

Second Language Teaching: Teachers' Beliefs and Realities

Abstract

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This article looks at the views of English language teachers regarding issues related to English language learning and teaching from the primary to the tertiary level in Bangladesh and tries to evaluate their views in the light of second language teaching theory and research. It is important that teachers should know the implications of their beliefs and their impact on classroom teaching and learning. It was found that some of their views conform to the conclusions drawn from second language teaching and learning research while others need to be modified.

1. Introduction

When we talk about second language learning, the first image that crops up in our minds is of a classroom setting. Although languages can be successfully learnt in naturalistic settings where the learner constantly interacts with native speakers of the target language, most second language learners all over the world are not so fortunate. In the majority of cases, second languages are learnt in formal classrooms where the class teacher is the only means of interaction in the target language. The language teacher therefore carries the whole burden of teaching the target language to his/her learners as s/he has to design, execute and evaluate language learning activities taking place in the classroom. As Allwright and Bailey put it: "in order to help our learners learn, it is not the 'latest method' that we need, but rather a fuller understanding of the language classroom and what goes on there."¹ It is therefore worth investigating what beliefs the language teachers have regarding classroom teaching and learning and to what extent they actually correspond to language teaching theories and realities established through research in the established fields.

2. Naturalistic vs. Classroom language learning

In order to evaluate teachers' beliefs regarding language learning we first of all need to look into the differences between the naturalistic and classroom language learning as the classroom setting is an artificial one that tries to simulate the natural setting. First of all the naturalistic setting:

- The learner needs to use the language with a native speaker for an actual communicative purpose, e.g. asking for direction, requesting help, instruction information, etc.

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- ❑ Success in communicating meaning is more important than grammatical accuracy. Native speakers actually overlook mistakes that do not really interfere with comprehension.
- ❑ Appropriacy of language is of utmost priority as communication might break down if the proper expressions are not used, e.g. how to address a superior, a subordinate; how to show politeness, etc. Here again, grammatical appropriacy is of less importance than contextual social appropriacy.
- ❑ Errors are actually corrected immediately (if necessary) by the native speaker if the receiver does not understand the message. The sender of the message usually monitors the correction when s/he realizes that it is interfering with the meaning of the intended message.
- ❑ There is less correction of errors of function words (i.e., grammatical elements like aux. verbs, prepositions, etc. that help clarify a message further) than of content words (i.e., words that convey the basic meaning of the message, e.g. nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.) as mistakes in such areas interfere with the meaning of the message to be conveyed.
- ❑ The learner is under pressure to produce the language as s/he must speak in order to gain an end.
- ❑ Language learning takes place through trial and error. In case of speaking, the speaker must repair his speech immediately if s/he realizes that s/he has made a mistake.
- ❑ The learner does not follow any specific syllabus but gets exposed to all kinds of grammatical structures at the same time.
- ❑ The vocabulary s/he is exposed to is very context specific, e.g. language of the working class people or language of the teenagers, etc.
- ❑ The vocabulary and language are also specific to the region in which the speaker is stationed at that point of time.
- ❑ The main reward of the learner is to successfully establish communication. S/he is highly motivated and actually wants to communicate.

Compared to the naturalistic language setting the classroom setting is greatly different in the following ways:

- ❑ The learner has no immediate need to communicate in the target language as s/he can always use the mother tongue whenever s/he fails to get the meaning through.

- ❑ The learner's main interest in the target language (TL) is more instrumental than integrative. S/he is in the class because s/he must pass the language course in order to achieve a certain goal, e.g. complete studies, get admission into an academic institution, etc. The language class is only a subsidiary part of his/her academic syllabus.
- ❑ The teacher is the only source of exposure to the target language. Hence, the teacher's accent, choice of vocabulary, level of language proficiency, etc. have a great deal of influence on the language learner.
- ❑ The teacher has his/her own syllabus² which does not necessarily correspond with that of the language learner's internal syllabus. This is because in most cases the language class is part of the mainstream academic curriculum and the syllabus is designed according to the needs of the course and not according to the needs of the individual learners.
- ❑ The language is being practiced in anticipation of a future need. There is no immediate need to use the TL for the sake of communication. The teacher therefore focuses more on accuracy rather than fluency, hence from the communicative elements of the language to the formal grammatical elements.

A comparison between the naturalistic and classroom second language learning environments reveals that there exist fundamental differences in the orientation of the two learning environments. The more a language teacher is aware of the elements that are conducive to language learning the more effective will his/her teaching be in achieving positive results. A study was recently conducted to investigate the nature of beliefs that English language teachers in Bangladesh have regarding language teaching and learning and to what extent these beliefs are close to the realities of second language learning.

3. Discussion on the findings of the study

A total of 43 teachers were selected for the study. These teachers belong to all levels of language teaching from the primary to the tertiary level with varied years of teaching experience. A total of eight questions on a rating scale were given where they had to point out whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements.

This section will discuss the findings of the study by looking at each question separately and evaluating the teachers' responses in the light of second language teaching and learning theories.

Statement 1. Languages are learnt mainly through imitation.

Agree		Disagree	
26	60%	15	35%

The majority of teachers agreed with the above mentioned statement. The behaviorist school of thought in the 1960's³ believed that like animal learning language learning is also a matter of habit formation through trial and error followed by reward and punishment in the form of negative and positive feedback. However, later schools established that language learning involves a great deal of cognitive ability where the language learner develops the ability to perform in situations for which he was not trained at all. According to Widdowson⁴ "the acquisition of competence is not accumulative but adaptive: learners proceed not by adding items of knowledge or ability, but by a process of continual revision and reconstruction. In other words, learning is necessarily a process of unlearning and re-learning whereby encoding rules and conventions for their use are modified, extended, re-aligned or abandoned altogether to accommodate new language data". Imitation can be taken into cognizance only so far as pronunciation is concerned but the ability to imitate pronunciations accurately lies more with younger children⁵ and degenerates with the advancement of age. Teachers who agree with this statement would probably be more prone to activities that involve language drills and memorization.

Statement 2. People with high IQs are good language learners.

Agree		Disagree	
23 teachers	55%	15 teachers	35%

Most teachers agreed with this view from their classroom experience. In the classroom a second language is mostly taught through rule teaching and grammar activities which involve a great deal of academic activity employing the "g" factor⁶, i.e. (the general intelligence needed for academic activities). This kind of ability might be useful in solving grammar exercises and passing traditional language tests but does not necessarily allow a learner to become a competent user of the language - a reality borne out by the existence of a large number of Bangladeshi learners with high grades in language tests and a low level of proficiency. Interestingly second language learning in naturalistic environments does not involve academic activity at all. Brown⁷ notes: "in its traditional definition intelligence may have little to do with one's success as a second language learner : people with both high and low IQs have proven to be successful in acquiring a L2". He notes that Howard Gardner (1983) gives intelligence a much broader perspective by categorizing it into seven broad types, viz. 1. **linguistic intelligence** (the ability to relate ideas and images to words), 2. **spatial intelligence** (the ability to form mental images and to transform them readily), 3. **musical intelligence** (the ability to perceive and create pitch and rhythmic patterns), 4. **bodily -kinesthetic intelligence** (the ability to make fine motor movements), 5. **logical mathematical abilities**

(the ability to interpret numbers), 6. **interpersonal intelligence** (the ability to understand others), 7. **intrapersonal intelligence**, (the ability to see oneself to develop a sense of self-identity). People who are naturally endowed with higher levels of any of these abilities tend to do better than others in particular areas, e.g. musical intelligence and bodily kinesthetic modes could be related to the greater ease in perceiving intonation and phonological elements in a language. Learners therefore need to be exposed to as much of the L2 (second language) as possible in order to allow their natural abilities to swing into action. Unfortunately most of the activities in the language classes in Bangladesh are just grammar exercises where the learner gets minimal options to hear, speak and use the language and allow his/her concepts of the language to develop freely.

Statement 3: The most important factor in second language acquisition is motivation.

Agree		Disagree	
34 teachers	81%	6 teachers	14%

It is not surprising that the majority of the teachers agree with this statement. Motivation can be of different types: a. integrative, i.e. originating from a wish to integrate with the speakers of the target language and b. instrumental, i.e. when learning the language actually helps achieve other aims. In Bangladesh we find incidence of instrumental motivation much more widespread. But getting students into the class is one thing and retaining their interest is another. An important type of classroom-based motivation is 'task-motivation'⁸ where learners get so involved in language learning activities that they start enjoying them. Language teachers therefore need to reflect on how much of their classroom activities are really motivating and how many of these are tedious and de-motivating. When learners are asked to memorize essays and paragraphs, the fun of creative expression is totally lost from these potentially very creative activities.

Statement 4: Learner's errors should be corrected as soon as they are made in order to prevent the formation of bad habits.

Agree		Disagree	
34 teachers	81%	8 teachers	19 %

The general attitude towards this statement is obvious by the fact that 81% of the teachers believe it to be true. According to Hill and Dobbryn,⁹ "when the teacher is doing grammar exercise with the whole class, immediate correction could help learners to understand that their concept of the item in question

needs to be revised". However, in case of speaking, correction could actually prove to be counter productive. When the learner is engaged in an activity that is meant to develop fluency, correcting mistakes frequently would mean interrupting the flow of the speech. Teachers can make notes of the points that need correction and discuss them after the task is over. Learners' errors have actually been considered as a window into the language processing that takes place inside their heads and termed as an "interlanguage"¹⁰. They are a valuable clue to assessing the stage of language learning the learners are in at a particular point of time and are therefore not only to be corrected but also carefully noted as a guide for future instruction. An interesting point that Hill and Dobbins¹¹ make is that: "if the teacher had a hundred eyes and a thousand ears he would still not be able to notice every mistake, particularly in choral work." They are of the opinion that the best tactics for the teacher to develop accuracy in the learners is to raise the learners' consciousness about mistakes so that they begin to notice their own errors without the teacher's assistance. As Jim Scrivener¹² puts it: "what you tell me I forget; what I discover for myself, I remember".

Statement 5: When learners are allowed to interact freely (e.g. in group or pair activities they learn each other's mistakes.)

Agree		Disagree	
27 teachers	64 %	14 teachers	33%

This is a general belief held by teachers who find group or pair work not very conducive to developing accuracy. As mentioned earlier, it is not possible for the teacher to speak with every student in the class. But interaction is essential if learners are to develop communicative abilities. Hence, these activities allow learners to express themselves in the target language uninhibited. Actually such activities allow learners to point out and discuss each other's mistakes. A study by Porter¹³ reports that "when learners corrected each other's errors they did so wrongly only 0.3 percent of the time and also that only 3 percent of the errors the learners produced could be attributed to repetition of a fellow learners errors. In general, therefore, learners do not appear to be unduly disadvantaged by exposure to deviant input from other learners".

Statement 6: Teachers should use materials that expose students to only those structures which they have already been taught.

Agree		Disagree	
24 teachers	57%	17 teachers	41%

As mentioned earlier, in a naturalistic setting there is no syllabus and the learner focuses on that part of the language that is important for his communication. In a classroom setting, however, the teacher restricts the learner to selective bits of the language.

This is helpful in the sense that it enables the learner to notice the language item sooner than in a naturalistic setting by providing "comprehensible input"¹⁴. However, too much selectivity slows down the learning process and inhibits the learner from making his own efforts. This explains some of the reasons why learners of English language feel nervous about attempting unseen comprehension passages during exams. A study by Terrel et al (1980)¹⁵ reveals that "the acquisition of one linguistic rule can occur when the instruction is directed at learning other linguistic rules." Learners therefore need to be exposed to large amounts of reading materials and taught strategies to decipher meaning from unknown passages, thereby becoming independent learners.

Statement 7: Students learn what they are taught

Agree		Disagree	
32 teachers	76%	10 teachers	24%

Regarding classroom teaching, Ellis's¹⁶ theory of Variability states that language learners develop ability in only those areas in which they have received instruction and have been made to practice. They do not automatically develop the competence to produce all kinds of languages in all kinds of situations. However, according to Widdowson:¹⁷ "What is put forward to be taught cannot be equated with what will be learnt". This is because, as mentioned before, learning is a process of continuous hypothesis testing by the language learner. Until the learner comes to a stage where s/he is mentally ready to take in what the teacher is saying real learning will not take place. According to Ellis¹⁸ the teacher has his/her syllabus while the learner has his/her own internal syllabus. Research has proven that this internal route to learning is the same whether the learner is learning in a naturalistic setting or in a classroom. According to Allwright and Bailey:¹⁹ "Learners do not learn directly from the syllabus. They learn, partly, from whatever becomes of the syllabus in the classroom". In their opinion the nature of the input provided for learning, the amount of opportunities provided for practicing and above all the level of receptivity of the learner at that point of time actually decide what and how much will be learnt. Teachers, therefore, need to be made aware of the fact that there is no straight equation between what is taught and what is learnt.

Conclusion

The above study reveals that some of the beliefs of the majority of the teachers under study need to be revised in the context of the theories of second language teaching and learning. In the areas where teachers are on the right track, further investigation needs to be carried out to establish to what extent their beliefs influence the way they teach in their classes. It has been noted in many cases that the way a teacher teaches does not correspond to what s/he believes he/she should achieve. Raising teachers' awareness to the impact of

how they teach would go a long way in achieving more positive results in the second language class. Moreover, teachers who had deviated from the responses of the majority groups also need to be investigated in order to establish whether their responses were deviant for the right or the wrong reasons. Clearly there is a scope of doing a lot of research in this area in Bangladesh.

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