Pakistani Students' and Teachers' Beliefs about English Language Learning at School Level: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

Beliefs whether they are of the learner or the teacher are very crucial in language learning. For the learner they are important in defining his behavior towards learning and for teachers they delineate the ways of teaching. A possible conformity or clash in the beliefs of the two can have an important effect on overall learning process and outcomes. This study seeks to document Pakistani teachers' and students' beliefs regarding learning and teaching English at school level and find out the possible similarities and differences among them. Data was collected through a closed questionnaire and interviews. The framework developed by Lightbown & Spada (1993) was used for the questionnaire and the same was reworded for interviews. The results indicate that beliefs regarding learning English held by teachers and students match in four respects, while differ in six categories. The study finally looks at what implications these beliefs have for teaching English in Pakistani schools.

Keywords: Beliefs, Language Learning, English Language Teaching in Pakistan.

1. Introduction

Second language educationists have argued that students bring with them to the classroom a complicated set of "attitudes, experiences, expectations, beliefs, and learning strategies" (Benson, 2001; Nyikos & Oxford, 1993; Oxford, 1992). These "attitudes toward learning, and the perceptions and beliefs that determine them", may have an insightful effect on learning performance (Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Como, 1986; Cotterall, 1995; McCombs, 1984 ;) and "learning outcomes" (Martin & Ramsden, 1987; van Rossum & Schenk, 1984; Weinert & Kluwe, 1987). Thus, a language learner's belief may be regarded as a personal matter, a conviction about language learning and how it may work. In the creation of learner beliefs, awareness of achievement and anticipation can play a major role. Contributory and optimistic beliefs help to solve issues and continue to uphold motivation, while unrealistically high levels tend to promote incompetence and diminish motivation (Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005:04).

Similarly, teachers' beliefs will shape their teaching instructions and the interpretation they will derive of what goes on in the classroom and how they will react to it (Sheorey 2006). Williams and Burden (1997) suggested that "teacher's deep-rooted beliefs will pervade their classroom actions more than a particular methodology they are told to adopt or course book they follow". Teachers' beliefs besides influencing their

teaching also affect how students approach learning (Altrichter, Posch and Somekh 1993, Patrick 2000, Prosser, Trigwell and Taylor 1994). A mismatch between teachers' belief and their classroom practice may lead to learners' receiving what Williams and Burden (1997:54) call "confused and confusing message" about learning.

In addition, a comparison of teachers and students beliefs will discover the extent to which they respond or differ from one another. If they do not match the result will be, according to Horwitz (1990:25), "a clash of expectations between teachers and students about language learning which lead to a lack of students' confidence in and satisfaction with the language class". Kern (1995) established that apprehension in the classroom might be the result of differences in beliefs of the student and the teacher. Lightbown and Spada (2004) claimed that information about findings and theoretical views in second language acquisition research can help teachers evaluate various language learning methods which can inform their practice.

The aim of this paper is to bring to surface the language learning beliefs of both teachers and students, to see the extent of possible differences between them, and then to explore the sources of these differences for reflection and analysis.

The 10 item questionnaire containing statements related to language learning based on Lightbown and Spada (1993) was adapted to assess teachers and students' beliefs and their relationship with language learning theories.(see Appendix A)

The study addressed the following specific questions:

1. What kind of beliefs do teachers and students hold regarding English language learning at school level?

2. Are there any similarities and/or differences between teachers' and students' beliefs about language learning?

3.   What implication do these differences and similarities have for ELT provision in Pakistani schools?

The outcomes of the study are expected to create awareness about the role of beliefs in English teaching and learning in Pakistan. Teachers would be expected to take into account students' views about language learning while devising their teaching strategies which may lead to improvement of ELT provision in Pakistan.

2. Past Studies on Beliefs

Research on language learning beliefs started with the pioneering work of Horwitz (1985, 1987, 1988). She investigated language learning beliefs of American university students taking a mandatory foreign language class. She developed an instrument to access students' opinions on variety of issues and controversies and named it "Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)". More recently relationship between learners and teachers beliefs in different setting and cultures has come under discussion. Kern (1995) used BALLI with 288 students of French as a foreign language and 12 instructors in the United States. He concluded that teachers don't agree with the importance of excellent accent in speaking foreign language, don't consider speaking easier than listening and don't think that learning a foreign language is a matter of translation from English, whereas students were inclined to accept or vary in their opinions about these issues.

Samimy and Lee (1997) investigated 34 students and 10 teachers and observed a mismatch between their language learning beliefs. Students were more inclined than their teachers towards accuracy in pronunciation, learning vocabulary and the use of translation in Chinese learning.

In another study, Peacock (1999) also used BALLI to compare 202 students and 45 university ESL teachers and found significant differences in their beliefs regarding vocabulary and grammar.

Chiou (2006) studied 96 students and 63 teachers' English listening beliefs. The findings revealed that students stressed the importance of excellent English pronunciation. While teachers placed a very high value on knowing about English speaking cultures in order to better understand the language, only half the students supported the concept.

Research taking a close look at the relationship between SLA theories and language teaching practices was sporadic. Comparison of teachers and students beliefs was done by Davis (2003) in China by using Lightbown and Spada (1993) 10-item questionnaire. The study showed that students and teachers beliefs differed in four points: (1) the earlier the second language is introduced the greater the likelihood of success, (2) teachers should present grammatical rules one at a time and students should practice examples of each before proceeding to the next, (3) students errors be corrected as soon as they are made in order to prevent the formation of bad habits, (4) teachers should use materials that expose students only to those language structures that have already been taught.

Shen, Li-Bi, Chia-Ling, Mei-Su, Yu-Chia & Pei-Ru (2005) did a survey in Taiwan adapting Lightbown and Spada (2004) 12-item questionnaire. Divided teachers' and students' opinion was noticed on two of the above four items pointed out by Davis (2003) for Chinese learners that teachers should present grammatical rules one at a time and students should practice examples of each before proceeding to the next and teachers should use materials that expose students only to those language structures that have already been taught.

All the studies on beliefs of teachers and students both based on BALLI or language learning theories strongly suggest that there is a wide divide between the beliefs about language learning held by teachers and students. The studies also suggest that this difference between their beliefs affects language learning in a significant way.

2.1 Second Language Acquisition Theories

With regard to second language acquisition, Lightbown and Spada (2004) have raised three theoretical approaches to explain how a child learns a second language: Behaviorism, Interactionism and Innatism. Second language acquisition is regarded by traditional behaviorist as a result of learners' imitation (repetition), practice, feedback on success and habit formation. Lightbown and Spada (1999:15) suggested that children use new forms of language which are not always the result of repetition and practice. They recognize patterns in the language and use their creativity to make sentences of their own. Brown (2004) pointed out that other theories are needed as behaviorism cannot fully explain the abstract nature of language, child's creativity and interactive nature of language acquisition.

Interactionism, on the other hand, explains "how children relate form and meaning in language, how to interact in conversation, and how to use language appropriately". Thus its focus is on the social aspects that shape language learning. Vygotsky (1978) pointed out that social interaction helps in the development of language. Long (1983) says that interaction is important for the input to be comprehensible. He maintains that native speakers modify their speech in long conversations with the non-native speakers.

Innatism, however, indicates that structures, ideas and processes that are in the mind of the child at birth help to develop human knowledge. These are responsible for basic language structures and how they are learned. On the basis of this view, Lightbown and Spada (2004:15) suggest that children are biologically programmed to learn the language in the same way as other biological functions take place. Under this assumption, innatism explains "the acquisition of complex grammar" and once the children are equipped

with the universal grammar they just need to learn the principles and variation in their own language to acquire it.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

3.1.1 Questionnaire

This study was carried out in two Pakistani schools, one a private school (Shaheen School System) and other a Government school (F.G. Girls Model School) in the capital city of Pakistan, Islamabad. The participants in this study were 101 students of 9th and 10th grades and 17 full time teachers of English. The choice of one government and one private school was made in order to have representation of both types of schools to make the study more reliable. Permission was taken from the principals of both the schools to conduct the research. Similarly, consent was taken from both the teachers and students. It was made clear to all the participants that their participation was entirely voluntary and they could withdraw at any stage without assigning any reason. Privacy and confidentiality of their views was ensured. The participants were told that the information would be used for research purposes only. Response rate was 100% because the questionnaires were completed in the class. Presence of the researcher was meant to clear up any confusion in the items of the questionnaires.

3.1.2 Interviews

For the interviews, all the teachers who filled the questionnaire were requested to participate but only six of them agreed to take part. Three teachers each from private as well as government school participated in the interview out of which one private school teacher didn't allow to tape record the interview so it was written by the researcher. The rest were all tape recorded. All six teachers were Masters' in English with an additional degree of Bachelors of Education (B.Ed.). Their experience varied from six months to twenty years of teaching. As for students, it was decided to interviews only twenty of them from 9th and 10th grade which were also tape recorded.

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1 Questionnaire

For this study, a closed questionnaire, framed in Likert scales (Likert, 1932) was administered. This study rested on the ten dimensions of language learning (see Appendix A) drawn from Lightbown and Spada (1993).

Respondents are asked to report their agreement or disagreement to each statement on a 5 point Likert scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). This rating scale helped in determining whether there was a significant difference between teachers' and students' views on language learning. Although the Likert-scale was originally developed to measure attitudes alone, its scope was extended to accommodate wider cognitive and affective variables including beliefs (Davis 2003). As a first step towards exposing a larger picture of Pakistani teachers' and students beliefs, it was considered more useful to adopt a survey style of research supported by interviews.

3.2.2 Interviews

For interviews, questions were framed keeping in view the statements of the questionnaire. Some related statements were joined to form one question to avoid repetition. For students, questions entirely related to teaching of English were omitted. (see Appendix B).

3.3 Procedure

Data collected from the questionnaire was analyzed statistically by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 12.0).   Descriptive analysis in the form of percentages was calculated. Interviews were analyzed and results were compared with those of the questionnaire to give an overall view of the beliefs of Pakistani students and teachers.

4. Results

4.1 Questionnaires

Table 1 presents the frequencies and percentages of teachers' and students' responses.

5. Discussion

While admitting that the results of the study cannot be generalized as a small number of teachers and students were involved in it, they shed light on some of the important issues which tell us about the thinking of teachers and students regarding teaching of English.

Teachers and students while replying to the questionnaire agreed with the following four statements:

1-Languages are learnt mainly through imitation. (Statement no. 1)

2-Teachers should correct students when they make grammatical errors. (Statement no. 2)

3-The most important factor in second language acquisition is motivation. (Statement no. 4)

4-Teachers should present grammatical rules one at a time and students should practice examples of each one before going onto another. (Statement no. 7)

It is worth pointing out that there was a striking difference between what the teachers and students said in the interview and the information they provided in the questionnaire. For example, the teachers and students agreed to the above four statements in the questionnaire but replying to the first question whether imitation should be allowed majority of the teachers (80%) claimed that while creativity should be emphasized more in Pakistani context, imitation is good for learning pronunciation which "might be useful in junior classes". Once the students have gained command over language, then they need not to imitate. A contrast of view was also noticed in relation to the second statement where a large number (70%) of students believed that students mistakes should be corrected then and there, while 80% teachers think that grammatical mistakes should be corrected afterwards because when students are corrected on the spot they lose confidence, feel shy and sometimes others make fun of them. Teachers added that practice is the key to success and the more students practice, the more they learn. There was a general agreement in the interviews as well regarding statement no.4 and 7.

It is interesting to note that these four statements reflect a broadly behaviorist view of language learning. This agreement was also noticed in Chinese teachers and students investigated by Davis (2003). Similarly, the first three statements are also in agreement with the study in Taiwan carried out by Li-Bi Shen, et.al (2005). It is also noteworthy that in all the studies conducted in China, Taiwan and Pakistan, both teachers and students suggested that motivation is the key to learning a second/foreign language.

However, the teachers and students also differed in relation to several beliefs and theories. Regarding the first major difference in the questionnaire where students were much stronger than teachers is that earlier a second language is introduced in schools, the greater the likelihood of success. One important point is that in the interviews both teachers and students reinforced the early start in English language learning. Students argued that second language should be introduced from Pre School so that students are perfect by class ninth and it is the time when they have fresh minds and students don't have much burden of other subjects. Teachers also believed that as the students improve gradually and since English is not their native language, they should start learning English from the beginning. They added if English is introduced from class 6th,

by then student should have learnt a lot of things in Urdu. In this way students will not be able to learn English and will always translate in Urdu to understand anything in English.

This view is supported in literature by Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson's (2000) (cited by Singleton in Mayo, 2003:10) who told that "younger learners acquire second languages automatically from mere exposure, while older learners have to make conscious and labored efforts". This probably explains the reason why students were more inclined for introducing English early in schools and regarding delayed introduction as one of the major factors for lack of proficiency.

Ellis (1985) views it in another way and suggests that "…while age does not alter the route of acquisition, it does have a marked effect on rate and ultimate success…For example, in terms of rate, adults appear to do better than children (6 to10 years), while teenagers (12-15 years) appear to outperform both adults and children" (cited in Nunan, 1999:41).

The decision of introduction of foreign/second language is based on consideration of motivation for learning. Lightbown and Spada (2006:186) explains that if the goal is to develop native like fluency it should come at an early stage and if on the other hand, the objective is development of basic communication skills it may be introduced at a later stage. This means that the introduction of foreign/second language should not be determined by age alone, but other factors including students' needs and school language objective should also be taken into account.

The teachers and students also differed in that "teachers should use materials that expose students only to those language structures that they have already been taught". Students held that strongly because their past experience works better so they want linear pattern of language development to be followed. This means that students prefer the teacher to build on the structures already taught. The teachers on the other hand prefer to expose their students to a variety of structures in order to enable them to cope with unpredictable situations conforming to the views of Lightbown and Spada (2006) who argue that when communicative competence is the preferred outcome then it is important to expose students to many language structures outside the classroom which they are neither familiar with nor have mastered them. In the same vein, Brown (2007:295) argues that motivation will be promoted and as a result students' interest will enhance if they are exposed to more challenging situations.

As regards the statement "most of the mistakes the second language learners make are due to interference from their first language", teachers held this statement more strongly than the students in response to the questionnaire. This is confirmed by Brown (2001:65-66) who holds that in the early stages of language learning, learners try to operate second language in the pattern of first language which is the main cause of errors.

Teachers in the interviews held that Urdu is responsible for difficulties in English. They argued that as students speak Urdu in their homes so they feel difficulty in learning English. This leads them to believe that "they are learning something very difficult which they can never do". Therefore, they translate each and everything in Urdu and then learn it. Teachers think that since the students have an option to fall back on, thus they use Urdu and don't try to learn English.

Regarding the other difference that "students errors should be corrected as soon as they are made" which was strengthened by the teachers in the questionnaire but was rejected strongly in the interviews. Most of the teachers (80%) want to correct students' errors afterwards. These views are in consistence with those of Lightbown and Spada (1993: 167) who accept that excessive feedback on error demoralizes the students.

Therefore, it is important that the feedback is communicated to the learner in a way that it does not hurt students' feelings in order to avoid discouragement and demotivation.This view was also supported by students in the interviews who said that they feel insulted when corrected in front of the class and expect the teachers to tolerate their mistakes.

Lastly, the teacher and students differed in questionnaire on "when students are allowed to interact freely (for example in pair or group work) they learn each other's mistakes". Teachers thought that this was the case while the students differed on this account. However, in the interviews teachers and students were in agreement, where half of the students believed that they would learn from the mistakes and will not "adopt them" when working in a group. The other 50% of the students believed that they would learn the mistakes because "they don't have confidence in themselves so they copy others". On the other hand, 50% teachers were of the view that students learn the mistakes but the teacher is there to correct them and they learn more in a group.

6. Implications of the Study

There are a number of implications that fall out from this study. For one thing, the study shows that there is lack of awareness in teachers about the importance of understanding of beliefs in language teaching and learning. Therefore, one outcome of this study is the need to create awareness about how beliefs of teachers and students are crucial. To this end, it is important that short courses and workshops geared towards creating such awareness are organized at various levels and teachers at schools levels are trained to take into account the beliefs of their students in order to achieve better results in teaching of English in Pakistan at schools level.

Secondly, the teachers should think of adopting practices where a greater degree of 'harmony' is achieved in the set of beliefs of teachers and students. While it is true, that a complete compatibility is not attainable, attempts should be made to narrow the gap between the beliefs of both teachers and students.

The study also contributes to ELT provision in Pakistan in that it brings to light the fact that there exist differences of beliefs amongst teachers and students regarding learning English. This study points to the need of addressing these differences in order to improve ELT provision in the country and take steps to reduce, if not eliminate, these differences.

The study particularly makes food for thought for ELT providers in Pakistan as to how realign their teaching practices which create motivation in the students for learning English. For instance, teachers can think about how to organize their teaching points in a graded order.

The study also stresses the need to revise the curriculum with a view to bringing it 'closer' to the beliefs of students which will go a long way in engendering motivation in students for learning of English and would produce better results.

7. Conclusion

This study concluded that while there was an agreement between the beliefs of teachers' and students' with regard to teaching and learning of English, they differed on several accounts. Students wanted a more sequential approach towards learning whereas teachers wanted control in respect of error making and interaction among students. The study also showed that the students' and teachers' beliefs have serious implications for learning and teaching English in Pakistani schools. It is therefore important that both teachers and students might be made aware of their beliefs and their repercussions for the language

classroom. It is hoped that the study will contribute in impressing the importance of recognition and harmonizing teachers' and students beliefs and will go a long way in improving English language teaching learning situation in Pakistan.

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Table: 1 Frequencies of response by students and teachers.

Variables		1	2	3	4	5	Total
		Strongly Agree				Strongly disagree	
1. "Languages are learnt mainly through imitation".	Students	18(17.82%)	26(25.74%)	41(40.59%)	11(10.89%)	5(4.95%)	101(100%)
	Teachers	3(17.64%)	2(11.76%)	11(64.70%)	1(5.88%)	0(0.0%)	17(100%)
2-"Teachers should correct students when they make grammatical errors".	Students	79(78.21%)	12(11.88%)	4(3.96%)	3(2.97%)	3(2.97%)	101(100%)
	Teachers	13(76.47%)	2(11.76%)	0(0.0%)	1(5.88%)	1(5.88%)	17(100%)
3-"Students with high IQs are good language learners".	Students	51(50.49%)	18(17.82%)	22(21.78%)	3(2.97%)	7(6.93%)	101(100%)
	Teacher	7(41.17%)	4(23.52%)	4(23.52%)	2(11.76%)	0(0.0%)	17(100%)
4-"The most important factor in second language acquisition is motivation".	Students	54(53.46%)	29(28.71%)	12(11.88%)	3(2.97%)	3(2.97%)	101(100%)
	Teachers	8(47.05%)	6(35.29%)	2(11.76%)	1(5.88%)	0(0.0%)	17(100%)
5-"The earlier a second language is introduced in schools, the greater the likelihood of success in learning".	Students	66(65.34%)	19(18.81%)	8(7.92%)	3(2.97%)	5(4.95%)	101(100%)
	Teachers	9(52.94%)	2(11.76%)	6(35.29%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	17(100%)
6-"Most of the mistakes that second language learners make are due to interference from their first language".	Students	22(21.78%)	29(28.71%)	22(21.78%)	15(14.85%)	13(12.87%)	101(100%)
	Teachers	6(35.29%)	4(23.52%)	4(23.52%)	1(5.88%)	2(11.76%)	17(100%)
7-"Teachers should present grammatical rules one at a time and students should practice examples of each one before going onto another".	Students	75(74.25%)	12(11.88%)	6(5.94%)	5(4.95%)	3(2.97%)	101(100%)
	Teachers	13(76.47%)	4(23.52%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	17(100%)
8-"Students errors should be corrected as soon as they are made in order to prevent the formation of bad habits".	Students	73(72.27%)	19(18.81%)	5(4.95%)	3(2.97%)	1(0.99%)	101(100%)
	Teachers	15(88.23%)	1(5.88%)	1(5.88%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	17(100%)
9-"Teachers should use materials that expose students only to those language structures that they have already been taught".	Students	45(44.55%)	21(20.79%)	15(14.85%)	9(8.91%)	11(10.89%)	101(100%)
	Teachers	6(35.29%)	7(41.17%)	2(11.76%)	2(11.76%)	0(0.0%)	17(100%)
10- "When students are allowed to interact freely (for example in pair or group work) they learn each other's mistakes".	Students	37(36.63%)	15(14.85%)	13(12.87%)	17(16.83%)	19(18.81%)	101(100%)
	Teachers	8(47.05%)	5(29.41%)	2(11.76%)	1(5.88%)	1(5.88%)	17(100%)

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Appendix A

Questionnaire Items on the Beliefs of Teachers and Students Regarding Language Learning.

(1)"Languages are learned mainly through imitation".

strongly agree ____1____2____3____4____5____strongly disagree

(2) "Teachers should correct students when they make grammatical errors.

strongly agree ____1____2____3____4____5____strongly disagree

(3) "Students with high IQs are good language learners".

strongly agree ____1____2____3____4____5____strongly disagree

(4) "The most important factor in second language acquisition is
motivation".

strongly agree ____1____2____3____4____5____strongly disagree

(5) "The earlier a second language is introduced in schools, the greater the
likelihood of success in learning ".

strongly agree ____1____2____3____4____5____strongly disagree

(6) "Most of the mistakes that second language learners make are due to
interference from their first language".

strongly agree ____1____2____3____4____5____strongly disagree

(7) "Teachers should present grammatical rules one at a time, and students
should practice examples of each one before going onto another".

strongly agree ____1____2____3____4____5____strongly disagree

(8) "Students' errors should be corrected as soon as they are made in order to
prevent the formation of bad habits".

strongly agree ____1____2____3____4____5____strongly disagree

(9) "Teachers should use materials that expose students only to those language
structures that have already been taught".

strongly agree ____1____2____3____4____5____strongly disagree

(10) "When students are allowed to interact freely (for example in pair or group
work), they learn each other's mistakes".

strongly agree ____1____2____3____4____5____strongly disagree

Appendix B

Teachers' Interview Questions

Q1- How do you see the role of imitation in learning/teaching English in Pakistani Schools?

Q2- How the teacher in your view should deal with the grammatical errors committed by the students?

Q3- In the light of your experience, what are the major causes of grammatical mistakes committed by the students?

Q4- When do you think should English as a second language be introduced at school level and why?

Q5- How do you see the role of motivation in learning English in Pakistani schools?

Q6- How far is first language or Urdu responsible for difficulties in learning English at school level?

Q7- What in your view is the best way to present grammatical rules?

Q8- It is said that by allowing students to interact freely i.e. in pair work or in group discussion students learn each other's mistakes. How would you respond?

Q9- It is claimed that students with high IQs are good language learners? How would you respond?

Students' Interview Questions

Q1- At what level do you think should English as a second language be introduced and why?

Q2- How the teachers in your view should deal with the grammatical errors committed by the students?

Q3- How do you see the role of motivation in learning English in Pakistani schools?

Q4- How far is first language or Urdu responsible for difficulties in learning English at school level?

Q5- What in your view is the best way to present grammatical rules?

Q6- It is said that by allowing students to interact freely i.e. in pair work or in group discussion students learn each other's mistakes. How would you respond?