

What Primary School Teachers Say About Their Beliefs on Teaching and Learning of English as a Second Language (ESL)

(Apa yang Diperkatakan oleh Guru Sekolah Rendah Mengenai Kepercayaan Mereka terhadap Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Bahasa Inggeris Sebagai Bahasa Kedua)

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ABSTRACT

The belief system upheld by a teacher largely controls and shapes his or her views and practices of the subject matter and pedagogical content knowledge. Whether or not this applies to an English as a Second Language (ESL) context underpinned the purpose of the study presented and discussed in this paper. This Case Study aimed to explore three purposively selected rural primary school teachers' beliefs and practices about teaching and learning of English. They each had fifteen, six and one year of experience; respectively. Data was gathered through individual interviews and triangulated with observations and document analysis. Themes were identified through constant comparative and thematic analysis and assisted with the use of CAQDAS, Atlas Ti version 7; a software for analyzing qualitative data. Findings indicate that despite the different number of years of experience, the teachers' beliefs had an impact on how they felt English should be taught and therefore employed pedagogical strategies they believed would work for their students. This implies there is a need to for sharing good practice which will enable even novice teachers to get the pedagogical content knowledge which are tested through real teaching experiences.

Keywords: Teachers belief; content knowledge; pedagogical content knowledge; primary school teacher

ABSTRAK

Sistem kepercayaan yang dipegang oleh seseorang guru menguasai dan membentuk pandangan serta amalannya terhadap kandungan subjek serta pengetahuan kandungan pedagogi. Sama ada tanggapan ini juga boleh diaplikasikan dalam konteks pengajaran Bahasa Inggeris Sebagai Bahasa Kedua inilah yang mendasari tujuan kajian yang dibentang dan dibincangkan dalam kertas ini. Kajian Kes ini bertujuan untuk meneroka kepercayaan dan amalan pengajaran dan pembelajaran Bahasa Inggeris dalam kalangan tiga orang guru sekolah rendah yang telah dipilih secara bertujuan. Mereka mempunyai lima belas, enam dan satu tahun pengalaman; secara urutan. Data dikumpul melalui temu bual perseorangan dan ditriangulasi dengan pemerhatian serta analisis dokumen. Tema telah dikenal pasti melalui 'constant comparative' dan analisis tematik yang dibantu dengan penggunaan CAQDAS, Atlas Ti versi 7; satu perisian untuk menganalisis data kualitatif. Dapatan menunjukkan yang meskipun bilangan tahun pengalaman berbeza, kepercayaan guru-guru tersebut terhadap pengajaran dan pembelajaran Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Kedua mempunyai impak terhadap pandangan mereka tentang bagaimana Bahasa Inggeris patut diajar. Dengan demikian menyebabkan mereka menggunakan strategi pedagogi yang dipercayai berkesan untuk pelajar. Implikasi kajian ini adalah perlunya perkongsian amalan terbaik yang membolehkan guru-guru novis memperoleh isi kandungan pengajaran yang telah diuji melalui pengalaman pengajaran sebenar

Kata kunci: Kepercayaan guru; pengetahuan isi kandungan; pengetahuan isi kandungan pedagogi; guru sekolah rendah

INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning is a complex process and can be conceptualized in many different ways. One important element in teaching is a teacher's belief towards the subject (Samuelsson & Grantstrom 2007). Individual teachers have different beliefs and assumptions about what constitutes effective teaching and learning (Richards & Lockhart 1996) and these are brought to the teaching and learning environment. The belief system upheld by a teacher largely controls and shapes his or her views and

practices of the subject matter, pedagogical content and how it should be learned and taught. Farrell and Lim (2005) reiterated that teachers hold a complex set of beliefs about teaching and learning which influence the instructional judgements and decisions made in the classroom. Teachers' views and beliefs together with their attitude and knowledge drive classroom behavior (Schoenfeld 2001). Herman et al. (2008) believe that "belief systems consist of an eclectic mix of rules of thumb in a more or less structured way. These belief systems influence how teachers teach in the classroom. Haney et al. (2002)

found that teacher beliefs lead to prediction of subsequent classroom action for five of the six-teachers observed in their research. Thus, teachers' beliefs is said to relate to what happens in the classroom. Meanwhile, Ertmer (2005) believes that teachers are the 'change makers' in any educational change. Thus, their attitudes and knowledge influence how successful the classroom activities are. According to Wozney et al. (2006), it is important to find out about teachers' beliefs and attitudes as these characteristics perform as filters when teachers need to acquire new knowledge and skills.

It may be concluded from these literature that the form and content of the classroom language environment is shaped by the teaching and learning styles of the teachers and students and how the teacher views his or her role (i.e., as instructor, counselor, facilitator or even translator) in the classroom learning context (Richards & Lockhart 1996). It is important to determine teacher's role in the classroom as in the teacher lies the success or failure of any educational policy or motivation, the attainability or otherwise of any educational objectives (Richards 1985). Hence, whenever there are attempts to reform or improve education, teachers are the centre of attention as students learning is most influenced, guided, and facilitated by teachers. For instance, when there was an embarkment of the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English in Malaysian schools, the teachers were first given due emphasis by providing them with the required training. This shows that teachers are the ones who have to absorb changes before they can channel these attained changes to the students. According to Jerry et al. (1992):

The transactions that take place between students and teachers are really the heart of the educational process. Even though the overall structure of education may not appear to change very rapidly, teachers make many changes and accommodations to respond to external influences. These changes often influence the nature of instructional transactions.

Teachers have always been held accountable for the progress of their students. In Malaysian schools, teachers have to make sure that students perform in formative and summative examinations. They are expected to demonstrate that their students are mastering basic language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. In addition, the current reform movement places a high priority on teaching higher order thinking skills. Students are to be exposed to problem solving and task based activities, to work cooperatively, collaboratively and develop a commitment to lifelong learning to facilitate optimal learning as they learn or acquire the English language. Besides classroom activities, teachers are filling roles outside of the classroom that have long been the sole responsibility of the administrators. On top of that, they are also loaded with endless paper work. In carrying out their teaching responsibilities, they have been expected to communicate effectively, manage conflict, use good judgement in making decisions, and engage in effective

planning. A teacher's role also continues to change as a result of social, political, and cultural influences. Thus, the complexity of teacher's role is increasing.

The behaviour teachers model will affect students' attitudes towards teaching and learning. Teachers who are genuinely enthusiastic about teaching and the subjects they teach tend to develop student enthusiasm for learning. Teachers must also demonstrate that they really know and like their students. When students feel positive about their teachers and are enthusiastic about learning, they are more likely to succeed. When students enjoy success in schools, their attendance rates improve, their test scores are better, and their self-concepts are enhanced. Therefore, teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning English as a second language is important as teachers exhibit behaviours that can have a powerful impact on students' learning. Hence, the purpose of the study discussed in this paper was to explore primary schools teachers beliefs on English language teaching and learning to understand their practices. It is to answer the research question "What are the primary school teachers' beliefs on Subject Matter Knowledge (SMK) and Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) in the teaching and learning of English as a Second Language?"

METHODOLOGY

Basturkmen (2012) suggested that research on teacher beliefs should consider study of relatively experienced teacher and inexperienced teachers in the same school. Hence, the research design employed in this study was qualitative in nature – a Case Study involving 3 teachers. They were defined as a veteran teacher (15 years of experience), an experienced teacher (6 years of experience) and a novice teacher (less than 1 year of experience). Teachers with different years of experience are believed to have differing personalities, beliefs and teaching styles and this would further add to the depth and richness of data collected. It was hoped that the different number of teaching experience would illuminate different (if not similar) beliefs and practices. The teachers were interviewed and voice recorded. This was the main source of data. They were also observed and video recorded and their lesson plans were analysed. The observations and documents served the purpose of data validity via triangulation.

Data obtained through interviews with the teachers were coded and analyzed using the Grounded Theory approach (Strauss & Corbin 2015); involving a constant comparative process (Silverman 2010) and thematic analysis. Patterns and themes are identified from the data collected (Braun & Clarke 2006). To assist in the coding of the data, a CAQDAS called ATLAS. ti Version 7 was used. The rigorousness of the data analysis process and trustworthiness in reporting the data ensured the validity of the data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the interviews indicate that the three participants believed that subject matter knowledge (SMK) is important to ensure that an effective teaching and learning environment takes place in the ESL classroom. The veteran teacher stressed that she is always prepared before class and strives to understand the content that is to be taught and improves her skills and knowledge before entering class. She explained:

... you have to prepare at least half an hour before. You have to ponder and then understand vocabularies you know from the text books. Even we have to refresh our skills and our knowledge before entering the class.

The experienced teacher meanwhile reiterated that insufficient subject matter knowledge will hinder explanation and students may find it difficult to comprehend what is conveyed. She said that:

subject matter knowledge is important because it helps you in explaining the concepts that your students need to understand, so if you don't have a good err... background of subject matter knowledge, you don't have enough err... knowledge about it, it will hinder you in explaining the concepts to your students which will make it harder for them to understand. So, plus it also boosts my confidence to teach in the classroom.

Meanwhile the novice teacher said that teachers need good grammar knowledge and they need to know how to teach or the students will be in the dark and this will lead to confusion. She mentioned:

I think my knowledge of SMK is really important as it affects the teaching and learning ESL. I need to have good grammar knowledge, I need to know how to teach based on topics and I need to know the essence of what I am going to teach if I want to teach better. Otherwise, my students will be in the dark and I may even confuse them.

The teachers also believed that pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) plays an important role in planning activities and tasks. The teachers feel that there is a need to stray away from the text books and incorporate interesting activities to evoke interest among students as students who are not exposed to the English language outside the classroom often lack interest in the classroom. Techniques that the teachers use in the classroom are also important according to the teachers. According to the novice teacher:

I not just focused on ... through teaching text books. ... I can vary the teaching and learning using different activities... not just individual, group work, more communicative activities you know for them to use the language. We want them to use the language rather than you know just books and read.

According to both the veteran teacher and experienced teachers, 'chalk and talk' method is no longer attractive

and does not work with students who need interesting techniques to motivate them. The veteran teacher stressed that using technology evokes students' interest in learning the English language, as she explained:

... of course chalk and talk no longer is attractive for students. Now, you have to use err... a very modern way where you have to use your laptops and screens and then have to give them err... pictures, images a lot. I find children get very excited when you use laptops nowadays and actually it reaches what we teach. The lesson reaches them very fast when you use modern equipment like video recorder, player or in fact I use a speaker in my class. So, when I do the reading and I use the speaker, they get so excited. Everybody wants to, you know, they want to speak up and they want to read the passage. So, they like equipment to be used.

Meanwhile, the experienced teacher mentioned that:

the type of teacher that is preferred by students is someone who is fun and energetic as well as knowledgeable. She should be able to err... catch their interest as well as teach them in a fun and entertaining way whereby they are not bored with the old chalk and talk method.

Hence, teachers need to use a myriad of teaching styles, strategies, methods, approaches and pedagogies to meet the needs of the students and to ensure that learning takes place in the ESL classroom. Traditionally, teachers used the 'chalk and talk' method. However, according to Serbessa (2006), the traditional 'chalk and method' is not suitable for students of the present generation. This is in line with Dewey (1966) who stressed that children have to be engaged actively in the teaching and learning process and create their own learning experience rather than merely be passive receivers of what is delivered to them. This is further supported by Barlow (2012) who stressed that the use of 'chalk and talk' in the classroom provides a passive learning environment and results in poor examination results.

In addition, children's acquisition has often been linked to the amount of exposure obtained. Dickinson (2012) reiterated that children learn the language best when adults interact with them offering prompt contingent and appropriate reactions and responses. When young children converse with adults at home, their understanding and comprehension of the language is enhanced. In this study, the teachers believed that limited exposure outside the school is a factor that contributes to low performance in the English language as not all students have meaningful exposure to the English language outside their classroom. Majority of the students in the school do not use the English language outside their classrooms. According to the teachers, the students are from non-English speaking background and they use their L1 which is the Malay language most of the time which leaves the teachers no choice but to use the students' L1 in the classroom to aid comprehension. According to the veteran teacher, she had to:

... use their mother tongue to make them understand, especially vocabulary lessons for students who are not from English speaking background. I told you if I were to explain to them for every lesson, then it's going to be, it's going to take a lot of time and maybe I might not finish the syllabus on time and it might affect their results also.

The experienced teacher also believed that the use of the students L1 is important to ensure comprehension of what is taught. She revealed:

...it helps them to understand a certain word or certain context that I'm trying to teach. Because, if I just use, err... use English, they just look at me blankly, not understanding what am I saying. So, I need to use a bit of Bahasa Malaysia in order to help them understand better and then they can relate these two languages.

According to the novice teacher, despite realizing that she should not use the students L1 to teach, in order to avoid confusion, she has to use the students' mother tongue, Bahasa Malaysia. She remarked that:

Before this, I believe I should not do translations, but now I really like think, it is very helpful for me because, because the students have little exposure to the English language. For example, if they ask me what is the meaning of sadness, I cannot mention it in a long sentence, saying sadness is someone being sad. It's like....Confuse them even more? Yah, it's like confusing them a bit more. So, I said 'kesedihan'. So, it is easier.

Auerbach (1993) supports the use of L1 in the classroom and says that "starting with the L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learners' life experiences, allowing them to express themselves. The learner is then willing to experiment and take risks with English". He feels that the mother tongue can be used for the following occasions: explanation of the syllabus and the lesson; record keeping; classroom management; scene setting; language analysis; presentation of rules governing grammar, phonology, morphology, and spelling; discussion of cross-cultural issues; instructions or prompts; explanation of errors; and assessment of comprehension.

The teachers in this study admitted that they often have to resort to using the students' mother tongue to explain meaning of words and concepts in the classroom so that favourable responses are gained. Thus, the teachers commented on the need for students to use the language more frequently. As their use of English is limited, they do not understand English and are not motivated to learn the language. Thus, the teachers find it difficult to encourage the students to speak as they rarely use the language and the limited hours in school are insufficient.

Concerning teacher attitude, according to the veteran teacher, the right attitude is important to be a good teacher. When teachers impart knowledge, it will benefit students not just temporary but for life. She believed that teachers

need to have a positive attitude towards teaching and will not neglect their students. She said that: ...as a teacher, I would say the teacher plays a very important role here. The teacher cannot neglect any students.

Meanwhile, the experienced teacher believed that teachers need to cater to different needs of students and be enthusiastic and passionate about teaching besides being knowledgeable and flexible. According to her:

...a good teacher is somebody who is enthusiastic and passionate about teaching as well as knowledgeable in her subject area. Also, she needs to be flexible to adjust to her surroundings

Meanwhile, the novice teacher believes that a teacher needs to know the students well, be creative, have goals and provide individual attention. She also needs to be strict but approachable. She feels that:

... an effective teacher should be flexible, like they know the students more. Err, as well as being creative, know, really focused on like really know the students well and have goals like, ok these students can do this, ok, try to push them to, to succeed in doing that and maybe have a good classroom management because that's something I really hhh... (sigh) need to improve on (laughter). Characteristics of a good teacher. Err... I think, flexible, approachable, err... it can be strict like maybe, yah, it can be strict but still approachable. I'm, I'm trying to do that with the students.

All the teachers however agree that they play the roles of a facilitator, counselor and translator in the ESL classroom as they commented:

... a teacher should be a good instructor, good facilitator when they are doing the activities and then err... good counsellor. This is very important in this era, a good counsellor and then of course a good translator." (veteran teacher).

... a teacher plays a lot of different roles in the classroom. Okay, she needs to be a little of everything. Meaning like err... need to be a part of err, a little bit of instructor, little bit of facilitator, a counsellor, translator. Cause at different stages of the teaching and learning process, you take up different roles. Meaning, at the beginning when you are teaching, you are an instructor, then later on, when they are doing their activities, also when you are trying to convey new knowledge structures, you have to be a translator as well." (experienced teacher).

... a teacher has many roles in the classroom. Like facilitator, counsellor and translator of course and yah, it works, a teacher has many roles and responsibilities. It's not just teaching, it's like, teacher is basically helping the children to become you know more, not just err... more intellectual person but as well as other aspects as well, you know, we have err... all the experiences, we have to fulfill and help the students to achieve all that, so, mmm, it's not just, I'm an English teacher, I'm teaching them about English but its more than that. Its teaching that, facilitating them how to be

more independent, mmm, like be more responsible for their work, for their own learning. (novice teacher).

Where teaching strategy is concerned, there was a common key belief that there should be a variety of sources and activities used in the ESL classroom. According to Jackson (2006), the classroom is a place where constructivist theories and practices meet reality and the real world environment is created in the classroom. Most students have different learning styles and comprehension abilities, so using constructivist method with the use of visual aids, pictures, video, internet, assignments and group projects help students increase their comprehension. According to Jones et al. (1994), engaged or meaningful learning in the classroom is essential for students to be energized by their learning. The veteran teacher stresses that she always uses sources from the internet and strays away from text books at times to provide a variety of materials and uses modern equipment like the LCD projector, video recorder and speakers as they are effective sources. She feels that:

... children get very excited when you use laptops nowadays and actually it reaches what we teach. The lesson reaches them very fast when you use modern equipment like video recorder, player or in fact I use a speaker in my class. So, when I do the reading and I use the speaker, they get so excited. Everybody wants to, you know, they want to speak up and they want to read the passage. So, they like equipment to be used.

On the other hand, the experienced teacher said she incorporates games into her lessons to encourage participation and interaction among students. According to her:

... English is important and should be taught in a fun and interesting way because English is a very fun language. Hence, the practices that one should conduct in an ESL classroom is to have a lot of interesting activities like songs, chants and fun games.

Meanwhile, the novice teacher said that English should be taught through songs, movies and experiments. She often uses big books with pictures and stories that she had created for weaker students to evoke their interest in learning the English language. According to her:

... it should be taught in various ways. For example, it can be music, through songs, through books, err... maybe it can be from watching the movie and then maybe you can do sort of like experiments, err... lots of different ways and I think yah, different. We should try different ways instead of focusing on just using text books and everything because children have different level of proficiency so we should really know their background before we start planning our lessons and everything. Yup. A few times already I have done a big book with them. So, there will be pictures and the story. I will repeat it for one week but for different, for different, what is it called, for different lesson, for example, writing, reading.

Thus, the teacher participants unanimously agreed that the students are more motivated to learn through fun and interesting activities and when good teaching materials are used in the teaching and learning process.

The pressing concern however is that the teachers do not have sufficient time to prepare different materials all the time as they are bogged down with other non-teaching duties that hinder them from doing their actual job which is teaching. The teaching profession according to them is getting more challenging, demanding, frustrating and exhausting and is killing their passion to teach.

The veteran teacher described the teaching profession as “burdensome and too taxing.” She stressed:

I’m not talking about teaching and learning, but other duties like collecting fee, distributing forms, paper work, documentation, err... where these clerical jobs interrupts or hold up the teaching and learning processes in school. They should reduce this. The government has to come up with another plan where you have to reduce all these. Teachers don’t have time to mark students’ work, no personal contacts with the students, we don’t have time to recognize our students, who are they, like I told you what are their levels.

Meanwhile, the experienced teacher described the teaching profession as challenging and exhausting. According to her:

The teaching profession has changed over the years. It’s definitely more challenging but as err... but also very interesting as it has incorporated many changes over the past years. But, however these days it’s becoming very exhausting with a lot of paper work as you have to handle both the teaching in the classroom as well as the paper work outside which err... mmm... like limits your time to actually plan a better lesson for your students.’

Similarly, the novice teacher’s views that the teaching profession, “... can be demanding, frustrating, challenging. I will not say easy, interesting. I will not say stress free.”

As the teacher is an important key to determine the impact of teaching and learning, it is hopeful that the investigation on the teacher’s thoughts and actual practices in the ESL classroom will provide insights on teachers’ beliefs and practices, realize the teachers’ strengths and weaknesses and provide a better picture of what transpires in the ESL classroom. Moreover, this study may provide teachers and the MOE information about teaching and learning in the ESL classroom and may be helpful and beneficial to ensure effective teaching and learning practices in the ESL classroom.

CONCLUSION

It may be concluded that SMK is essential in the teaching and learning environment and the quality of teaching is very much influenced by the amount of SMK the teacher has. In order to optimise student learning, the

link between what a teacher believes and knows and the way she teaches is important. PCK shows a teacher's capability in handling the teaching and learning process in the classroom and an effective teacher has good PCK in order to create an environment that fosters learning. It is worth recalling that exposure to the English language is needed to enhance students' English. However, it seems impossible for teachers to be in control to enhance students' English if the students themselves and their parents are not aware of the importance of practicing it at home. The teachers' responses could also be used to conclude that positive attitude and proper approaches applied by teachers will result in student success. These factors should be considered for the appropriate selection of techniques so that student attention is gained and their interest in the language is sustained. An implication that may be illuminated is that PCK comes with experience and therefore for the benefit of novice teachers or for teacher training purposes, there should be sharing of best practices or collaborative teaching. This would help in handling the issue of workload.

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