

# Teachers' Beliefs in English Language Teaching and Learning: A Review of the Literature

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## Abstract

Beliefs form part of the process of understanding how teachers shape their work which is significant to the comprehending of their teaching methods and their decisions in the classroom. Teachers' beliefs have been an interesting topic for researchers due to the input they provide for the improvement of English language teaching and learning. Teachers' beliefs have a deep impact on their classroom principles. The realization of this relationship is very important for teachers to prepare and implement their new syllabus. Teachers' beliefs affect what they accomplish in their classroom, their attitudes, and their learner' beliefs. They guide teachers to adopt their teaching strategies for coping with their teaching challenges, shape language learners' learning environment, their motivation and their language ability. In this study, the researchers define the term belief, explain the nature of teachers' beliefs, express sources of teachers' beliefs, and finally mention some previous studies on teachers' beliefs. The review of related literature revealed that investigating teachers' beliefs will help them change their methods to teaching and learning over time in order to bring about more improvement for language learners.

**Keywords:** teachers' beliefs, teaching, learning, nature, sources

## 1. Introduction

Beliefs are an important issue in every area that is related to human behavior and learning (Ajzen, 1988; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Breen (2001) and Bernat and Gvozdenko (2005) represented that the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes that learners bring with them to the learning situation are important factors in the learning process. Learners have strong beliefs about the nature of language, its acquisition process, the success of learning strategies, the existence of aptitude, and their own expectations about success and teaching methodologies. Recognition of these beliefs and their effects on language learning and teaching, the learners' expectations and strategies can help teachers design syllabus and their teaching practices.

Zheng (2009) remarked that teachers' beliefs are significant ideas in comprehending teachers' thought processes, teaching methods, and learning to teach. Teacher beliefs are significant subjects in teacher education that have been designed to help teachers develop their thought and principles. Li (2012) represented that beliefs have a key role in language teaching. They help persons make sense of the world, impacting how new information is understood, and whether it is accepted or rejected. Beliefs depict memories and adjust our understanding of occurrences.

Teachers' beliefs have a greater effect than the teacher' knowledge on planning their lessons, on the types of decisions they adopt, and on classroom practice. Teachers' beliefs identify their real behavior towards their learners. If teachers can determine their learners' abilities, they will be able to choose and modify their behavior and educational choice appropriately (Li, 2012; Pajares, 1992). Beliefs play a key role in teachers' classroom practices and their professional development. Harste and Burke (1977) and Kuzborska (2011) said that teachers make decisions about their classroom teaching regarding beliefs they have about language teaching and learning. They emphasized that teachers' beliefs have a great impact on their aims, procedures, their roles, and their learners. Richards and Rodgers (2001) asserted that teachers have beliefs about language learning and these helped them get a special approach to language teaching.

Teachers' beliefs strongly predict their decisions and classroom practices. Nation and Macalister (2010) and Amirousefi (2015) asserted that what teachers do is identified by their beliefs. Similarly, Williams and Burden (1997) declared that teachers' beliefs about learning languages will have more impact on their class activities than a specific methodology they are told to follow. In addition, Kagan (1992) represented that teachers' practices indicate their beliefs about language teaching and learning. Understanding teachers' beliefs about various features of language teaching and learning and is also of great importance. Riley (2009) stated that if teachers and learners' beliefs match with each other, learning will be increased.

Due to the need for the improvement of teacher education and the significance of teacher beliefs in teacher education, the aim of carrying this study is to examine themes pertinent to teachers' beliefs which helps to identify the role of teachers' beliefs in furthering teacher education.

## 2. Definition of Belief

According to Pehkonen and Pietilä (2003), a belief is a kind of knowledge that is subjective and experience-based. Raymond (1997) defined the term belief as a personal judgment formed from experiences. According to Rokeach (1972) and Pourhosein Gilakjani (2012), a belief is any premise that starts with the term "I believe that." Beliefs that are related to other beliefs are regarded as "core" or "central beliefs." If a belief is associated with other beliefs, it will have more outcomes to them.

Beliefs are conceptual portrayals that signal a reality, truth, or trustworthiness to its holder to ensure reliance upon it as a guide to personal thought and action (Cabaroglu & Roberts, 2000). According to Peacock (2001), beliefs are psychologically held appreciations, assumptions, or theorems about the world that are felt to be correct. Huang (1997) defined beliefs as preconceptions language learners have about learning a language. According to Kunt (1997) and Wang (1996), the terms "opinions" and "ideas" or "views" refer to "beliefs."

Beliefs are judgments and evaluations that we make about ourselves, others, and the world around us. They are personal ideas based on observation or rational thinking (Khader, 2012). Beliefs are defined as a group of ideas which are shaped in persons by their experiences and the overlapping of notions during the learning processes (Ford, 1994; Khader, 2012). Beliefs are reflections that involve all subjects that we do not have enough knowledge about them but we have enough confidence to work on them (Barcelos, 2003; Khader, 2012). Beliefs are defined as the teachers' arguments and their views on teaching and learning (Haney, Lumpe & Czerniak, 1996; Khader, 2012).

## 3. The Nature of Teachers' Beliefs

Teachers' beliefs show a large number of knowledge and teachers understand their world by shaping a complicated system of personal and professional knowledge (Clark & Peterson, 1986). A lot of teachers' professional knowledge are appropriately considered as belief. As teachers' experiences in the profession enhance, this knowledge also develops more and forms a highly personalized belief system that limits the teachers' understanding, judgement, and behavior (Kagan, 1992). Beliefs are made slowly over time. Beliefs involve both subjective and objective aspects and act as the background to teachers' decision making and classroom actions (Richards & Lockhart, 1994).

Whether a belief is held consciously or unconsciously, it is regarded as true by the persons and guides thought and behavior (Borg, 2001). Beliefs are shaped early in life as a result of persons' education and experience (Johnson, 1994). Beliefs about learning and teaching are formed when students complete education. There are five main categories of teachers' beliefs – beliefs about learners and learning, teaching, curriculum, learning to teach, and about the self and the nature of teaching. These five categories are well connected with each other (Calderhead, 1996). Beliefs exist in connection to other beliefs, contradict one another, and indicate the complexity of belief systems (Breen et al. 2001).

Woods (1996) demonstrated that beliefs are non-consensual, include the existence of abstract entities, are evaluative, have a high degree of episodic/anecdotal materials, have different degrees of strengths, range from strong to weak, and have a high degree of overlap. Richards (1998) said that an important source of teachers' practices is belief systems. That is, the information, views, values, anticipations, theories, and thoughts about teaching and learning that teachers make over time and bring with them to the classroom. According to Green (1971), Pajares (1992), and Abdi and Asadi (2015), teachers' belief systems are divide into core and peripheral beliefs. Core beliefs are constant and use a more powerful impact on behavior than peripheral beliefs.

Burns (1992) examined the beliefs of six teachers and indicated a core of some important beliefs that affect their approach to language teaching. These beliefs are pertinent to the nature of language as it is related to beginning language learning, the relationship between written and spoken language in beginning language learning, the

nature of beginning language learning and the strategies related to language learning, learners and their ability to learn English, and the nature of the language classroom and the teacher's role in it.

Phipps and Borg (2009) and Abdi and Asadi (2015) expressed that teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning are affected by their own experiences as learners and are established when they go to university, act as a filter through which teachers explain new information, exert a deep effect on teachers' instructional practices, are, not always indicated in what they do in the classroom, have a great impact on their teaching decisions, and greatly affect what and how they learn during language teaching education.

#### **4. Sources of Teachers' Beliefs**

According to Kindsvatter, Willen, and Ishler (1988) and Abdi and Asadi (2011), the sources of teachers' beliefs are as follows:

- 1). Teachers' experience as language learners. A lot of teachers know that they were previously learners and how they were taught and these helped them form their beliefs about teaching.
- 2). Experience from teaching. Teaching experience is the main source of teachers' beliefs in that how a specific method is used for a specific group of learners may result in the beliefs about that method.
- 3). Teachers' personality. Some teachers prefer a particular method because it corresponds to their character.
- 4). Education-based or research-based principles. Teachers can get their beliefs from learning principles of second language acquisition research, education, or schools of thoughts like psychology.

Zhou Guotao and Liu Xiaoming (1997) and Li (2012) expressed that teachers' beliefs are shaped during their teaching processes and indicate the teachers' subjective knowledge of educational phenomenon, particularly towards their own teaching abilities and their learners. According to Xin Tao and Shen Juliang (1999) and Li (2012), the sources of teachers' beliefs are the result of social history and culture. Li (2012) emphasized that beliefs originate from teachers' experiences. Teachers have various processes of self-construction. Social psychologists stated that social cultural has a great effect on teachers' beliefs. They state that these beliefs are shaped during accepting culture.

According to Richardson, (1996), three main sources of teacher beliefs are personal experience, experience with instruction, and experience with formal knowledge. Kukari (2004) demonstrated that there is a relation between cultural and religious practices of teaching and learning. These practices define the understanding of teaching and learning that teachers hold before becoming learners of teaching. Teachers' beliefs and understandings affect both the theoretical constituents of teacher training (Clark, 1988; Crow, 1987; Holt-Reynolds, 1992) and the teaching behaviors during experience (Goodman, 1988).

Knowles (1992) said that teachers' beliefs are formed throughout their life and are impacted by different factors such happenings, experiences, and other people in their lives. McGillicuddy-De Lisi and Subramanian (1996) declared that some beliefs are taken from culture. Some are formed by experiences adjusted by culture. Persons have almost identical experiences as a child, as a member of a family, and as a parent or teacher. These experiences form their beliefs about learners and curriculum development.

Teachers' beliefs originate from four sources. They are content knowledge, educational materials, formal teacher education, and experience (Shulman, 1987). Mansour (2008a) expressed that teachers' teaching beliefs concerning their roles, learners' roles, the goals of science and their teaching methods were formed by personal religious beliefs obtained from the principles existing in religion. The researcher continued that teachers' religious beliefs worked as a 'schema' which affected on their perception. According to Richards and Lockhart (1994), past experience in learning or teaching is not the sole source of beliefs. Some other sources are involved in forming beliefs. They are established practice, teachers' personality factors, educational principles, research-based evidence, and principles originated from a method.

According to Mansour (2008b), there are two kinds of experiences; formal and informal. A formal experience is indicated in the formal education through which teachers have passed, either at school or at university level. The informal experience is indicated in teachers' every-day life contacts that may adjust, support, challenge, or change their beliefs and knowledge. In this regard, Zeichner (1980) represented that both informal and formal experiences are 'socialization influences,' saying that teachers' teaching at schools had more power in impacting teachers' beliefs than their formal university experiences.

#### **5. Previous Studies on Teachers' Beliefs**

Research has indicated that beliefs about teaching and learning restrict teachers' capability to be open to new opinions. Teachers enter the field of teaching with predetermined beliefs about teaching and learning that better

their classroom practices (Johnson, 1992). Borg (2003) reviewed 64 works in the field of foreign and second language teaching and concluded there are a lot of differences in teachers' beliefs about language education. He continued that brave teachers believe grammar should be taught by explicit instruction while less experienced teachers tended to teach grammar implicitly.

The connection between teachers' beliefs and their teaching practices have been reported by many researches (Attardo & Brown, 2005; Johnson, 1992; Jones & Fong, 2007; Poynor, 2005; Yook, 2010). Johnson (1992) applied studies and lesson plan analyses to examine teachers' beliefs about L2 teaching and learning. The results obtained from this study indicated that many teachers held determined theoretical beliefs which indicated one of the three methodological methods: function-based, skill-based, and rule-based approaches. A lot of instructors had theoretical beliefs pertinent to the function-based approach at the time of the research. Johnson observed three teachers' classroom teaching chosen from 30 participants based on their various beliefs. The obtained results showed that three teachers' teaching practices were consistent with their theoretical attitudes. Johnson concluded that teachers teach based on their theoretical beliefs.

Jones and Fong (2007) interviewed 30 pre-service and 27 in-service teachers and indicated that teachers' experience had played an important role in forming their teaching beliefs which were teacher-centered, textbook-based, and grammar-oriented. The results also showed that a lot of teachers held to their previous beliefs despite their exposures to various teaching methods. Schulz (2001) carried out a study to investigate the cultural differences in learners' and teachers' realization of the importance of grammar teaching. Schulz (2001) used a questionnaire to 607 Colombian foreign learners and 122 of their teachers and 824 U.S. foreign learners and 92 of their teachers. Schulz revealed that most teachers from both U.S. and Colombia thought that the teaching of grammar was significant in foreign language teaching and Colombian teachers believed in the important role of grammar instruction than their U.S. teachers.

Algozzine, Kissau, and Yon (2012) studied teachers' predetermined beliefs about teaching and understood that these beliefs differed among teachers. 222 teachers participated in this study. Teachers who had 10 years of teaching experience had strong beliefs about the significance of teaching grammar. Less experienced teachers found more attention on grammar rules to stop the development of oral proficiency. Johnston and Goettsch (2000) examined teachers' beliefs about grammar instruction. According to the results of their study, teachers believed that a conscious perceptual understanding of the different grammatical points was essential and useful and it was indicated in their grammar instruction.

Burns (1992) used class observations and interviews to investigate teachers' beliefs about teaching writing and the effect of these beliefs on their learners' writing. The obtained results from this study indicated that the teachers used written language to show the usage of accurate pronunciation of spoken language, placed emphasis on enhancing learners' reliance, practice, and repetition, and realized themselves as directors of the classroom and facilitators of class interactions. These beliefs had a great impact on the teachers' classroom writing instruction. Macalister (2012) did a study in Malaysia. 60 Malaysian teachers were selected by the researcher to understand the role of teacher training courses in forming teachers' beliefs about the role of vocabulary in language learning. The results of his study showed that teachers have various beliefs about teaching and professional development that disregards teacher trainees' prior beliefs cannot be effective in affecting their beliefs about teaching.

Teachers have strong beliefs about teaching and learning and these beliefs are traditional because they are knowledge transmitter and information dispenser and serve as filters for new information in that existing beliefs are accepted rather than challenged (Kagan, 1992; Yook, 2010). Teachers' beliefs are very important in understanding the difficulty of teaching and learning issues and setting up better education programs. Freeman and Johnson expressed that teacher education should interfere with changing teachers' beliefs if that is essential for their professional development. The researchers continued that teacher education programs and teacher educators should comprehend how their learners/teachers develop beliefs and how they affect teaching principles (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Yook, 2010).

Some researchers have investigated the influence of teacher education on changing teachers' beliefs. Some of them have stressed the positive role of teacher education programs in altering teachers' beliefs (Burgess, Turvey, & Quarshire, 2000; Donahue, 2003; Mattheoudakis, 2007; Peacock, 2001; Stuart & Thurlow, 2000; Yook, 2010). Richardson (1996) stressed that beliefs are thought to drive actions and experiences can lead to change in beliefs. Grossman et al. (1989) expressed that teacher educators should provide opportunities for teachers to recognize and investigate their beliefs about teaching lesson content. Donahue (2003) said that teachers' beliefs impact on the acceptance of new methods and have a key role in teacher development. The researcher continued that

teachers should be provided with training courses to bring their beliefs out into their classes and to incorporate them into the course content.

Teachers should know their course content via refining it through their belief systems and teacher development programs must provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on their beliefs about teachers and teaching (Johnson, 1994). Peacock (2001) investigated the significance of a teacher education program in modifying teachers' beliefs about learning. Peacock tracked changes in the teachers' beliefs and found no significant changes. He concluded that teachers' beliefs were stable and were never subjected to any change. Teachers' beliefs affect the realization of new information and they impact on the understanding of educational changes and they are pertinent to the successful implementation of educational reforms (Allen, 2002; Yook, 2010).

A number of studies have been done which examined teachers' and learners' beliefs about different parts of vocabulary teaching and learning (Amiryousefi, 2015; Augustyn, 2013; Macalister, 2012; Tran, 2011). Tran (2011) investigated Vietnamese teachers' beliefs about vocabulary teaching and learning by using questionnaire. The results obtained from this study revealed that reading is an effective method to enhance vocabulary and technology assisted learners to learn vocabulary components. Moreover, Augustyn (2013) examined the beliefs about vocabulary teaching and learning in communicative-approach German classrooms. The researcher understood that by integrating translation and extensive reading, vocabulary elements can be taught and learned easily in preliminary levels.

Könings, Brand-Gruwel, and Merriënboer (2007) examined the connection between successful performance of an educational reform and teachers' apprehension of the reform. The aim of the reform was to provide a powerful learning environment that increased learners' learning and problem-solving skills. The results indicated that teachers have the role of a coach rather than an instructor and it was also shown that teachers were more sensitive to the learners' improvements and difficulties. Kim (2006) applied a questionnaire to study beliefs about EFL education held by 29 teachers and their 286 learners. The results demonstrated that teachers' and learners' beliefs are different in that learners regarded grammar, vocabulary, native-speaker-like pronunciation and translation ability to be significant while teachers did not believe it. The researcher continued that such differences between teachers' and learners' beliefs can have a negative effect on learners' English language learning.

Chou (2008) carried out a study about how teachers are affected by their beliefs. The researcher studied the beliefs of teachers about teaching reading. The results of this study indicated that there were no significant differences between teachers' beliefs and their methods. Shun (2008) investigated teachers' beliefs and their connections to educational methods. The results obtained from this research represented that there were no significant differences between teachers' beliefs and the application of educational methods.

Teachers' prior learning experience affects their beliefs about learning which shapes the foundation of their understanding of teaching during teacher education. Johnson (1994) and Numrich (1996) indicated that teachers' beliefs are based on previous experience that is related to the classroom practice. According to Johnson (1994), teachers' instructional decisions were based on pictures of teachers, materials, activities, and classroom organization made by their own learning experience. Richards, Ho, and Giblin (1996) carried out a study and found that beliefs change based on teachers' notion of their role in the class and their professional knowledge.

Bisland, O'Conner, and Malow-Iroff (2009) examined the teachers' teaching beliefs and their classroom practice. The obtained results did not show any relationship between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices. Harcarik (2009) examined the relationship between teachers' knowledge and beliefs and their relationship to classroom practices. The results of this research revealed that there is a relationship between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices in the areas of resources, classroom practices, and time.

Based on the above studies, it can be concluded that teachers' beliefs are affected by training courses, learning experiences, professional development, teaching experiences, and teaching practices. Teachers use their previous beliefs for teaching and learning and these beliefs impact on what they learn and how they learn them in their teaching programs. Some studies indicated the great impact of teacher education on changing teachers' beliefs. The above studies revealed that teachers' beliefs towards English language teaching and learning are impacted by their previously existing beliefs. What teachers understand about particular changes in English language teaching are related to what they believe about it. Consequently, in order to have a deeper understanding of the specific changes in English language teaching, it is necessary for teachers to have a deeper understanding of their beliefs.

## 6. Conclusion

In this study, the researchers reviewed some important issues related to teachers' beliefs in language teaching and learning. Teachers' beliefs are related to some factors that interact with each other in the processes of teaching and learning. As it was indicated in the paper, teachers bring beliefs acquired from many years of learning experiences to a teacher education that impacts what and how they learn to teach. Teachers' beliefs affect what they say and do in classroom which forms their beliefs. Teachers' beliefs affect teacher awareness, teaching attitudes, and teaching methods. Teachers' beliefs impact their teaching behavior, learner development, guide their decision-making and interactions with their learners. Beliefs help teachers form their planning, curricular decisions, and identify what should be taught in the classroom. On the whole, it can be concluded that teachers' beliefs will have a great effect on forming active teaching methods and will bring about a considerable amount of advance in learners' language capabilities.

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