

TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION: A CASE STUDY OF TEACHERS' BELIEF AND CLASSROOM REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Masoud VARNASSERI GHANDALI^{1*}, Elkhas VEYSI²

¹ PhD. In TEFL, Department of TEFL, Islamic Azad University Masjed Soleiman Branch, Iran,

² Associate Professor, Department of Linguistics, Payame Noor University, Iran.

***Corresponding Author**

Email: mardavij1387@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Exploring beliefs of a teacher as the case of investigation to find out the relationship between his beliefs and classroom activities through reflective practice is in the concern of the researcher. Teacher's beliefs are closely related to their values, views of learners, attitudes toward learning, and conception of teacher's roles in teaching practices. This study aims to investigate the correlation between the beliefs of teachers and their practices in the teaching of reading to advanced learners. The study method was exploratory and descriptive. Interview and observation were the instruments of collecting data and transcribing, coding for analyzing were engaged. Additionally, findings of this study indicated that by exploring and reflecting on his beliefs, the particular teacher became more aware of the effect of his beliefs on educational process in the classroom. The outcome of this study confirm the findings of pervious works on language reading research which examine the relationship between teacher belief and classroom practice. On the other hand, findings from this study is a rejection of Lee (2009) research on the relationship between teacher belief and classroom practice.

Keywords: Teacher Belief, Teacher Development, Classroom Practice

INTRODUCTION

In general, educational research, the concept of teaching is greatly accepted as a cognitive activity and teachers' beliefs influence on teaching procedures widely from decision making in the classroom to final testing, or from initiating of input to end of output (e.g. Shavelson & stern, Tillema, 2000). Teaching a second language is considered as complex activities . These complex cognitive activities are based on teachers' beliefs and one of the procedures for identifying teachers' beliefs is reflecting on practice (Farrell, 2007). The beliefs are about different components of teaching and learning context, such as: beliefs about teaching, materials, syllabus, students, teaching aids and testing. As Borg (2003) suggested that the beliefs are principle values which are derived from teacher's prior experiences, school practices and teacher's individual personality. The beliefs have great impact on education procedures (Basturkman, 2012; Farrell& Bennis, 2013). The impact is mostly unconscious as Kagan (1992, p.62) explained, "unconsciously held assumption about students, classroom, and academic material to be taught"; however, by bringing the beliefs to the level of awareness, the teacher will understand and get control over the beliefs to improve and change that can be useful in better managing class procedures. One technique to make the teacher aware of his/her beliefs could be articulating the beliefs by the teachers through reflecting on practice (Farrell, 2008). Reflecting on classroom practice is defined as, teachers' thinking about different aspects of teaching process, and then

comparing with the classroom practices (Farrell, 2008). The reflecting on practices could be done through systematic gathering of data by the teachers and the act of comparing will take out the unconsciousness of the beliefs. The disclosing of main indexes of teaching and classroom context for the teachers might promote the level of teaching and learning. The teachers might find their ill beliefs and consequently their defaults in the teaching process. As knezedvic (2001) has described, the reflecting on practice is a “process of reducing the discrepancy between what we do and what we think we do” (p. 10). In this case study a thirty years old high school teacher, Arya, was participated and he has BA in TEFL. The present study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are Arya’s beliefs?
2. What are Arya’s classroom practices?
3. What is the relationship between the participant’s belief and reflecting on practice?
4. How does the reflection facilitate Arya’s exploration of his beliefs and practice?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reflective on practice

Reflective on practice is rooted in Dewey’s (1933) term, reflective thinking, which has been depicted carefully by his words as, “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of grounds that support it and the further consequences to which it leads” (p.9). Dewey suggests several types of thought, including beliefs, imaginations, and stream of consciousness. To extend Dewey’s work, Carol Rodger (2002) takes four characteristics for reflection as:

1. “reflection is a meaning-making process that moves a learner from one experience into the next with deep understanding of its relationship with and connect to other experience and idea.
2. Reflect is a systematic, rigorous, disciplined way of thinking, with its roots in scientific inquiry.
3. Reflect need to happen in community, in interaction with others.
4. Reflection requires attitude that value the personal and intellectual growth of oneself and of others.” (p.845)

Other researchers take the concept to teaching field and named as reflective on practice. Farrell (2007) believe that defining of reflection on practice is not easy, but he explains the concept as the teacher’s systematic collection of information about their underlying value and beliefs about context of teaching and learning and then comparing with classroom practices. The comparison might help the teachers to be aware of the impact of their beliefs on students’ learning. In many contexts most of the teachers aren’t aware of their beliefs and the influence of their beliefs on learners’ learning, specifically in the context of Iran. Senior (2006) takes the propensity of teachers to disclose the underlying reasons of their classroom decisions under question.

Two forms of reflective on practice have been in the concern of researchers: weak and strong versions. Wallace (1991) explained weak form as, “informally evaluate various aspects of their professional expertise” (p.292). Richards and Lockhart (1994) outlined strong version as, “collect data about their teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and teaching practices, and use the information obtained as a basis for critical reflection about teaching (p.1).



Johnson (1992) claimed that since the belief is an unobservable entity, getting definition to it is difficult. Kagan (1992) asserts that teachers' beliefs are perceptions and assumptions about learning and teaching. In the field of TESOL, teacher belief has been described as teachers' beliefs about knowledge of teaching, content, practice, teachers' personalities, and teaching programs (e.g., Borg, 2003; Burns, 1992; McFee, 1993). Pajares (1992) defines belief as "an individual's judgment of the truth or falsity of a proposition" (p. 316),

According to Fives and Gill (2015) "some beliefs are explicit to the teacher whereas others are implicit but that all beliefs exist within a complex, interconnected, and multidimensional system. Within that multidimensional system, beliefs may be primary or derivative (i.e., grounded in primary beliefs), core or peripheral (i.e., endorsed with more or less conviction) and be held in clusters, that are more or less isolated, thereby allowing incompatible or inconsistent beliefs to coexist" (p. 66). Most researchers have concluded that teachers' beliefs impact on classroom practices. Wilkins' (2008) study of 481 American elementary teachers' beliefs shows that the beliefs are strong predictor of classroom practices.

Up to now much papers has been published on teacher belief and classroom practice related to ESL students, Kuzborka (2011) the congruence of practice of eight teachers reflected a skill-based approached to reading instruction. On the other hand, Lee (2009) claims that teachers' belief don't have congruence with classroom practice.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study is conducted to find out the relationship between teacher belief and reflective on practice in terms of second language reading (Bogden & Bilken, 1982). In descriptive research a case could be in the concern (Merriam, 1998). For the sake of in-depth understanding of what is to be studied - this methodology is selected.

Participant

Arya, an English teacher in a high school in Iran, has a Bachelor of Arts in TEFL and at the time of the study had just completed his fifth year as an EFL teacher. Arya told the researcher about his interesting in English language and teaching. He was especially interested in discovering his beliefs related to teaching English- reading. He thought that the study was a new technique for being a better second language teacher.

Arya, in service teacher, is teaching English as a TEFL teacher in high schools of a city, Masjed solyman, Iran. The students have four hour classes per week. The textbooks are the base for the teachers to teach, as an in- advance syllabus, different skills. The population of each class is 20 to 30 students, and English is a foreign language for them. The text books were manipulated to teach different skills, but the focus of teachers are on reading. Reading is the most important skill for most teachers in high schools.

Data collection

It is notable that in this study different sources of data collection were used: classroom observation, interview and journal writing. In most researches on teacher belief the researchers used questionnaire and interview for collecting data and in few studies the observation of classroom has been engaged (Kuzborska, 2011). The triangulation of data of three sources is little seen. Thus, the present investigation tries to fulfill the gap in the literature on teacher beliefs and reading.



The data of this study includes: one pre-study interview, eight one- hour classroom observations with 20-30 minutes pre-lesson and post lesson interview, along with last observation. A final interview was also conducted three month later after the period of the study to get Arya's reaction to the findings. Arya offered to make a journal where he was able to report all his thoughts about teaching and learning which could be useful in cognitive map of the teacher. All interviews and observations were recorded. The period of data collection was about four weeks. The reason for applying semi-structured interview was to take the scene to the case to express himself as much as possible. Pre-observation interviews were conducted four hours before observation and post- observations would be performed one hour after the classroom observations. The questions in pre-observation interviews indicated the activities that Arya wanted to do in the classroom and his related beliefs; on the other hand, the post-interview questions could be related to what would be happened in the classroom. A final interview was a form for reviewing the starting interview in addition to some new questions compare and discover different aspects of beliefs of the teacher. A follow up interview also had been done to analyze the reactions of the case.

The observations take eight one-hour sessions and the researcher sat at the back of the classes. The eight one- hour observations were conducted while everything was recorded by a cell phone. In addition, the researcher took notes when it was necessary. The recorded data was transcribed meanwhile Arya himself wrote his insights about teaching and learning in teaching journals. In writing and format of the journals, the participant was free because all of them were his reflections to the observed classes.

Data Analysis

The observation and interview data were transcribed, and along with them the teaching journals were coded by three experts in order to reach a consistent measurement and high reliability. For increasing the validity of evaluation, findings of the study were triangulated, and codes of the different sources were compared with each other.

RESULTS

The findings are presented as the answers of the research questions.

1. What are Arya's beliefs?

Here is the report on Arya's beliefs about teaching and learning. Table 1 outlines the participant's responses in pre-study interview. The beliefs were classifies into three categories: language teaching in general, teaching second language reading, and language learning.

Arya said, "Teacher should be kind and make the lesson interesting for the students". He noted, "I am very patient when students make noise and interrupt the class, I try to be their friend". In relation to teaching he believes that the teacher should make the lesson very interesting for students. Arya made an example of his work as an ESL teacher, he used pictures and photographs to make the second language teaching a flamboyant job. He also wrote, "Since the textbook is the central part of teaching and the topics were chosen in advance, the teacher could not change the topics, but I sometimes use related topics or texts to the topics of textbook". Arya stated that he used pair work for conversation parts, and repetitions for pronunciation section or reading of the lessons.

Table 1. Arya's beliefs

Theme	Beliefs
Language teaching	<p>Make students learn English.</p> <p>Teaching and learning a second language is mostly grammar, and word memorization.</p> <p>Main skills are reading and writing.</p> <p>Teaching new words is important.</p> <p>The student should understand words and sentences, so translation is very useful for reading English texts.</p> <p>Language learning in high school is a matter of passing entrance examination of universities, thus, the teacher should focus on the needs of students which are reading and grammar.</p>
Teaching second language reading	<p>Most important job of an ESL teacher is teaching reading and</p> <p>Reading foreign language contents</p> <p>Translating the reading text</p> <p>Word by word translation</p> <p>Good pronunciation of words.</p> <p>A teacher can help students to learn the effect of grammar in comprehending the texts</p> <p>Different meanings of words should be explained for students</p> <p>The teacher can read loudly and students follow him/her</p> <p>Oral dictation is a useful technique in teaching words and sentences</p> <p>The content and the arrangement of materials in the textbooks are not suitable.</p>
Language learning	<p>Repetition of words and sentences with</p> <p>Writing 10 times of new words and</p> <p>Writing from text at least three times.</p>

Arya said that he preferred to read and students write in order to make them memorize second language, words and sentences. He said memorization is very important in learning a second language. He continued that reading is important because the students want to read the authentic materials in English, so by learning reading the content of knowledge will be accessible for them. Regarding the teaching of second language reading, Arya believes that words are the central part of a language, and by practicing words the language learning will be facilitated for learners. The practice could be: 20 to 30 times of writing new words by students, spelling them aurally, choral repetition and aural dictation. He said, "First I get synonyms and definitions of new words in second language for new words, then translate all of them in first language. In next step, I want students to write from new words or any word that they have problem in their spellings". Arya believes that aural testing of spelling of words is an important technique. He wants students to be active in the classroom. He also activates students' prior knowledge of topic. He explained about the topic in the first and second language, but most of the time he inevitably should explain in the first language.

2. What are Arya's classroom practice?

This section answers the second research question which is about Arya's classroom practice. Table 2 outlines Arya's classroom practices during each of the eight observed lessons.



Table 2. Arya's classroom practice

Observed practice	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6	A7	A8
Teacher checked assignments as an obligation at the beginning of the class.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Teacher gave extra time in class to complete exercises.	O	O	O	O	×	O	O	O
Teacher took up activities in a step-by-step process.	O	×	O	×	O	×	O	O
Students repeated the texts in groups.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Teacher used various means to guide students to answer.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Teacher assigned homework at the beginning of the class.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Students required to provide reasons for their answers. Teacher facilitated class discussions.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Teacher read a passage with/ without the class.	×	O	O	O	×	O	O	×
Teacher encouraged students to use information from text.	O	×	O	O	O	O	O	O
The other language skills were practiced in the class.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Grammar is described through reading the texts as a tool for comprehension.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
He helped students to look up new words.	O	O	×	×	×	O	×	×
Teacher tried to coordinate all students regarding their amount of learning.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Teacher encouraged students frequently even for non-important matters.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Teacher practice the exercises of the textbook by engaging the students.	O	O	×	O	×	O	O	O
And he himself check and correct the performance of students.	O	×	O	O	O	O	×	O

Notes. Each lesson is identified by the main activities completed during the lesson. A1 = Arya's Lesson 1: Dictionary Skills/Information Recall; A2 = Arya's Lesson 2: Dictionary Skills (continued) / Word forms; A3= Arya's Lesson 3: Pre-reading Discussion questions / True and False; A4 = Arya' Lesson 4: True and False (continued) / Passage Analysis; A5 = Arya's Lesson 5: Information Recall; A6 = Arya's Lesson 6: Exam Review (Pre-reading discussion questions / True and False); O= observed practices # = limited occurrence; ×= not observed.

According to Table 2 most of the classroom practices were observed and reported by the researcher. Eight lessons were consistently inspected to find the real activities of the teacher in a second language teaching class while only a few were not observed during each lesson. In all lessons, Arya encouraged students to memorize the words and practice the spelling of words. He read the texts loudly or used a CD recorder for pronouncing the words and sentences. Arya used a step – by step process in his teaching: Getting synonyms and definitions in the first and second language, showing pictures to help students learn the words in a tangible way, explaining some definitions in both languages and reading the texts loudly. In loudly reading the students should follow the teacher and repeated exactly the teacher's pronunciation. They read in chore form, while Arya divided them into two groups for repetition. In three classes, he helped the students to look up the new words in a dictionary. In two classes Arya wanted the students to explain their reasons in answering True or False exercises. In all classes, he himself explained the reasons in selecting true false answers or reading comprehension multiple choices.

In none of classes, Arya used skimming and scanning. The discussions were on the reasons of selection of answers.

Arya mostly began the class with homework check whereby the homework were written in two colors: new words in red and the rest text in blue. In addition, the new words should be written 20 times. He assigned the homework with a green pen and grade them into very good, good, bad, very bad. Arya frequently interrupted the reading from the texts and explained the grammatical points.

Excerpt 1

A: Washoe had to take the puzzle apart. Okay Reza, what do you think about the tense of the verb?

S: I think; it is future tense.

A: No, you see that it is the simple past tense, why?

S: because it is about an action.

A: Because the author wanted to explain something in the past time, or better to say something which is not exist in the present time.

[Key. A=Arya; S= student]

It is revealed that Arya tries to review grammar even in reading text. He was interested in describing and analyzing the second language based on syntax. The teacher wanted to use writing skill in the service of teaching reading.

When asked about the observation, Arya stated, “now he understood his overload use of grammar in the class.” He said, it is natural that students are tedious. In observation, Arya’s style in managing the class was very serious and standoffish. He didn’t confirm the observed report and he thought that he was friendly, not very strict. He was aware that some of his observed manners were not contained beliefs. Maybe these beliefs were in deeper layers of Arya’s mind that even he himself was not aware of them. In the following excerpt the teacher encourage the learners unconsciously.



Excerpt 2

A: well, number 2, where did the man put the puzzle? *[Tell me your answers and I will write on the board]*

S1: In the zoo

A: well done, are you sure?

S2: no, sir, he took it on the cage?

A: nice, are you sure?

S3: sir, I think he took it in the cage.

A: now, we have three answers on the board, which of them is correct?

Class: no answer *[silence]*

A: okay, now let’s look at textbooks and try to find the real answer. *[Compare the answers with textbook].*

S3: If we look at line 4, there is the best answer.

A: very good, nice.

3. *What is the relationship between the participant’s belief and reflecting on practice?*

Arya’s beliefs are shown in table 3, and beliefs are organized into three main themes: language teaching, teaching second language reading, and language learning. In table 3 the beliefs and observations of performances are displayed.

Table 3: Arya's beliefs and classroom practices

themes	beliefs	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6	A7	A8
Language teaching	Teaching and learning a second language is mostly memorizing words for reading.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
	Teaching grammar is helpful for reading comprehension and writing.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
	The student should understand words and sentences, so translation is very useful for reading English texts.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
	Language learning in high school is a matter of passing entrance examination of universities, thus, the teacher should focus on the needs of students which are reading and grammar.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Teaching second language reading	Most important job of an ESL teacher is:								
	Reading foreign language contents	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
	Translating the reading text	O	x	O	O	O	x	x	O
	Word by word translation.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
	Good pronunciation of words.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
	A teacher can help students to learn the effect of grammar in comprehending the texts.	O	x	O	O	O	x	O	x
	Different meanings of words should be explained for students.	O	O	O	x	O	x	O	O
	The teacher can read loudly and students follow him/her.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
	Oral dictation is a useful technique in teaching words and sentences.	O	O	O	x	O	O	x	O
	The content and the arrangement of materials in the textbooks are not suitable.	O	O	x	O	O	x	O	O
	Teacher practice the exercises of the textbook by engaging the students.	O	x	O	x	O	x	O	O
	And he himself check and correct the performance of students.	O	O	x	O	x	O	x	x
Language learning	Repetition of words and sentences with								
	Writing 10 times of new words.	O	O	x	O	O	O	O	x
	Writing from text at least three times.	O	x	x	O	O	O	x	O

Notes. Each lesson is identified by the main activities completed during the lesson. A1 = Arya's Lesson 1: Dictionary Skills/Information Recall; A2 = Arya's Lesson 2: Dictionary Skills (continued) / Word forms; A3= Arya's Lesson 3: Pre-reading Discussion questions / True and False; A4 = Arya' Lesson 4: True and False (continued) / Passage Analysis; A5 = Arya's Lesson 5: Information Recall; A6 = Arya's Lesson 6: Exam Review (Pre-reading discussion questions / True and False); O= observed practices # = limited occurrence; x= not observed.

Arya believes in language teaching as a matter of teaching vocabulary and grammar, his practice in the classroom revolve around words in a way that the core part of a language is words. Even he tried to manipulate the lessons in order to present the words and usage of them colorful for learners. Arya used flamboyant pictures and pantomime for teaching vocabulary. In the classroom he frequently said, "You are students and you want to participate in entrance

examination of universities, you need to learn vocabulary, because the multiple choices of Konkor, entrance examination of university, is replied with words and their usages.” In the class he loved to explain the role of words in the texts and the relationship between words was in his concern. In classroom observation, we find out that the teacher change the arrangement of different parts of lesson; he shifted teaching vocabulary from the end of the lesson to start point of his teaching session. Arya read the text loudly and he wanted the students to repeat after him. The researcher observed that the students were obliged to rewrite from the text.

We also observed some activities in the classroom that Arya had not professed them as his beliefs. For example, it was observed that Arya sometimes focused on slow students. He stressed to reach slow students to the class. This work waste the time of the class.

4. How does the reflection facilitate Arya’s exploration of his beliefs and practice?

The fourth question inspected the impact of belief awareness on the teacher’s practice in classroom. Since Arya hadn’t been aware of his beliefs about teaching second language before conducting the research, he was interested in knowing his real teaching beliefs. The interview and observation could be helpful for Arya to disclose his beliefs about teaching second language. The findings of this research emphasis on the teacher’s awareness of his awareness before engaging in teaching as a second language teacher and even during their service. As Laung (2009) said that if the teachers were aware of their beliefs, they would be successful in their services (p.53). Arya was surprised of some of his beliefs specifically the belief and consequently his insisting for helping slow-students. Even this belief took a great time of class practice. On the reflection, now he found out that the source of this behavior in the classroom practice stem from when he was a student and his teachers didn’t pay enough attention to him. Since Arya believes that the teachers of his time only wanted to finish the syllabus without checking the learner’s comprehension. This atmosphere was extended in other classes like mathematics and physics. As Arya mentioned:

When I flash back in my mind, I remember the times in the classroom that the students didn’t understand different points of the lessons whether English, or other lessons, but our teachers mostly didn’t provide enough explanation about lessons. And we ashamed of asking, so there was no learning occurred.

On the reflection, Arya disclosed that he greatly used encouragement for the learners even if the student was not deserving to receive. He was wondering of the reason. He thought and said:

My experience as a learner leads me to the answer. Since our teachers at the time in guidance school tried to teach and finish the lesson in any possible form, they did not encourage learners and when we tried to present ourselves as sharp students and answer to questions voluntarily, the response was cold silence and a heavy neglection which was very disappointed. There was no encouragement or at least a little type of conformation, so it was very painful for me that my attempts for the teachers were not important or valuable.

Consequently, at the end of the research Arya stated that his involvement in the research was an informative experience for him to get a better understand of his beliefs. Arya said,” reflective practice is an instructive way for a teacher to get a clear picture of his classroom practice and a helpful technique to discover cognitive map.” As a result of Arya’s reflection practice which accompanied with interview, journal writing and classroom observation, the teacher could fulfill



the gap between his students' needs and his teaching practices stem in his beliefs. Walsh (2006) has recently noted that self-evaluation based on classroom observation could be an instructive technique for raising consciousness and understanding of teachers.

DISCUSSION

The results of the research indicated that the overall Arya's beliefs were converged with his classroom practices. In interview session, he said that the textbooks were determinative and restrictive factors in his classroom practices to the level that he had not enough freedom to use his creativity or even various materials and techniques in his teaching. Thus, the textbooks need to review and rewrite based on new everyday needs of modern society. This finding proves that the teacher should have freedom in selection of materials and methods of teaching to modify the textbooks. Referring to his emphasis on grammar analysis in reading comprehension, the reason may be related to what Richards and Lockhart (1994) maintained. "Teachers' beliefs about learning may be based on their training, their teaching experiences, or may go back to their own experiences as language learners (p.34). Arya found that he deeply believed in helping all students specifically slow students to be in the same rate of knowledge achievement even if it made time consuming of the time. When the researcher asked Arya about achieving goals of teaching, the teacher strongly claimed that he fulfills all educational goals of teaching. In this case study, the method of teaching was old but the teacher believed in it and he did his best to fulfill the goals of teaching. Thus, the research showed that the belief and especially teacher's deep belief could be strongly effective in teaching.

CONCLUSIONS

This project sought to find a relationship between teachers' beliefs and classroom practice. By conducting the case study in the context of high school; it proved an opportunity to examine the inner part of a teacher as an important part in the process of teaching in a classroom. The results of the study indicated that teachers' beliefs is the cornerstone of teaching process in a class, and with accompany of reflective practice, they could shed light on the dark sides of a teacher.

Interview, journal writing and observation were effective in this way to show the impact of teachers' belief on classroom practice. As a consequence, the research reached to the point that teachers' beliefs should not be neglected. The neglection will be harmful regarding wasting of time and budget. Meanwhile the classroom observations indicated that some beliefs are not addressed easily and clearly, the reason could be related to situation of beliefs in belief structure hierarchy whether the belief is surface or deep. As direct consequence, the teacher awareness of his hidden beliefs help him/her to reprogram his/her teaching schedule. The findings and results of this case study show that interview, journal writing and observation all and all help teachers to disclose their hidden beliefs and their effects on practice.

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