

# Primary School English Teacher's beliefs in vocabulary teaching: A case study

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**Abstract:** *In spite of the volume of literature in teacher beliefs and vocabulary teaching, there is scarce literature to combine the two. This dissertation uses a qualitative case study method to investigate the beliefs of two primary school English teachers, who are in different developmental stage. Observations, interviews and documentation were used as the data collection technique. Analysis was made by the perspectives of their views on the importance of vocabulary, their views on the purposes and content of vocabulary teaching, their views on the methods of vocabulary teaching and their views on the teacher-learner relationship.*

*This study has demonstrated the significance of teacher beliefs, which place great influence on teachers' classroom practices. It has also shown the homogeneity and particularity of teacher beliefs. Similar context in which they are in has made the two teachers to share many similar beliefs with each other. At the same time, their different experiences of learning, their different working experiences and their different positions have also made them to shown certain level of differences in their beliefs. From the comparison between the two teachers, and between the comparison between their beliefs and practices, it can be seen that teacher beliefs are closely related with their practices. Their practices and influenced by their beliefs, but not always correspondent with their beliefs. The research results have also shown the homogeneity and particularity of teacher beliefs. A number of influential factors in the forming of teacher beliefs are also discovered: teachers' experience of learning, their working experiences and the positions they hold.*

**Key Words:** *EFL teacher, teacher beliefs, vocabulary teaching, primary school English.*

## ABBREVIATIONS

CLT - Communicative Language Teaching  
EFL - English as a Foreign Language  
ELT - English Language Teaching  
MOE - Ministry of Education  
NEC - New English Curriculum

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

In China, there is a very high awareness of the importance of English teaching and learning. Within ELT, vocabulary is a very important aspect. In the textbook being used in most schools in Zhejiang Province, there are two periods devoted to vocabulary teaching in each unit, not to mention the incorporation of vocabulary learning on other occasions. The importance of vocabulary teaching and learning is highly acknowledged. However, how vocabulary can be not has generated much discussion and debate at the moment. In the literature, the importance of teacher belief is well documented as many writers propose that although a wide range of interacting and often conflicting factors may come into play in teachers' classroom practices, teacher belief is a powerful and consistent influence on their practices. This study has used a qualitative case study method to examine the beliefs and classroom practices of two primary school English language teachers regarding the teaching of vocabulary.

The following research questions are addressed:

- (1) What beliefs do teachers have about teaching English vocabulary?
- (2) What are their classroom practices in terms of vocabulary teaching?
- (3) What is the relationship between teacher beliefs and their classroom practices?
- (4) What are the similarities and differences between different teachers in terms of their beliefs and practices? What are the influential factors?

This study is believed to be of theoretical importance and practical implications. It is believed that findings of this study can contribute to discussion both about vocabulary teaching and teacher beliefs and enrich study of both fields. It is also hoped that findings gained from this study can provide some implications for the teachers, schools and teacher educators.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW :**

### **2.1 TEACHER BELIEFS**

#### **2.1.1 DEFINING TEACHER BELIEFS**

There are various definitions in terms of what teacher beliefs is. Pajares (1992) voices that the educational beliefs of teachers are only part of the general belief system of teachers. Beliefs include both attitude and subjective norms, which makes it difficult to separate teachers' individual preferences from their opinions about how things should be. Richards (1998) proposes that beliefs are the information, attitudes, values, expectations, theories, and thoughts about teaching and learning that teachers create over time and bring with them to the classroom.

Beliefs of the teachers are influencing their mind operations and instructional decisions (Borg, 1999). These beliefs mainly determine teachers' selections and practice, such as addressing teaching objectives, lesson design, and choice of tasks and activities, as well as assessment of student performance (Rios, 1996).

The concept teacher belief is interconnected with concepts such as teacher knowledge. Researchers tend to hold that knowledge is based on objective facts, while beliefs are affective and include a certain type of judgment or assessment. Thus, teachers can gain new knowledge, but are still influenced by their beliefs when deciding whether they accept it as true or not (Ertmer, 2005; Hoy, Davis and Pape, 2006).

#### **2.1.2 FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE TEACHER'S BELIEFS**

There were several factors suggested by Stergiopoulou (2012) that influence the formation of teacher's beliefs about their profession and their practice in the classroom. First, it is the learning experiences of the teachers from the first educational institution in their life to the last one, which greatly affects the teacher's beliefs later positively or negatively. Second, it is knowledge and development of education. In one study by Bailey and her colleagues (1996), teachers expressed strong beliefs in the importance of the teacher's style and personality, as well as in creating a positive learning environment that they considered crucial in learning their own language. Regarding the above two factors, it was also said that language teaching methods are influenced by the knowledge of teachers that underlies their beliefs, in addition to this factor there are also other influencing factors, because all the teachers were students themselves and watched many other teachers teaching various subjects in childhood and early adulthood (Hall, 2011; Farrell, 2007). Third, it is the teacher's experience. When the teachers in the classroom they have the opportunity to experiment with new ideas, to make hypotheses, which they then confirm or refute. From this we can conclude that the more classrooms teachers visited, the more times they could try out their ideas in practice, to make hypotheses, and also these factors caused them to form their beliefs from time to time (Williams & Burden, 1997). Also referring to the experience of teachers, Freeman (2002) spoke out that because of the experiences gained in the past, teachers are now strongly influenced by them, this means that it can cause teachers to form certain strong beliefs, which in turn may contradict to the theories they were taught in College or University. When discussing this topic, it is necessary to include such a group of factors as education and the school environment, including the curriculum, school management and education policy. This is consistent with Bandura's Social cognitive theory, which states that self-regulating and self-reflexive cognitive processes are involved in adaptation and / or changes (Pajares, F. Albert Bandura, 2011).

## **2.2 VOCABULARY TEACHING**

### **2.2.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF VOCABULARY TEACHING**

Kuzborska (2011) proposes that language learning is cumulative, which means that students should be enough motivated to acquire new English vocabulary, and also to comprehend it, since this is the basis for reading as well as all other branches of language study. Based on the words of Schmitt (1998), this has led some scholars to advise conducting longitudinal studies that could detect the amounts and types of vocabulary that are considered appropriate for different categories of language proficiency. According to Gardner and Davis (2014), vocabulary lists are also processed by exam boards and curriculum developers in order to cover them with a specific curriculum, and they are also responsible for compiling lists that could be considered as a standard for measuring student development. To this day, there are discussions about the benefits of decontextualized vocabulary learned from lists, as well as contextualized vocabulary learned from interacting with tasks and other people, or from narrative texts. There is no need to limit the ability of teachers to use teaching approaches in relation to their students because deliberate learning combined with learning opportunities with a communicative approach is much fruitful than any of these approaches of learning separately from each other (Nation, 2014).

### **2.2.2 METHODS TO TEACH VOCABULARY**

The methods to teach vocabulary have also witnessed several waves of change as a result of the changes and develop of approaches and methods in ELT. One of the earliest approaches to teach English is grammar translation method. Based on the words of Ketabi and Shahraki (2011), this method, which originated in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, initially comes from focusing on the written word, as well as on the sense of duty of teachers in terms of helping their students to obtain the necessary literary works written in L2. When using this method, teachers often focus on encouraging students to memorize the new vocabulary, as well as pattern drills, translation and

comparison with the native language. Often, vocabulary tests are accompanied to make sure that their students can clearly remember the form and meaning of new vocabulary (Hall, 2011). In general, the grammar translation method is a teacher-centered, according to which the teacher instructs students in stages through a preliminary established curriculum (Al-Mutawa and Kailani, 1989; Hall, 2011).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many approaches and methods to ELT were developed as a response to societal development. These approaches and methods include situational language teaching, audiolingual method, cognitive approach, suggestopedia, etc. (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Since the 1980s, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was proposed and soon became a popular method in ELT. CLT aims at presenting both grammar and vocabulary in the appropriate context. Bogards and Laufer-Dworkin (2004) say that the communicative approach is based on the notion that understanding meaning is considered as the first stage of learning a word or a phrase before you can apply it in real-life situations. Using this approach, the role of the teacher can be described as follows: the teacher must somehow change the teaching material so that when it is received by students, it is easier for them to acquire as much vocabulary as possible through casual use (Ellis and He, 1999). Even during class or outside of class, teachers can turn simple interactions in the environment into opportunities for their students to acquire or repeat vocabulary, such as when they pick up a pen or clean a blackboard, and it's up to teachers if they want to use these opportunities to practice natural instructions and questions in English or not.

### 3. METHODOLOGY :

#### 3.1 RESEARCH METHOD

This study aims to investigate the beliefs of two primary school English teachers in their vocabulary teaching. To achieve this purpose, a qualitative case study method was employed.

#### 3.2 PARTICIPANTS

Two primary school English teachers were selected as participants. Both teachers are female teachers as there are only female teachers in the school that this study took place. These two teachers are similar in teaching experiences and they also both teach grade 3. In spite of their similarities, they differ from each other in terms of their professional titles. One of the teachers is a Level-1 teacher and the other is a senior teacher who enjoys well reputation in the whole city for her expertise in English teaching.

Table 1: Participant's information

Participant	Gender	Experiences of teaching	Professional title	Grade of teaching
T1	Female	About 19 years	Level 1	Grade 3
T2	Female	About 20 years	Senior	Grade 3

T1 is a primary school English teacher with a working experience of about nineteen years. She had Chinese teacher training for three years and English teacher training for two years. She also had experience of working in Britain as an assistant of Chinese teaching. T2, working in the same school as T1, has been working in the field of EFL already for around twenty years. She finished general teacher training that allowed her to teach any subject in the primary school. Therefore, English was not a particular focus, but one of the subjects she was learning to teach. However, in addition to the limited English lessons that were offered at the university, she also managed to communicate with a foreigner in order to improve her English. Currently, T2 is a well-know teacher in the field of ELT in the city, and even in the whole province. Her teaching skills are very highly acknowledged.

#### 3.3 DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

Methods of data collection include interviews, classroom observations, and documentations. Each participant was interviewed for around three times. The approximate duration of the interview was for about half an hour to one hour each time.

#### 3.4 RESEARCH ETHICS

Ethical principles were also carefully considered when conducting this research. Respect for intellectual property and the absence of plagiarism were two of the main issues that I had been concerning about in this study.

### 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION :

#### 4.1 THE HOMOGENEITY OF TEACHER BELIEFS

Based on the interview data and observational transcript, this study has found that there is a homogeneity of teacher's beliefs. Although the two teachers differ from each other in terms of their professional titles, and most

importantly the fame they enjoy, with the second one being more famous and prestigious. However, they share with each other many common beliefs. For example, with regard to the role of vocabulary in language teaching, they both agree that vocabulary is of basic importance. With regard to the purposes and content of vocabulary teaching, they both share the view that vocabulary learning for grade three should include pronunciation, meaning and usage. In terms of the method of teaching, they both highlight the importance of context and argue that Chinese should be used as a supplementary medium of instruction. It can be concluded that their beliefs are quite similar with each other, in spite of some small differences. The reason behind their similarities may be the joint context and discourse they share with each other. They teach in the same school and their beliefs and practices are shaped by the context in which they teach. Additionally, they are exposed to the same official discourse, for example, principles suggested in the NEC and expert talks about vocabulary teaching and other aspects of English teaching. Additionally, T2 is a role model who enjoys fame in teaching. She has given speech about ELT both in the school and city-wide. She may have placed her influence on T1. Therefore, T1's belief may have reflected that of T2.

#### **4.2 THE INDIVIDUALITY OF TEACHER BELIEFS**

The two teachers do have many similarities with each other in terms of their beliefs. However, their beliefs also differ from each other somehow. For example, in terms of the content of vocabulary learning, although they all believe that pronunciation, meaning and usage are the core of vocabulary learning. T1 believes that meaning is the most important while T2 voices that pronunciation should be placed as the top priority. However, the key difference may be their ability in voicing their beliefs and how these beliefs are constructed. As an expert teacher, T2 seems to be more capable in voicing her beliefs and many of the beliefs are explicitly held, while that of T1 very often seems to be more implicit. For example, in talking about what they believe to be the most important in vocabulary learning, T2 voices that pronunciation is the most important and she can refer to theories that words are encoded and decoded by their sound. Also, in talking about whether Chinese should be used as the medium of instruction, T2 knows that some scholars and experts may hold a different view and she still chooses to use Chinese. This shows she has reflected on her actions and her beliefs are more explicit.

#### **4.3 BELIEFS AND CLASSROOM PRACTICES**

Findings in this study confirms the well documented claims that there is a close relationship between teacher beliefs and classroom practices. Classroom practices are a very influential factor in teacher's belief development. As evidenced in both teachers interview data and observational transcript, there is a general consensus between their beliefs and classroom practices. Most of the beliefs they have are reflected in their classroom practices. For example, both teachers all voice that vocabulary is of great importance in language learning and they do have devoted much time to vocabulary teaching. Additionally, they all voice the importance of context in vocabulary teaching and observational data does suggest they have tried to incorporate context in their teaching. Admittedly, many of the aspects they voice in interviews, for example, try to make students learn in sentences and in coherent situations may not be always reflected in every class.

#### **4.4 INFLUENTIAL FACTORS OF TEACHER BELIEFS**

This study has also found the influential factors of teacher beliefs. One of the key influential factors identified is their prior language learning experiences and their own English proficiency. T1 believes meaning is the most important in vocabulary learning while T2 proposes that pronunciation is the most important. This is perhaps due to their different language ability and language learning experience. As T2 admits, her pronunciation is not particularly good and she naturally wants her students to have better pronunciation. Another influential factor is their teaching experience, for example, T1 favours the use of drama in teaching and she thinks this is due to her experience of teaching in Britain. One more important factor may be the position they hold. For example, T2 is a famous teacher and she has many opportunities to share with others about her beliefs. It is this process that has prompted her to think and reflect on her beliefs and enables her to better verbalize her beliefs.

### **5. CONCLUSION :**

#### **5.1 THE HOMOGENEITY OF TEACHER BELIEFS**

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some small differences. The reason behind their similarities may be the joint context and discourse they share with each other. They teach in the same school and their beliefs and practices are shaped by the context in which they teach. Additionally, they are exposed to the same official discourse, for example, principles suggested in the NEC and expert talks about vocabulary teaching and other aspects of English teaching. Additionally, T2 is a role model who enjoys fame in teaching. She has given speech about ELT both in the school and city-wide. She may have placed her influence on T1. Therefore, T1's belief may have reflected that of T2.

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