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A STUDY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' BELIEF IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Abstract

Teachers' belief is one of the key areas in the field of teacher cognition. The beliefs teachers hold characterise their instructional approach and classroom practice. This paper reports the findings of a study which explores English as Second Language (ESL) 'Guru Cemerlang' (Master Teacher) beliefs in teaching and learning. Two English teachers from two boarding schools were selected as participants of the study. Both teachers have a minimum of 8 years to maximum of 28 years of experience in teaching English language and have been awarded the 'Guru Cemerlang' Scheme by Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA). The data were collected through 2 semi-structured interviews, 8 classroom observations and 8 stimulated-recall interviews over the period of 4 weeks for each participant. The findings indicate that the ESL teachers demonstrate specific beliefs in teaching and learning which are assigned in the following themes: selective processing, cooperative learning, and cultural identity. This study implicates the importance of teachers to identify their beliefs in teaching and learning as it would help to improve their pedagogical decision and professional growth.

Keywords: English language teaching, teachers' belief, ESL teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Many studies have looked into teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning in order to explain what goes on in the classroom. Many of these beliefs are found to influence teachers' instructional approach and guide the way teachers behave. In definition, teacher beliefs are notions on teaching, learning, learner, their discipline, and roles (Borg, 2011). Teachers deem these beliefs to be true and play a significant role in shaping their instructional approach and behaviour.

Despite the many beliefs identified to be held by ESL teachers throughout the studies, teachers' beliefs are not always reflected in what teachers do in the classroom (Phipps & Borg, 2009). Some studies (e.g., Basturkmen, 2012) found that teachers' beliefs are not very consistent with what they do in the classroom. Beliefs elicited through questionnaires and interviews may or may not correspond with what teachers do in the classroom. Thus, careful examination is required in identifying and understanding teachers' beliefs that can support teachers' pedagogical decision (Farrell & Guz, 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many studies have covered teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning in order to explain what goes on in the classroom. Many of these beliefs are found to influence teachers' instructional approach and guide the way teachers behave. In definition, teacher beliefs are notions on teaching, learning, learner, their discipline, and roles (Borg, 2011). Teachers deem these beliefs to be true and play a significant role in shaping their instructional approach and behaviour.

Research on teacher cognition proliferated in the late 1930s and early 1980s, and one of the core areas in the study is the teachers' belief. Nespor (1987) describes teacher belief as teachers' 'episodic memory' in which the memory is organized into personal experience, events or incident. Kagan (1992) describes teachers' beliefs as teachers' 'implicit assumptions' about teaching and learning. Pajares (1992), on the other hand, described it as an "individual's judgment of the truth or falsity of a proposition, a judgment that can only be inferred from a collective understanding of what human beings say, intend, and do" (p.316). Finally, Borg (2001) defines beliefs as "a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held and is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by the individual and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further it serves as a guide to thought and behaviour" (p.186). The teachers used these preconceptions and implicit theories in decision-making and interactive teaching. Despite the array of conception, through the literature of teacher belief, it is found that teachers' belief, besides knowledge, is a major determinant of teachers' perception, judgement, and behaviour (Borg, 2001; Shavelson & Stern, 1981; Pajares, 1992; Kagan, 1992; Rueda & Garcia, 1996).

Teachers' belief have been studied in several areas that include the teachers' beliefs about teaching and classroom practice (Richards, Tung & Ng, 1992; Gow & Kember, 1993; Gleeson & Davison, 2016); learner and learning (Levine, 2003; Liu, Ahn, Baek & Han, 2004; Wong, 2010; Xu, 2012; Kissau, Rodgers & Haudeck, 2014; Garrity & Guerra, 2015; Olusiji, 2016); subject matter (Richards, Gallo & Renandya, 2001; Pan & Block , 2011; Farahian, 2011; Ahmadi & Shafiee, 2015); assessment (Brown, 2004; Harris & Brown, 2009; Barnes, Fives & Dacey, 2015; Opre, 2015) and curriculum (Prawat, 1992; Richards, 2013).

During the early 1970-1990s, there were several studies conducted in which teachers are found to hold different beliefs in language teaching and learning. Johnson (1994) has found that the teachers' previous experience or images of learning the second language characterized their perceptions and teaching beliefs. Prior to their teaching practice, these images formed a belief they held in learning a second language which has been described by Lortie (1975) as the apprenticeship of observation. The beliefs, later, became a guideline in their practice and caused a conflict with the newly formed and emerging belief throughout their teaching practice. The conversion or gestalt shift (Nespor, 1987) has triggered a struggle to the teachers in reconciling the conflicting beliefs and perceptions. Pajares (1992) claims that the newly acquired belief is vulnerable as it will be influenced by prior beliefs which have been formed earlier. Thus, the teachers felt powerless to alter their instructional practices as their images of

second language learners which manifested through their own learning experience continues to act as model of teaching.

The research on teacher cognition have been conducted in both contexts namely the mainstream education and the teaching of English (as first, second and foreign language). In the context of Malaysian English language education, there are several studies conducted on teacher cognition and these studies found out that Malaysian teachers hold different beliefs in teaching and learning, their beliefs are shaped by different factors, and their classroom practices converged with their stated beliefs.

Studies on teacher cognition in Malaysian context have shown that teachers hold different beliefs in teaching English language. In the teaching of pronunciation, Wahid and Sulong (2013) have identified that ESL teachers believed grammar mastery is more important than pronunciation. This is due to two factors: firstly, the teachers were concerned about the assessments; secondly, the teachers did not have rich technical knowledge in the teaching of pronunciation. These two factors led the teachers to believe that they should focus more on grammar components than phonetic and phonological components in the teaching of pronunciation. In the teaching of vocabulary, on the other hand, teachers are found to believe in reading to expand one's vocabulary. Macalister (2012) conducted a study comparing Malaysia and New Zealand preservice teachers and he has found that the two groups of teachers showed disagreement on one of the survey items namely 'the best way to learn vocabulary is through reading'. Malaysian preservice teachers indicated strong belief in the power of reading as they agreed that learning a foreign language involves a lot of learning new words. Their New Zealand counterpart, however, disagreed to the use of reading to learn vocabulary and they did not regard learning vocabulary in isolation is the best use of class hours.

Besides the belief in teaching pronunciation and vocabulary, ESL teachers are also found to have belief in the teaching and learning approaches. Ernest Lim Kok (2014) conducted a study exploring teachers' view of Student-centred Learning Approach (SCL) and he has found that teachers believed in the implementation of the approach. They believed that the approach would allow their students to be responsible of their own learning, develops their capacity and capability and learning, and learn from their experience. Salleh and Mohd Yusoff (2016) extended the study in SCL and found the same findings where teachers believed in the implementation of SCL. However, both studies show that the teachers were struggling in implementing the approach as they were facing with several challenges such as lack of knowledge and skills, syllabus coverage, students' readiness, class size (Salleh & Mohd Yusoff, 2016) and time factor (Ernest Lim Kok, 2014). Despite the challenges they faced, the teachers have a strong belief that the approach has a significant impact in boosting students' interest in learning the language.

Teachers also believed in the use of Autonomous Learning Approach (ALL) as teaching and learning approach. Yunus and Arshad (2015) conducted a study on 35 in-service secondary school English language teachers and have found that

teachers are positive and futuristic in developing ALL in their classroom. They understand their critical role in ALL and they are willing to practice ALL despite the discouraging situation of ALL among the students. Teachers emphasised that they should be given continuous programs and courses related to ALL, as well as theoretical support during their learning term in university.

The studies above show the different belief held by teachers in teaching and learning the language. These beliefs are developed through the teacher's unique classroom experience and are held to be true. Teachers' belief systems are "developed gradually over time" (Richards & Lockhart, 2007, p.30) and it has an "adaptive function in helping teachers define and understand the world and themselves" (Pajares, 1992, p. 325).

Borg (2003) developed a framework on teacher cognition (Figure 1) and the framework indicates that teachers have beliefs about various aspects of their work, such as beliefs about teaching, learning, students, subject matter, and instructional activities. These beliefs were informed by multiple factors which includes teachers' experience as a learner, experience of teaching within a classroom situation, contextual factors as well as professional education training. The framework encapsulates the cognition process within teachers' lives and Borg (2018) found that teachers deem their beliefs as true and it shapes their classroom practice. The experience that teachers garnered from their past and current practice, as well as the professional training they attended, guided their behaviour and planning of lessons. They select the most effective instructional approach and implement them as experienced previously.
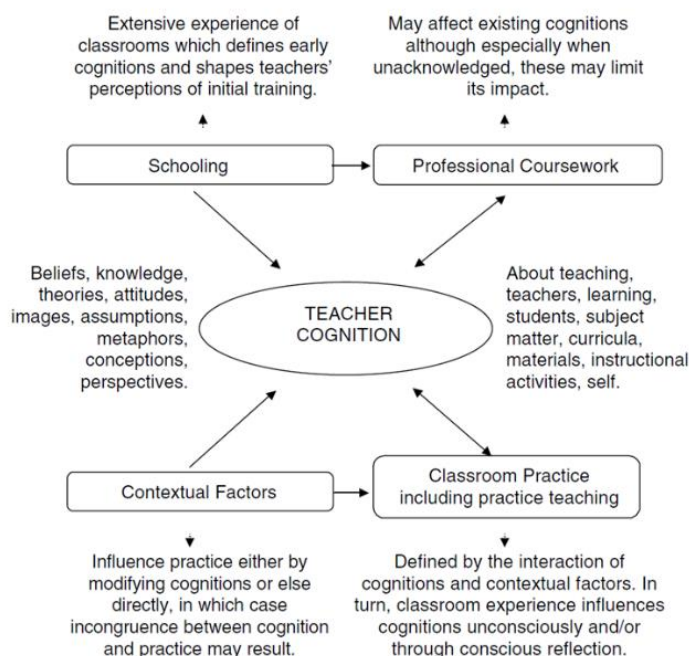

Figure 1. Teacher cognition, schooling, professional education, and classroom practice (Borg, 2003)

As their beliefs impact their instructional approaches, Borg (2018) argues that it is important to investigate teachers' belief on several premises. Firstly, studying teachers' beliefs will help teachers to identify the gap between their stated-belief and their classroom practice. From identifying their own stated beliefs about teaching, they will be able to identify whether the beliefs were reflected on the practice or not. This realisation will allow teachers to focus on practices in which congruent with what they believe in and make changes to the notion of teaching and learning.

Secondly, by knowing what their beliefs are, and how it impacts their teaching practice, teachers will be able to recognise the effective or ineffective practices within their classroom. This allows the teachers to reflect on their beliefs and focus on the effective classroom practices instead of continuing with unproductive instructional approaches. Teachers will also look into the source of their beliefs and identify how it negatively impact the interactive classroom. Lastly, Borg (2018) states that teaching and learning session will be more effective if teachers' beliefs and practices are congruent. Teachers should align their beliefs and their practices that they understand the reasoning beyond their instructional approach and behaviour within classroom situation.

METHODOLOGY

Participants
Two female ESL teachers from Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA)'s secondary residential schools MARA Junior Science College (MRSM) were selected as participants of the study. The selection was made through purposive sampling in which the researcher identified potential and accessible research participants. The selection of the participants was based on several criteria. The two teachers have been recognised as '*Guru Cemerlang*' (Master Teacher) by MARA under the '*Guru Cemerlang*' scheme. They have a minimum of 8 years (Teacher B) to maximum of 28 years' experience (Teacher A) in teaching English language at secondary level. Teacher A has a master's degree in education while Teacher B has a bachelor's degree in education. Both teachers teach English Language to the Form 4 students (upper secondary school level) and are preparing the students for the national exam '*Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia*' (Malaysian Certificate of Education).

Data Collection Method
There were three instruments which are used to collect data for the research: semi-structured interview, classroom observation and stimulated-recall interview. The semi-structured interview was adapted from Mohd Ariff Albakri (2011) and was used to collect information on the teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning. The constructs include teachers' beliefs in learning a second language, teaching styles and pedagogy and daily routines in the classroom.
Classroom observations were carried out to identify the instructional strategies used by the English teachers in their lessons and to triangulate the data collected from the interview. The eight observations took place in the English teachers' English lessons and were recorded.

Upon the completion of each classroom observation, stimulated-recall interviews were immediately conducted to elicit verbal commentaries of the English teachers' classroom actions and instructional approach. This was to ensure that the participants were able to recall the classroom actions within the classroom session and the reason beyond the action taken.

Data Collection Procedures

The main data collection procedure was conducted in two stages. The first stage of data collection in the study commenced with the semi-structured interview to explore the participants' experience of teaching. The interview was held at the research participant's workplace at a time convenient for the research participant. The interview was audio-recorded and transcribed for data analysis purposes.

Secondly, a series of lesson observations were conducted to identify their pedagogical strategies and interactive decision making. There were eight sessions of observation for each of the research participants in the period of two months. The researcher situated himself in the classroom and followed the non-participant observation procedures for the first two weeks. This was to make the students to be familiar with the researcher's presence. Once they were familiarized with the researcher's presence within the classroom setting, the student would display their actual behaviour. The observations were conducted in the participant's natural classroom setting. During the observation, the researcher also took notes of the participant's action. This was to identify the teachers' specific behaviour and action in relation to their interactive decision making. The observations were video recorded and transcribed for data analysis purposes.

Finally, upon the completion of each classroom observation, the researcher also conducted stimulated-recall interview to elicit the participants' justification for their instructional approach and decisions. The stimulated recall interview was conducted immediately after the classroom observation and via face-to-face and person-to-person with each of the participants. The reasoning to conduct the stimulated-recall interview 'immediately' was to ensure the participants will be able to recall their thought process at the time of behaviour. The researcher showed the video recording of selected classroom events to the participants as a stimulus in identifying the participants' interactive thought process. The researcher asked the participants to verbalize their thoughts about their interactive action and decision making. A research protocol for stimulated-recall interview was used as a guideline in conducting the interview. The interview was audio recorded and transcribed for analysis purposes.

MAIN RESULTS

Based on the findings, it was found that there were three beliefs about teaching and learning held by the English teachers. Both English teachers shared two beliefs in which ELS teacher should be selective in processing students' in-classroom behaviour and ELS teachers should allow the students to work in groups. However, Teacher B, also reported a different belief within her teaching

practice. She believed that the teaching of language is manifested with cultural identity.

Theme 1: Selective Processing
Both teachers emphasised that teachers should be selective in processing information or student's behaviour in which not all of it is considered important. The teachers only attend to particular behaviour which they deemed as more critical than others.

Teacher A and B believe that when the students misbehave, they wanted for the teachers' attention. When that situation occurs, according to them, traditionally the teacher will immediately pay attention to the students in hoping that the student will behave. However, according to Teacher A, some behaviour should not be given immediate attention as the students purposely behave in that manner. Instead, teachers should filter through and identify the behaviour which requires their attention. Teacher A and B responded in the interview:

"Sometimes, yes we do have this kind of students in every class. They are over-active, and sometimes they conquered the class (laugh)... Okay, what should I say... ..sometimes when the students are too active, it is okay. But as long as he wants to learn I think I do not mind."
(Teacher A, stimulated-recall Interview 3)

"It depends on the type of behaviour. Okay, let's talk about the type of behaviour... We have students who, you know, they doodle or they are fidgeting with things, I can still accept that. Or even eating. Some people find eating as a discipline problem. But I am okay with them eating, and fiddling. As long as their mind are focused on the task and they can talk about what they are doing. So that I know that they understand or they are confused on what is going on. But if they are asleep, or they keep going to the toilet, that is something that we need to worry about."
(Teacher B, stimulated-recall Interview 5)

Both teachers identified that some of the students misbehave during the classroom session. For example, some of the students were too active, laughing with loud voices, and fidgeting with things. However, the teachers also recognised that these types of behaviour do not interrupt the learning session and the students also completed the assigned task. According to Teacher A, the rest of the students informed her that some of their classmates used to behave in that manner within all class sessions. The rest of the students did not mind the behaviour as it does not disturb their focus and attention to the learning session. Teacher B noted the same situation as she did not pay attention to all misbehaviour that occurred in her classroom session. She identified that some of the behaviours were not 'disruptive' and she will not take any action to such behaviour. However, if the students are falling asleep in the class or frequently go to the restroom, she will intervene and act towards such behaviour. Teachers B identifies these behaviour as worrying as it will affect the teaching and learning session.

The belief was apparent and can be seen during the classroom observation. There was one male student by the name Ali, who was walking around during Teacher's A classroom session and disturbed one of his classmates. Ali then opened his

classmate's bag and looked into looking for something. Teacher A identified Ali as a hyper-active student in which he was the most active student in the class. He regularly moves around the class and talk to the others. According to her, Ali is actually a weak student in academic. Teacher A described Ali as a student who needs more of her attention. She explained that she has to make sure that Ali is seated and complete his task. Whenever Ali started to move around in the class, Teacher A has to call his name and make sure he returns to his seat. Unlike her approach with the active students in which she tolerates and give them the space to be active in the class, Teacher A has to intervene with Ali as she identified him a hyper-active student. Teacher A has the knowledge of Ali's academic performance and hyper-active behaviour which led her to put more attention to Ali. During other classroom observation, some of the students were quite active compared to the rest of the students. They had a loud conversation with each other; however, Teacher A did not pay much attention to them. She did not identify the active students' behaviour as critical as the hyper-active student. Thus, Teacher A did not put a lot of effort in managing them. This shows that Teacher A identifies Ali as a critical student who needs more attention from her and thus giving more attention to Ali than to the rest of the students' misbehaviour.

The same situation can be found within Teacher's B classroom observation. During one of the sessions, Teacher B found out that one of the students did not complete his homework on his own, instead he plagiarised other student's work. Teacher B reprimanded the student and told him that he should not plagiarize someone else's work. Another disruptive behaviour was shown by one of the female students during the fifth classroom observation. The female student was not focusing on the task given, instead played with a flower during the classroom session. When Teacher B was asked about this behaviour, she responded that she did not identify the behaviour as critical and major disruptive to the learning session. According to her, she knows the student's level of understanding in learning, and she believed that the female student knows how to do the work and can actually complete the task given.

From the response given by Teacher A and Teacher B, it is found that both English language teachers exert selective information processing during the classroom session. When they identify certain behaviour shown by students as critical, they will intervene and take action to ensure the achievement of their instructional objectives. However, if they consider the behaviour as minor disruptive behaviour, they will not take any action at all and ignore it. The selective information processing allows them to focus more on the achievement of instructional objectives, in which at the same time enables the students to learn from the meaningful classroom activities.

Theme 2: Cooperative Learning
Both teachers were found to prefer in the use of student-centred approach in which the students work in a small group to achieve the learning goals. This was apparent during the interview and classroom observation.

"If they read individually, I know that this is a very weak class, and they might not want to push themselves to finish reading it. So, if I put them in groups, and they take turns, at least

it becomes clear about how the story is progressing and how far along are they. And sort of to keep each other on track during that activity."
(Teacher B, semi-structured interview)

Teacher A and B identified cooperative learning as their main approach in deciding their instructional approach. They want the students to work in groups so that the students can share and discuss ideas among themselves. The cooperation between the students allows them to actively participate and work together on the assigned task. According to both teachers, providing group work attracts the students' attention and encourages them to participate in the classroom activities, rather than providing individual work in which the students will work on their own. When the teachers implement group work with their classroom activities, they also hope that it will take out the 'boredom' of the learning session.

The data from the interviews can be triangulated with the classroom observations. During the classroom observation, both teachers were found to provide several lessons which allowed the students to cooperate with their group members and compete with the other groups. Of eight lessons observed (for each teacher), Teacher A was found to provide four lessons in which integrated the element of engaging lesson. The lesson was lesson 1, 3, 5 and 6. Teacher B, on the other hand, provided six lessons demonstrating engaging elements: lesson 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6.

During the observation of all the lessons above, both teachers provided activities which required the students to cooperate with their group members to achieve the targeted goals. Teacher A and B placed the students into groups of 4 to 5 and assigned them tasks to be completed. Then the teachers explained what the task was about and provided them with ample time to brainstorm, discuss and execute the task. During the lesson, students were found to communicate with their group members, suggested and listened to ideas, assigned tasks to every group member, assisted, and guided their group members into completing the work. The students also listened to the presentation of the work and laughed when their friends shared light jokes. They clapped every time a group completed their presentation and looked forward to the next presentation.

The data from interviews and classroom observations both supported the theme of cooperative learning. Teacher A and B stated their belief that lessons should allow the students to cooperate with their group members. Both teachers also demonstrated the implementation of cooperative activities within their classroom session which improved the students' participation and focus during the teaching and learning session.

Theme 3: Cultural identity
Teacher B believes that the teaching of language is manifested with cultural identity. According to her, it is inevitable in teaching the language. The integration of culture teaching within the English language teaching is essential as it guides the students on what to say and how to say it in a specific cultural context. Teacher B responded during the interview that:

"When it comes to teaching English (language), we are not just teaching a language. We are teaching a cultural norm that go along with it. And language always happen in a context."
(Teacher B, semi-structured interview)

According to Teacher B, a lot of people believed in the notion that language can be learnt separately from the cultural context but that is not the case. Teacher B stated that even though they can be very good at the components of English language i.e., grammar and speaking, without the knowledge of culture, they will not be able to speak and deliver their message appropriately. Teacher B also reported that it is the teacher's responsibility to integrate culture in their teaching of English language and guide their students on how to use the language appropriately and effectively. Teachers should incorporate cultural information when teaching the language so that the students can be aware of the cultural perspective every time they communicate in the language. This is to avoid misunderstanding while using the language and communication breakdown in cross-cultural communication due to the lack of cultural sensitivity. Teacher B added that she did not want her students to encounter such problems in using the second language. Thus, she believed that the integration of culture teaching in the teaching of English language is imperative, and it is the teachers' responsibility.

The interview findings can be triangulated with the classroom observation. During the second observation, teacher B was teaching the students how to write an informal letter to their mother. She asked the students to develop the sentences. Teacher B wrote on the whiteboard 'Dear Mom, I miss you so much' and asked the students to continue the sentence. One of the students suggested 'Do you feel the same?'. Teacher B explained that the sentence is not appropriate to be said to a mother from the cultural perspective. She stated that it was more suitable to be used in a foreign culture context, or by a couple who love each other, rather than between a child and a parent. Teacher B explained further to her students that writing letters to their friends, loved ones, or parents is not exactly the same task. She reminded the students to consider their choice of words when speaking to their parents or even to their friends as some of the words are not appropriate for the targeted receiver. Teacher B then suggested sentences such as 'How is everything at home?' and continued asking for the students' ideas on what should be written in the informal letter.

The teaching of culture was perceived important for Teacher B as language always occurs in a cultural context. She stated that the knowledge of grammar does not guarantee the appropriateness of using English without being sensitive to the cultural norms, which can cause misunderstanding in communication. She believed that the integration of target culture can help the students to notice the appropriate phrases pragmatically. This is consistent with Kuzborska's (2011) in which the teachers perceived that language learning goes beyond the literal meaning of the text, thus the integration of cultural context is paramount.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study show that the English teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning guide their instructional approach and in-classroom behaviour. The teachers used their belief as a foundation to inform their lessons. The study implies that teachers are conscious about their beliefs in teaching and learning, and they recognised the implementation of the beliefs within their teaching practice. The awareness of one's beliefs is crucial as they will be able to identify effective teaching approaches and utilise it to positively impact the teaching and learning session.

BIODATA

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