

The Gap between English Language Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

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Abstract

This article reports the beliefs of the teachers about language teaching and learning and their actual classroom practices. The study shows that teachers who are responsible for academic development of language learners fail to exercise some of their cherished beliefs about language teaching and learning in actual classroom situation. The data for the study was collected from teachers to know their beliefs about language teaching and learning. The data for the confirmation of their classroom practices was collected from students of the same teachers to know the extent to which teachers actually practice their own beliefs. It was found that there was significant gap between some of the beliefs of English language teachers and their classroom practices. The study implies that these areas where the gap between beliefs and practices does exist need careful consideration in terms of their application in the language classroom for better results in L2 learning.

Keywords: Language teachers; Beliefs; Practices.

Introduction

Second language learning under formal situation is mostly teacher directed. Different teachers have different beliefs about language teaching and learning. These perceptions differ from teacher to teacher. But in this article, we investigate the most cherished beliefs about L2 learning. The article tries to find out the extent to which the teachers actually practice their own beliefs about language learning. Commonly there exists a great gap between what teachers believe very helpful for language teaching and learning and what they really teach in the classroom. If there does exist this gap between beliefs and practices, then it might retard language learning in actual classroom situation. The ideal beliefs

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of the teachers about language teaching and learning are of no help to actual language learning. Because language teaching beliefs are based on the applicability of these beliefs in actual classroom setting.

The study does not restrict this gap to classroom situation only; it also shows the utopian beliefs of the teachers and their awareness by the learners. The learners should be aware of what they are taught is the best content, and it is taught in the best possible manner. They should be aware of the practice involved therein. Through experiencing the actual classroom practices the learners are the best judges to know the beliefs of the teachers. The teachers might not be aware of the fact that there does exist a gap between what they believe and what they actually practice in the classroom.

Research Aims

The study is concerned with teachers' beliefs and practices about L2 learning because this constitutes the essence of L2 learning in a formal situation like classroom. The study aims to investigate the gap between the teachers' beliefs and their actual classroom practices. It focuses on the beliefs of the teachers about different teaching and learning processes and strategies and their actual classroom practices. The previous research ignored the importance of classroom practices; which were mostly researchers based and they did not take into account the relative importance of classroom realities. Teresa Pica emphasizes that there is need to bridge the gap between researchers and language teachers. This brings to light the fact that classroom considerations are very important for language learning to take place. But even teachers may not act according to what they believe to be important for language learning.¹

Research Question

The research question of the present study is:

Whether or not there exists gap between teachers' beliefs about L2 learning and their actual classroom practices?

Research Hypothesis

In the light of the above research question our hypothesis is:

There is a gap between teachers' beliefs about L2 learning and their actual classroom practices.

Literature Review

A growing body of research seems to show that interaction plays an important role in learning a second language.² It has been suggested that in order to develop successful teacher training programs, it is paramount that we have an understanding of what it is that English as a second language (ESL) teachers know and practice.³ Teachers' perceptions of their teaching roles, along with their *beliefs* regarding teaching and learning, are considered particularly powerful and have been found to have a strong impact on student success.⁴

Over the last decade, research on teaching and learning, particularly within higher educational institutions, has provided empirical evidence that teacher beliefs influence not only how they approach their teaching but how students approach learning.⁵ Thus, in order to make language learning to be more effective, there is great need that there should be no difference between what the teachers believe and what they actually bring into the language classroom.

Interactive language instruction involves the teacher and learners engaging in activities that create conditions that foster language use, which lead to further language development.⁶

A number of activities for pairs and small groups foster interaction and focus on meaningful communication (Ellis, 1999). Research seems to suggest that grammar instruction is most effective when it is focused on raising learners' awareness of how a structure is formed, what it means, and how it is used rather than on practicing drills for accuracy.⁷ To create effective interactions, teachers ideally also know when it is appropriate to talk about language and when it is appropriate to let learners use language, and how to balance fluency and accuracy work. Research suggests that there is an appropriate time and place for form focused instruction and that direct grammar instruction can help acquisition for some learners.⁸

In the course of developing learner autonomy the teacher's role is considered to be that of a facilitator, a counselor and a manager in the learning process.⁹ In considering the impact of the teacher learner interactions and of social factors on L2 learning, teacher beliefs have started to emerge as highly significant, particularly in how they may affect language learner beliefs about themselves and how learners approach learning.¹⁰ The purpose of the investigation discussed in this paper is to uncover what Prosser and Trigwell describe as a relationship between the person experiencing and the object experienced. In this case the person

experiencing is the teacher, the object experienced is the teaching of language through learner.¹¹

Methods and Procedure

For the present study the questions related to the beliefs of the teachers are based on the classroom concerns taken from Pica which she has referred elsewhere as “the ten most wanted list in language teaching”.¹² Many of the questions focus on the nature of language taught and learnt in the classroom environment, instructional strategies and pattern of classroom organization. Other questions relate to the language used in the class, grammar instruction, role of teacher and students and different instructional materials used in the class.

The ten questions about the beliefs of the teachers are:

- i). Does the use of mother tongue hinder second language learning?
- ii). Are both comprehension and production important for language learning?
- iii). Should students drill and practice new forms, vocabulary and structures?
- iv). Is group work helpful in second language learning?
- v). Should grammatical instructions be given attention in the class?
- vi). Does error correction assist the L2 learning?
- vii). Should accurate pronunciation and accuracy in production be given importance?
- viii). Should fluency be given any importance in language learning?
- ix). Does the use of instructional materials help language learning?
- x). Should the teacher be facilitator and participant in language classroom?

Data Collection

The data for the present study was collected from 32 teachers of District Swat and District Okara (Pakistan) whose experience of English language teaching ranged from 4 to 20 years. They all had good background knowledge and experience of teaching English language at different levels. They belonged to different private and public sector language schools, colleges and institutions. Some of the institutions were autonomous, while others were affiliated with different boards and universities. A questionnaire consisting of the

above ten questions was distributed among them to know their language teaching and learning beliefs.

Another questionnaire consisting of the same ten questions (edited) was distributed among 182 students of the same teachers to help us know the actual classroom practices of these teachers. Students were randomly selected (at least five students for each teacher) in order to avoid any misinformation about actual classroom practices. For the convenience of comparative analysis, the number of the students was then adjusted to the number of teachers.

The ten questions do not encompass all the beliefs of the teachers about language learning but they are the most wanted questions to be met in any language classroom. Each individual question is about a single belief of the teacher about second language learning. Each question had two choices and so we expected equal choices on the part of the teachers in order to accept null hypothesis. For this purpose, we used nominal scale to see the responses of the teachers about that belief and then their actual classroom practice of the same belief if confirmed by them.

Results

In table 1, the responses of the teachers about different beliefs and their actual classroom practices have been compared. The 32 teachers have responded to different beliefs contained in the questionnaire. Their actual classroom practices are reported, and compared with their beliefs:

Table 1: Comparison of teachers' beliefs and their actual classroom practices

Questions	Belief	Practice
1) Mother tongue hinders L2 Learning	25 (78%)	10 (31%)
2) Both input & output are important in L2 learning	28 (88%)	14 (44%)
3) Students should drill & practice in language class	29 (91%)	25 (78%)
4) Group work is important in L2 learning	28 (88 %)	13 (41%)
5) Grammatical instruction is helpful in L2 learning	21 (66%)	27 (84%)
6) Error corrections assist the learners	30 (94%)	29 (91%)
7) Accuracy in pronunciation & production is important	15 (47%)	18 (56%)
8) Fluency in the target language is important	18 (56%)	14 (44%)
9) The use of instructional materials helps L2	30 (94%)	8 (25%)

learning		
10) Teacher should be facilitator and participant	30 (94%)	16 (50%)

The comparison of teachers’ beliefs and their actual classroom practices shed light on the fact that there is a great gap between some of the teachers’ beliefs and practices while this gap is very less in some of these beliefs. So it is better to see this gap among these beliefs and practices one by one.

Does the use of mother tongue hinder second language learning?

Figure 1

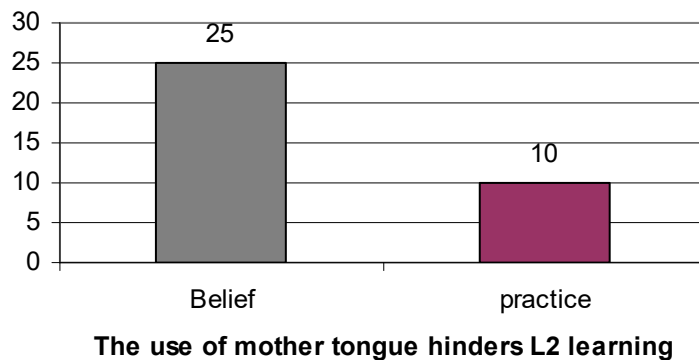


Table 2

Chi-Square	6.42
Df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.001

The Figure 1 shows that there is a significant gap between this belief and its practice. 78% (25) teachers believe that the use of mother tongue hinders second language learning and so should not be used in L2 classroom. Whereas only 31% (10) teachers actually teach the target language without using mother tongue in their second language classroom. The gap between belief and practice is also evident from the chi square value. The chi square value X^2 $p < 0.05$, $df(1) = 6.42$ was far greater than the corresponding critical chi square value (3.84). It shows that our hypothesis about this belief is accepted. Thus there is a gap between teachers’ belief and their actual classroom practices.

Are both production and comprehension important for L2 learning?

Figure 2



Table 3

Chi-Square	4.66
Df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.000

Figure 2 shows that 88% (28) teachers believed that both comprehension and production are important for L2 learning whereas only 44% (14) teachers focus on these aspects of language learning in their classroom practices. The greater chi square value $X^2 p < 0.05$, $df (1) = 4.66$ also shows that our hypothesis about this belief is accepted. Statistically speaking, there is a significant gap between teachers' belief and their actual classroom practice.

Should students drill and practice new form, vocabulary and structures?

Figure 3

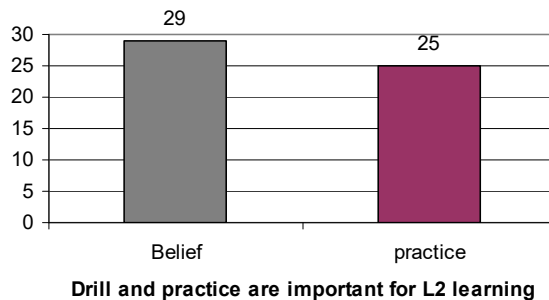


Table 4

Chi-Square	0.29
Df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.000

The Figure 3 shows that 91% (29) teachers believed in the relative importance of drill and practice of new forms, vocabulary and structures in L2 learning. Actual classroom practice reveals that most of the teachers 78% (25) involve the students in drill and practice. The table also shows that the chi square value X^2 $p < 0.05$, $df(1) = 0.29$ is less than the corresponding critical value (3.84). So, our hypothesis about this belief is rejected and there is no gap between belief about drill and practice and the actual classroom practice.

Is group work helpful for second language learning?

Figure 4

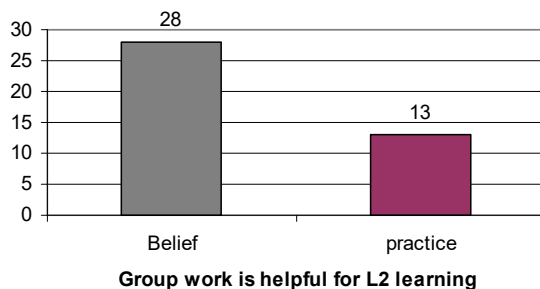


Table 5

Chi-Square	5.62
Df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.000

The Figure 4 shows that 88% (28) teachers believed that group work is helpful in L2 learning. They are of the view that students should work in groups to enhance their L2 competence. But the facts are otherwise. Only 41% (13) teachers actually practice group work in the class. The table shows that the chi square value X^2 $p < 0.05$, $df(1) = 5.62$ is greater which indicates that there is a significant gap between belief about group work and its observance in the classroom.

Should grammatical instructions be given attention in the class?

Figure 5

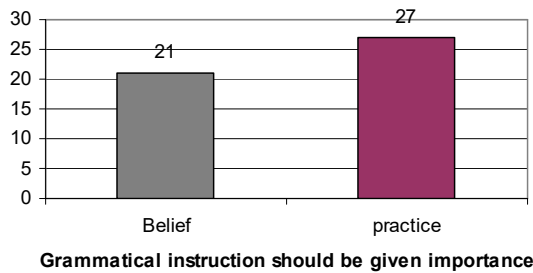


Table 6

Chi-Square	0.75
Df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.077

The response of the teachers in favor of grammatical instruction was 66% (21). Whereas their actual classroom practice was 84% (27). This shows that teachers put more emphasis on grammatical instructions than their belief about the importance of grammatical instructions. The chi square value X^2 $p > 0.05$, $df(1) = 0.75$ is far less whereas the alpha value (.077) reveals that null hypothesis is accepted and there is no significant gap between this belief and its practice.

Does error correction assist the learners?

Figure 6

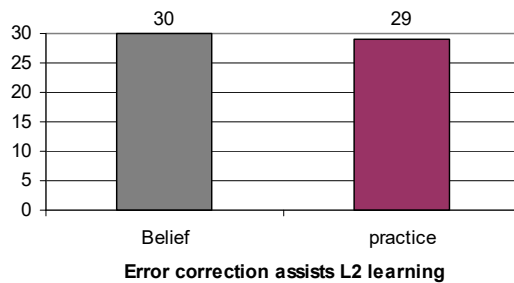


Table 7

Chi-Square	0.016
Df	1

Asymp. Sig.	.000
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The percentage of the teachers’ belief about error correction was 94 % (30). It means that teachers believe in error correction. The classroom practice closely resembles their belief about error correction. The teachers practiced 91% (29) error correction in their class. The chi square value $X^2 p < 0.05$, $df (1) = 0.016$ is far more less which suggests that there is strong coherence between this belief and its practice in the classroom.

Should accurate pronunciation and accuracy in production be given importance?

Figure 7

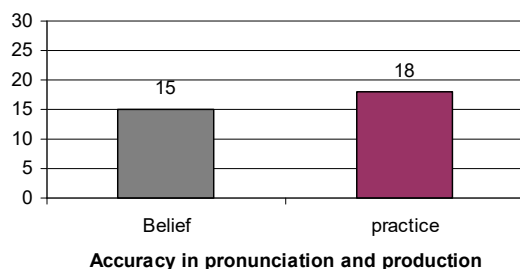


Table 8

Chi-Square	0.27
Df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.724

The response of the teachers about their belief in the importance of accuracy in pronunciation and production (speaking and writing) was 47%. Whereas more of the teachers (56%) were practicing accuracy in pronunciation and production. The chi square value $X^2 p > 0.05$, $df (1) = 0.27$ also reveals that there is no significant gap between the belief and practice.

Should fluency be given any importance in L2 learning?

Figure 8

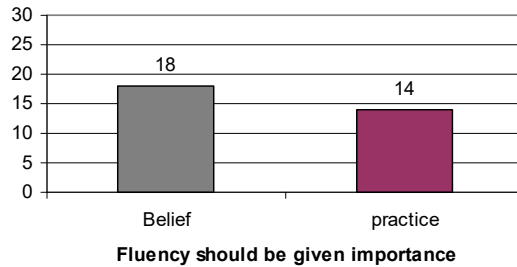


Table 9

Chi-Square	1
Df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.480

56% teachers believe that fluency should be given due importance in L2 teaching and learning. But the actual classroom practice is 44%. Chi square value X^2 $p > 0.05$, $df(1) = 1$ shows that there is no great gap between this belief and its practice.

Does the use of instructional materials help language learning?

Figure 9

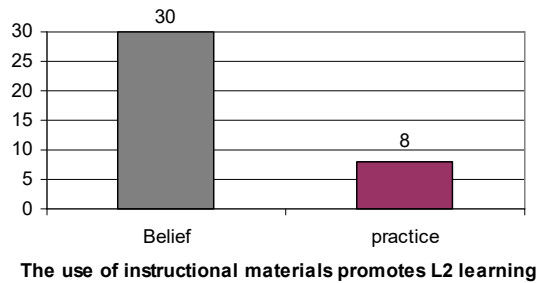


Table 10

Chi-Square	12.73
Df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.000

The Figure 9 showing the belief of the teachers about the use of instructional materials indicates that 94% teachers believe in the use of instructional materials in L2 class. But the actual classroom practice (25%) shows that few teachers use instructional materials. The chi square value X^2 $p < 0.05$, $df(1) = 12.73$ is far greater than the corresponding critical chi square value (3.84). Thus, our hypothesis is accepted and there is a significant gap between teachers' belief and their actual classroom practice.

Should the teacher be facilitator and participant in language classroom?

Figure 10

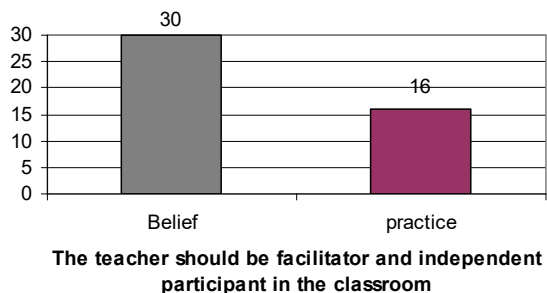


Table 11

Chi-Square	8.22
Df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.000

The Figure 10 about the teachers' belief regarding the role of teacher and student in L2 classroom shows that 94% teachers believe that teacher should be facilitator and participant in the class and student should be active participant as well. But the actual classroom practices (50%) show that many of the teachers are not playing the role of facilitators and participants. The chi square value X^2 $p < 0.05$, $df(1) = 8.22$ is greater than the corresponding chi square critical value (3.84). Thus our hypothesis is accepted and there is a great gap between this belief of the teachers and their actual classroom practice.

Discussion

The results of the study indicate that the responses of the teachers about these ten beliefs and their classroom practices are not the

same. There is significant gap between the beliefs and practices about the use of target language, importance of input and output, group work, use of instructional materials and the role of teacher and student. There is no significant gap in the beliefs and practices about drill and practice, role of grammatical instructions, error correction, accuracy and fluency.

Most of the teachers believe that mother tongue should not be used in L2 classroom but they are unable to avoid mother tongue in L2 classroom. It was observed that only those teachers make extensive use of the target language who are competent enough or teaching in the private institutions.

A striking difference was found regarding the importance of input and output and its observance in the class. Almost all the teachers agreed that both input and output are very important in developing L2 competence. But the actual classroom practices do not conform to the teachers' beliefs. Surprisingly the most practiced skills were reading and writing. This is probably due to the deficient paper based examination system which focuses mainly on reading and writing skills.

It was observed that the practice of group work was also very rare in the L2 classroom despite the fact that most of the teachers believe in its practice. The teachers did not practice group work because of the overcrowded class, higher management, lack of time to be equally distributed between teacher instruction and students' group work. The most striking gap was found between the teachers' belief about the use of instructional materials and their practice. The teachers are forced to teach from the textbook in order to avoid the arrangement for different instructional materials. The non-availability of resources too, leads to the lack of practice.

In most of the public sector institutions the teacher's role is seen as authoritative. He is seldom a facilitator and independent participant although he believes it to be necessary for L2 learning. The classroom setting, students' negative response and lack of interest lead to such traditional role of the teacher.

Conclusion

The study aimed at identifying the gap between teachers' beliefs and their actual classroom practices. The results clearly indicate that certain areas of language teaching and learning need careful consideration in terms of their application in the language classroom. In the language classroom, all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) must be given due importance. Ignoring any of these skills may result in poor performance by the

learners as regards their L2 competence. The learners must have access to the resources (instructional materials) that can facilitate L2 learning. The role of the teacher should be that of facilitator and independent participant rather than that of the traditional authoritative role. The teachers are the ultimate authority to guide their students in language classroom, so they should practice their beliefs which would eventually lead to effective L2 learning under formal situation like classroom.

Delimitations

The study is not concerned with the beliefs of the teachers as such, but it focuses the actual classroom practice of any belief on the part of the teacher. Here we do not investigate the relative value of any belief but the gap and relationship about beliefs and practices. We do not go into the root causes of this gap if it exists, but we want to highlight this gap between beliefs and practices. As each belief has its own circle around itself we cannot generalize our finding in totality. But we can discuss each belief in isolation in order to know the degree of its applicability in actual classroom setting. The study focuses on this very aim, because learning is not so much concerned with learning beliefs as with actual classroom practices. The students never learn beliefs but they experience different classroom practices and thereby learn a language.

Any belief about language learning comes from its actual practice, if there is no practice there will be no concept about language learning in a second language classroom setting. We cannot here evaluate different contrastive beliefs about language learning or bring the whole literature on this topic in discussion. But we simply want to see that whatever the belief of the teacher is whether he brings into practice that very belief or not.

Implications

This study implies that the gap between teachers' beliefs and practices influence L2 learning. It has practical implications for language teaching and learning. Language teaching and learning under formal situation like classroom is mostly teacher driven and if teachers practice their own beliefs in language classroom, it may enhance L2 learning. The study will help L2 teachers to see the gap between their own beliefs and practices and thereby evaluate their own performance in L2 teaching and learning activities. It will highlight the area for further research to investigate the causes of the gap between beliefs and practices. The study has pedagogical implications to indicate potential areas of

improvement for language teachers in order to make sure language learning according to their own beliefs. It provides them the opportunity to realize the similarity among their beliefs and compare their classroom practices in the light of those beliefs.

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