevitably, what they believe is also what they bring into their classrooms. As proposed by Van Lier (1996), interaction with speakers of the language is how language learning occurs. Thus, the pedagogical practices that the teacher observes and applies in the classroom is immensely influenced by teacher beliefs so much so that these practices conversely and eventually provide us with a peep-hole or direct view into what is it that teachers believe, know and think about language learning and teaching.

1.3 Background of the Study

Second language acquisition is no easy feat for young children as they encounter many challenges and difficulties along the way. This is particularly true for young language learners; learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) such as those in Malaysia. The national curriculum strives to create balanced and holistic individuals who will in adulthood serve as functional and productive members of the society contributing to the development and progress of the nation (National Education Philosophy, Ministry of Education). In order to produce such individuals, the government realizes the need for increasing opportunities and provision of English language learning.

Such aspirations are clearly evident in the new and improved Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools that has replaced the Integrated Curriculum for Primary Schools (KSSR, Ministry of Education, 2011) as well as the recently announced Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) that seeks to promote and improve bilingual proficiency. “Every child will be, at minimum, operationally proficient in Bahasa Malaysia as the national language and language of unity, *and in English as the international language of communication.*” Through the new blueprint, the MOE (Ministry of Education) seeks to carry out eleven shifts to transform the education system which includes ensuring every child is proficient in English. The MOE is taking extra measures such as expanding the LINUS programme to include English literacy (which previously only focused on Bahasa Malaysia literacy and numeracy skills). Teachers are also provided with more relevant professional development to ensure that the new and improved Education blueprint sees the light of day through programmes like MBMMBI (Ministry of Education, 2011) - ‘To Uphold Bahasa Malaysia and To Strengthen the English Language’.

English is the lingua franca of the economic and business world, the effervescent medium of intercultural communication and the international language

of the current borderless world. The status of English has only improved in the past decades and undoubtedly English is a hot commodity throughout the world. Putting aside terminologies such as second language and foreign language (ESL/EFL), the current status of English is as an international language (EIL) and a lingua franca (ELF). Jenkins, Cogo & Dewey (2011) provide a definition of ELF; “On the VOICE website, it is described as an additionally acquired language system which serves as a common means of communication for speakers of different first languages.” The ever-changing and multifaceted definition of the English language can also be explicated as per Seidlhofer (2004):

“It is important to note that the term International English is thus used in reference to two quite different linguacultural situations: on the one hand, there are Kachru’s Outer Circle countries, where English can be said to be localized to meet domestic, intranational purposes. On the other hand, there is English as a globalized means for international communication, which, of course, transcends all national boundaries.”

(Seidlhofer, 2004)

Seeing that English is a valuable asset to equip our students with, the responsibility of the teacher is ever more crucial. The teacher’s pedagogical practices and what she or he brings into the ESL classroom are building blocks for young L2 learners’ language development. L2 learners are sometimes thrust into learning environments that are threatening, increase their affective filters and lack rich language input. This could be due to their inability to comprehend speakers of the English language let alone gain a good command of the language. The challenges of teaching in many schools where English is more of an ‘alien’ language are daunting. L2 learners speak and learn in their first languages in schools and at home. Even communication outside the home and school institutions is carried out in the first language. Hence true enough English is alien to them. In such scenarios, the teacher is the sole mediator between L2 learners and the English language.

As sole mediators of the language, what teachers bring into the language classroom is vital to getting L2 learners familiar with the language, hence the socialization process into the L2 learning. The pedagogical practices of the teacher in the L2 classroom are the building blocks for L2 learners' language development. The teacher, as the sole mediator and driving force of the language teaching and learning, moulds and manoeuvres the L2 learners' language learning journey.

1.4 Statement of Problem

Chitravelu et al (2005) posit that "In the rural areas in Malaysia, English is a foreign language because the rural child has very little environmental support in his learning. This is because very few people and institutions in the rural areas use English." This provides us with an idea of how rural children in Malaysia grow up in language-poor environments with little or no access to the English language outside of school. Primary education being the building block for further language acquisition, pedagogical practices of teachers of young learners should be highlighted to further enlighten us on the enormity of the language teacher's impact, influence and significance. In achieving this, the belief system of the teachers shapes the pedagogical practices that the teachers bring into the classroom. A teacher's belief system is the driving force that guides, shapes and manoeuvres her or his pedagogical practices. Teaching young learners in a rural setting presents teachers with various challenges in catering to these young learners' learning needs and styles. Hence, these challenges may foreshadow an 'interesting' set of beliefs on what works and what does not, in a rural young learner classroom.

On another note, Desimone, Smith & Frisvold (2009) state that "measuring classroom instruction is a key component of studying the implementation and effects of education policies." Sinclair (1987) concurred with the importance of classroom discourse. He explains that classroom discourse is an important area to be researched as it opens doors to understanding and exploring various aspects such as the process of teaching and learning, the professional routines, styles and attitudes of teachers as

well as diverse teaching methodologies employed and their effectiveness. Classroom interaction comprises two important figures; the teacher and the pupils (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). The interaction that occurs between teacher and pupils makes up classroom discourse. In this case, the teacher's role is immense and weighty as she or he shapes the interaction and practices that transpires in the classroom.

To a certain extent, interactional patterns that occur in a language classroom are somewhat influenced by the beliefs of the teachers. Johnson (1992: 84) proclaims that "teachers' theoretical beliefs may shape the nature of classroom interactions as well as have a critical impact on student's early perceptions of literate practices." Hence, teachers' beliefs play a central role in the emergent interactional patterns of classroom discourse. Analysing classroom interactional patterns provides us with opportunities to examine the nature of interaction that may provide deep insights into teacher beliefs and attitudes. Most importantly, we can also identify prevalent interactional patterns that are related to how and what teachers believe they should teach. Nishino (2012: 395) explains that "teachers' beliefs and practices are situated in their own unique teaching contexts". Thus, the way teachers interact with their pupils is also underlain by their beliefs on language teaching and learning and is influenced by the context and setting within which their language teaching occurs. It is vital and may be valuable to identify interactional patterns that occur between teacher and learners in a language classroom and further explore the underlying beliefs of the language teacher based on her classroom interactional practices.

To sum up, there has been very little research conducted regarding teacher beliefs in terms of the teaching of young learners in a rural setting. There has been limited research on teacher beliefs and the interrelationship of these beliefs with their pedagogical practices within the Malaysian context. This study seeks to explore these elements in the perspective of teaching young learners from a rural background within a sociocultural approach. Teachers teaching young learners in a rural setting face various challenges that need to be addressed. Seeking out answers of what teachers in this setting believe works for their classroom is vital in shedding some light to tackling the challenges of teaching young learners in rural schools. Having

said that, identifying the interrelationship between teachers' beliefs and their pedagogical practices will be the core element of this research. In doing so, analysing the classroom discourse will provide the data to highlight the interrelationship of teacher beliefs and their pedagogical practices.

1.5 Purpose of the Study

This study aims to focus on two aspects; teacher beliefs and classroom pedagogical practices, and examine how they are related. It has been posited that teachers think and act based on underlying beliefs that anchor their teaching practices, methodologies and thoughts (Borg, 2003; Richards, Gallo and Renandya, 2001; Johnson, 1992). On the other hand, the classroom is where we can source out the wealth of language teaching and learning, where teachers put to practice what they believe.

1.6 Objectives of the Study

Hence, there are three objectives that are formulated to carry out this study:

- i) To identify teacher's pedagogical beliefs about language teaching and learning in two young learner ESL classrooms

- ii) To discover the teacher's pedagogical practices in two young learner ESL classrooms

- iii) To discern the extent to which teacher's pedagogical beliefs about language teaching and learning are interrelated with the pedagogical practices

1.7 Research Questions

The umbrella issue that this study seeks to examine is in terms of how teacher beliefs are being translated into the pedagogical practices that occur in the language classroom. To seek more focused insights into the issue, teacher beliefs are looked into from the perspectives of teaching young learners who come from a rural background with little access to the second language outside the language classroom. In order to shed more light on the issue, there are three research questions that are sought to be answered.

- 1) What are the teacher's pedagogical beliefs about language teaching and learning in two young learner ESL classrooms?
- 2) What are the pedagogical practices of the teacher teaching young learners in two ESL classrooms?
- 3) To what extent do teacher beliefs about language learning and teaching interrelate with the pedagogical practices in the classroom?

1.8 Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it seeks to discern teachers' beliefs in terms of what they believe their role is in the language classroom as well as how learners learn a language. Furthermore, answers to the aforementioned questions can then help to elucidate whether teachers' beliefs are translated into their teaching and classroom practices in terms of interactional patterns. Farrell (2007) says that investigating teachers' beliefs and the corresponding classroom practices can proffer insights on what teachers need to change, improvise and improve in their approaches towards language teaching and learning. In view of that, this study hopes to bring to attention the idea that teachers need to examine their pedagogical beliefs and whether their classroom practices reflect their beliefs accordingly. From this study, the

findings and information obtained could serve to inform ESL classroom pedagogical practices in Malaysia. Besides that, this study may also contribute to the body of literature on teacher cognition in terms of teacher beliefs and decision-making during classroom interaction with young Malaysian ESL learners.

Moreover, another significance of this study is in terms of contributing to the body of literature in exploring English language teaching and learning in Malaysia. Musa *et al* (2011) argued that literacy learning in Malaysia should be positioned within the theory of literacy as social practice. Thus, the focus of teaching and learning is on processes and practices that are situated in meaningful activity and not cognitive capacities alone. This study may contribute towards understanding the teaching and learning process of English as a Second Language in the sociocultural setting of the L2 classroom. Insights gained may be useful in informing policy making, syllabus and material design, lesson planning and teaching methodologies and approaches for the Malaysian English classroom.

1.9 Scope of the Study

This study is non-quantitative and thus takes on the qualitative approach. Therefore, this study does not seek to identify the effectiveness of teaching methodologies employed by the teacher through studying their interactional patterns. It is also not designed to identify or determine students' language achievement based on certain interactional patterns employed by the teacher. This study is focused on exploring teacher pedagogical beliefs and how these beliefs transpire through the interactional patterns in two young learner ESL classrooms.

1.10 Definition of Terminologies

The definition of significant terminologies below is based on key literature review and is in context of this study.

Sociocultural Theory of Learning

The forefather of sociocultural theory of learning is Vygotsky and his ideas of mediation, internalization, the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and scaffolding are the fundamental elements that make up the framework of this theory. The sociocultural theory of learning propagates that learning occurs when situated in a social setting. Sociocultural theory emphasizes that an individual's mental development can be achieved with meaningful verbal interactions with others in social contexts which involve complex and higher mental functions. (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). Therefore, learning is assumed to occur when learners are thrust into robust, interactive environments.

Teacher Beliefs

Teacher beliefs are typically what teachers perceive and believe to be important and necessary in order to teach. Borg (2003) uses the term *teacher cognition* to refer to the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching – what teachers know, believe, and think. He further illustrates that “teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practically-oriented, personalised, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs” (pg.81). Kagan (1992) defines teacher beliefs as unconsciously held assumptions (that teachers have) about students, classrooms and the academic material to be taught. Richards, Gallo & Renandya (2001) further

illustrate that the study of teachers' beliefs forms part of the process of understanding how teachers conceptualize their work.

1.11 Conclusion

To conclude, this study seeks to inform teachers and educators on the inter-relativity between teacher beliefs and their teaching practices. Farrell (2007) says that often teachers' beliefs and viewpoints do not correspond with their teaching practices and classroom instructions. It is vital for teachers to understand the link between their thoughts and assumptions to what they really say and do (speech and actions) in their classrooms to harness all their capacities in becoming reflective practitioners and improved teachers.

This chapter seeks to proffer an overview of the study by introducing the background of the study as well as the statement of problem. From the problem statement, research objectives and research questions are derived to inform the study. The significance of the study is also discussed to highlight the importance and benefits of the study for teachers and educators. In addition to that, the scope of the study is also discussed as well as a brief definition of key terminologies is provided.

The subsequent chapter will review and discuss key literature that is related to the research objectives and questions of the study.

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