

**Exploring Tensions between English Teachers' Core Beliefs and Peripheral Beliefs in
Teaching Reading**

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Abstract

The study is an attempt to explore the tensions that leads to a gap between core and peripheral instructional beliefs leading to the classroom practices of Secondary School English Teachers in the cultivation of students' reading skills. Following qualitative phenomenological approach, the study was designed to explore the live experiences through interview protocols from experienced teachers teaching English at Secondary school level. The collected data were analyzed following interpretative approach. The results explored that there was a complete fiasco related to the teaching of reading skills development on the part of the school. Although, the teachers believed that teaching reading skills do need adoption of some well- known strategies yet the examination pattern and the demands of the students and parents were better met otherwise, which means deviation from the National Curriculum, 2006 document. This is the main reason for the obstacles that impede in creating powerful readers. Other contextual factors such as time constraints, classroom management as well as official concerns do intervene which make the teaching of the reading skill as non- existent.

Keywords: Teaching of English; Core Beliefs; Peripheral Beliefs; Reading Skills; Reading Strategies

Introduction

Simon Borg, in an interview with Birello (2012), opines that teachers have their distinctive way of presenting things. Moreover, they have their own distinctive ideas and preferences, that don't restrict teaching to a behavior only. We must understand as to what knowledge, attitudes and feelings they possess. Underlying the behavior, there is belief, knowledge as well as other related constructs which we must fully understand. Simon Borg in that interview further elaborates on beliefs, that we have different subsets of beliefs such as core beliefs and peripheral beliefs where there exists inconsistency. The core beliefs always dominate as these are more powerful as compared to our peripheral beliefs that aren't so stable and powerful as we are less committed to these peripheral beliefs. So, core beliefs are more specific, varying from individual to individual whereas peripheral beliefs are more generally believed in by all in the same way.

In addition to this discussion about the core and peripheral beliefs, Clark-Gareca, and Gui, (2019), Green (1971) and Pajares, (1992) explains that there is limited research work present on core and peripheral beliefs in the context of educational research. They believe that such a system of core beliefs along with peripheral beliefs do exists. On the other hand, Phips and Borg (2009) believe that a lot of literature is available about teachers' instructional beliefs and practices such as: (Borg, 2003; and Pajares, 1992). Delving the matter further, Freeman (1993) points to this difference in beliefs that there exists tensions or divergence among different forces or elements in what teachers believe and practice due to the forces that are in the shape of context, contents and students.

Pointing to the sources of teachers' beliefs, Li (2012) explained that teachers' beliefs are formed during the process of teaching which is indicative of teachers' knowledge and teaching methodology forming their teaching abilities. These sources include the impact of social history as well as culture. Thus, the emphasis is on teachers' experience which leads to his/ her self-construction.

Talking about the sources of teachers' beliefs, Richardson (1996) explores that these are the result of teachers' personal experience, instructional experience and knowledge experience which feed teachers' belief system. Borg, (2003) concluded that teachers' beliefs about teaching language differ from each other. Likewise, Phips and Borg (2009) after interviewing three English language teachers concluded that some peripheral beliefs were replaced by core beliefs with certain

assumptions such as better classroom management, students' interest and time management. Richardson (1996), while exploring the sources of such beliefs stressed that beliefs on the one hand cause action, on the other hand, experience (action) can result in the change of beliefs as well.

In the same manner in Phips and Borg (2009), there is a summary of the impact of teachers' beliefs as: these may be formed after teachers' own experience as learners or their experience as teachers. The studies of Holt-Reynolds (1992) and Lortie (2020) work as filter for teachers to sieve new information as well as experience. (Pajares, 1992); these may surpass whatever effects the teacher education can have on classroom activities, (Kagan 1992, Richardson, 1996); these can have everlasting influence on teachers' instructional strategies, (Crawley & Salyer, 1995); these can interact in dual way with experience, (vice versa effect), (Richardson, 1996); these can have powerful effect on pedagogical decision making, (Johnson, 1994); these can be more effective and not prone to change, (Pickering, 2005).

According to Lanning (2009), there are some powerful strategies for struggling readers which are believed to have great utility and transferability across any context. Strategies, which are believed to be more effective for increasing students' comprehension. These strategies are: I, Summarizing such as determining the Genre, the Form of text, Categorization and Classification of knowledge, paraphrasing, elicitation and synthesis of concepts; II, Generating meaningful connections which includes- Comparing knowledge with current and previous experiences, raising questions and making synthesis of knowledge and experience; iii, Self-Regulation, which includes- reflection activities including Learning Progress, Contexts and other strategies used, Making Prediction, Confirmation, Clarification and Revision, Making Synthesis of current and background information; iv, Inferring the objectives, the nature of language, the biases/views of the writer, predicting meaning, determining theme, drawing conclusions, raising questions about these conclusions, making a synthesis of all the relevant knowledge.

Statement of the Research Problem

But still the success of these strategies depends on teachers' instructional beliefs which regulated their practices of teaching of reading skills. Therefore, an exploratory study is required to prove the existing lacuna between core and peripheral instructional beliefs to address the need of creating powerful readers. The study might thus be helpful for curriculum developers, teachers, parents and other officials in the field to understand the need of teaching reading skills and facilitating it. Furthermore, this paper intends to explore the areas creating tension for teachers to adopt a core belief that are the focus of individual teachers in competition to peripheral beliefs which are more generally accepted, in teaching reading skills in the context of English language at secondary level in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan.

The author has come forward with this piece of research to prove that a great lacuna exists that needs to be addressed in the interest of creating powerful readers. The study is thus helpful for curriculum developers, teachers, parents and other officials in the field to understand the need of teaching reading skills and facilitating it.

Research Questions

The researchers designed the research targets through research questions as followed:

1. Do the teachers practice peripheral beliefs or core beliefs in teaching of reading?
2. What factors influence teachers to follow the peripheral or core beliefs while teaching reading skills?

Study Significance

This study concentrates on the core and peripheral beliefs of teachers teaching the subject of English. Research studies reveals that students in Pakistan in general and in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in particular are facing problems in the reading skills in the subject of English. Among many reason some are related to teachers' core and peripheral instructional beliefs which create tension and inconsistency in their teaching activities. The results of this study would be beneficial to all the teachers teaching English, their students, teachers' training institutions, policy makers and curriculum developers. As these results might enable the teachers and students to reduce the gap between their core and peripheral beliefs, synchronize their teaching activities and follow the recommended instructional approaches required to students reading skills development. Further, the results of this study might also provide insight to the policy makers and curriculum developers in the designing of policies and curriculum.

Theoretical Framework

Teachers' instructional beliefs are indispensable as it directly intervened into their teaching activities in classroom. The core beliefs of teachers direct them to conduct certain specific teaching activities which he/she deemed necessary for uplifting students' skills. These beliefs range from teaching to assessment, classroom management, students' guidance, critical and creative thinking and classroom environment (Hussain, Idris, & Akhtar, 2019). Furthermore, teachers' actions are based on these beliefs and realize them for the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of their instructional strategies.

But on the contrary the situational factors and available facilities compel to adopt certain peripheral beliefs with the aim to reach to them teaching targets. These peripheral beliefs are preferred because teachers are supposed to complete the courses instead of students' skills development, control the classroom activities instead to providing space for students' hands-on practices, adopt low cost teaching aids and many more (Clark-Gareca, & Gui, 2019).

According to Borg, and Phipps (2009) the synchronization of teachers' core beliefs and their practices results in better academic achievement as compared to the peripheral beliefs, because it leads to psychological satisfaction, increase instructional motivation and valuable time investment. Similarly, Birello (2012) concluded that language teachers' personal beliefs result in effective teaching and students' academic performances. Therefore, these studies enable the researchers to explore this tension that how teachers put their core and peripheral beliefs into their instructional practices in the teaching of English.

Methodology

The nature of the study was qualitative and the researchers adopted interpretive phenomenological research design to conduct the study. Teachers' instructional beliefs about teaching reading skills at secondary level was taken as a live experience of English teachers explored through open-ended interview protocols. These interview protocols were designed after studying and analyzing the previous research studies on the core and peripheral instructional beliefs of teachers.

Participants

The participants comprised three English language Secondary School teachers who agreed to participate in the interview for the sake of a better future of English language teaching. The participant teachers possessed teaching experience of more than ten years in different Secondary Schools. These teachers taught grade ix to x. They were thus teaching adult school learners. The students were believed to enter higher secondary level, i.e. grade xi to xii also known as pre university education. The resources that teachers relied upon included mainly textbooks issued by the government as well as their supplementary material in the form of guided books composed by some expert teachers and available in the local market. Learning objectives have been specified by the National Curriculum 2006 while more specifically, a syllabus presenting course work has been provided by the government agencies. The teachers are expected to follow the syllabus, strictly.

Data collection and data analysis

The research phenomenon was explored through open-ended interview questions following constructivist paradigm. These in-depth interviews comprised some pre-set open-ended questions suitable for individuals as well as group. The questions in the interview guide were pilot tested. The interviews were recorded with prior permission of the interviewees. The interviews were transcribed and the contents endorsed from the interviewees.

Exploratory VS explanatory method

Although, the interviewees agreed that they try to give space to the children for exploration yet their methodology is explanatory. Students are involved only to the point of their alertness to the lesson taught. The teachers believed on arranging separate session comprising some quizzes and instruction checking questions the purpose of which is just to know their level of alertness to the lesson delivered by the them.

The two teachers called teacher 'A' and teacher 'B' explain everything including summarizing, vocabulary and theme. they wish to sort out everything for the student including the summary of the lesson, the theme. the form and even the genre. Only, surface questions are asked from the students to mark their level of alertness. Otherwise, the students are not involved in exploring the main idea or investigating any main idea sentence. Their teaching is, thus, more of informative nature than exploratory. Teacher 'C' does confess that he lets the students participate in the lesson, however, that is only for separate session and not during the lesson.

Teacher 'A' summaries the lesson in the form of a story. After this, she explains the main idea of the lesson as well as the purpose of the lesson. She tries to provide as much information as she can to lead to the clarity about the lesson. She will try to lead the students from specific to general. It means, the whole effort is put into by the teacher with less effort left to the students to memorize.

Teacher 'B' focusses on the 'key points of the text'. He tries to 'draw a pen picture' of the lesson and clarify 'the essence' of the lesson. He is of the opinion that the main idea should be explained by the teacher 'in detail'. All the key words are explained as well. The roll this teacher is taking is of explanatory nature. He becomes an informant who very sympathetically shares all the information contained in the text. This is then practiced in the form activity by the students.

Teacher 'C' believe in involving the students to the maximum; however, he has to share the best possible information with the students.

Teaching of grammar

The three teachers never let the students explore different grammatical categories nor explain these themselves. They do believe in inductive method of teaching grammar; however, they won't apply it during the lesson but as a separate activity at the end of the lesson which has no bearing upon the lesson taught. The teacher has some poll of well-chosen sentences which are of great use in the teaching of grammar. The main focus is thus the pre-set MCQs at the end of the lesson.

Teacher 'A' teaches grammar at the end of the lesson. She solves some MCQs with the help of the students. Her grammar teaching is limited to these MCQs.

Teacher 'B' follows the general pattern of 'taking a long sentence and breaking it into parts with the help of the students', although a good activity yet without any context.

Teacher 'C' upheld both inductive and deductive methods simultaneously. Grammar is first taught deductively and then practiced inductively with some well-chosen sentences. Grammar teaching is usually limited to the practice of MCQs given at the end of a lesson and usually not related to any context. These are texts without context.

Group work

The students are expected to perform in group work only on some special occasion with a purpose to memorize or practice some aspect of the lesson or grammar already taught. No group work is observed during the lesson for exploration. Sometimes, a competition is held in the form of quizzes asked in groups. The purpose is just to memorize important information. These quizzes are mostly without context. Group work is just meant to be an entertaining activity or to share some important information from the teacher to be further discussed in groups. During the lesson teaching, the learners have just to listen to their expert teacher passively.

Teacher 'A' arranges some special activities like quizzes and project works. She arranges these usually on monthly basis as feedback activities.

Teacher 'B' believe in learning by doing, however, he has to choose some special occasion for the activities to be performed. The activities are restricted to special sessions and not during the lesson. He did believe in presentation and assignment, nevertheless, the purpose is to memorize and not comprehend.

Teacher 'C' does arrange some activities-based learning like quizzes, role plays and tasks completion; however, some activities fall short of the level of the students.

Course/ task completion VS comprehension

All the teachers who were interviewed did believe and emphasized comprehension more as compared to a task or course completion, nevertheless, they succumbed to the priorities of the administration, parents and even students whose main focus is on course or task completion. It makes all other activities as secondary. Completion of course, therefore, becomes the top most priority for the teacher as well who finds little time for comprehension enhancing activities. That is the main reason as to why teaching has become one-way traffic in these schools. Even the instruction checking questions are meant for knowing the alertness level of the students. According to the interviewee 'B', the teacher's task is to clear everything to the students in time. The comprehension activities are secondary and are rarely arranged.

Teacher 'A' tries to meet the demands of the administration as well as to focus on comprehension. She believes that the priority of the administration is only course completion.

Teacher 'B' can't deviate from what administration, parents and students believe in. He has to focus on course completion as well as to cater to the students' desire to pass well in the final examination. He hardly finds time for comprehension activities.

Teacher 'C' believes that his priority though comprehension and capitulation is at odds with that of the administration. He is puzzled by the difference in the priorities in this regard.

Feedback

The three teachers who were interviewed do believe in getting feedback from the students. However, the feedback activity is meant to be an organized one arranged randomly. It is like a formal exam and not a routine activity during the lesson. Usually, the feedback is restricted to the memorization of some preset questions on which the students are supposed to perform. The students' assignments and any other feedback is marked on the criterion of correctness. Teacher 'B' has to bring the students in front of the class to highlight his or her mistakes which will lead to the memorization of the rule by all the class.

Teacher 'A' mostly grades the students for correctness of spelling and grammatical mistakes.

Teacher 'B' mostly depends upon home assignments which are 'sincerely' checked. The main focus is on correctness and encouraging the students to write correctly, mostly copy.

Teacher 'C' gets feedback through separate sessions of asking questions, tests and competitions; nevertheless, these are regarded as unique self-contained memory practice.

Research Findings

Based on the results the following research findings were extracted;

1. Teachers follow explanatory instructional methodologies in their teaching but they were agreed that exploratory methods are more effective for the development of students reading skills.
2. Furthermore, storytelling, lessons from the text and summarizations were the major techniques followed by teachers in the teaching of reading at secondary school level.
3. Teachers believed that inductive instructional methods are effective for the teaching of grammar but they were not following due to certain reasons. Likewise, group work was also used as teaching strategy in teaching reading skills to students.
4. Similarly, the teaching of grammar is practiced through MCQs and on certain specific declarative statements. The tension in grammar teaching from the perspective of core and peripheral beliefs is that teaching of grammar is made through text without context.
5. Reading comprehensions was considered more important as compared to course completion and feedback was identified the most important aspect of teaching grammar and reading. The participants prioritized completion of course instead of focus on the skills of students.

Conclusion

As evident from the discussion with the three teachers who were interviewed, the teachers do believe in some practices which are essential for enhancing comprehension; however, due to strict limitation of the time table and the gap in the priorities of the administration and teachers as well as the difference in the demands of the students, parents and examination, it becomes pressing on the teacher to deviate from the accepted teaching norms and values and adopt those which are more convenient for all. This trend is of terrible consequences to the future of English language learning in general and of reading comprehension in particular which if not addressed timely will maintain an ugly status quo.

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