



**AN EXPLORATION OF THE TEACHER'S PERSONAL CONSTRUCTS:
THE EFFECTS OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTORS' MAJORS ON
THEIR ORIENTATIONS TOWARD
TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION**

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to examine how teachers' educational background (those who have educated in TEFL in comparison to those who have educated in Literature) may influence their beliefs and attitudes on language learning, teaching and the teaching methods they apply in their classes. On a general basis, depending on teachers' opinion, learning process might be seen as behavioristic, inductive, interactive or cooperative; teaching might be seen as structural, functional, interactional, or task-based; finally, reading comprehension might be seen as practice, product, process, or social process. Though it is not within the scope of the present study to find how each one of these teaching and learning processes might correspond to the teachers' beliefs, the main argument of the study is that the teacher's own educational background has a strong influence on the application of different approaches to teaching reading comprehension courses. The results indicated that the relationship between the teacher's educational background and his or her opinion about the processes of learning and teaching in the classroom was neither correlated nor significant. Anyhow, the teacher's educational background was found to have a strong effect on the method s/he applies in his Reading Comprehension classes.

Keywords: Teacher's belief, Reading comprehension, Reading comprehension as practice, Reading comprehension as product, Reading comprehension as process, Educational background.

Introduction

The EFL and ESL researchers have recently begun to recognize the significance of how language teachers' beliefs influence the process of language teaching (Freeman, 1989; Richards & Nunan, 1990; Johnson, 1992). The study of teacher's belief forms part of the process of understanding how teachers conceptualize their work. In order to understand how

teachers approach their work it is necessary to understand the beliefs and principles they operate from. The educational background is assumed to have a substantial influence on determining the teacher's beliefs about how learning and teaching processes take place in an instructional situation. Thus, teachers' educational background, whether their orientations come from TEFL or Literature, is

assumed to be a main source of differentiation in their beliefs and principles about how to teach reading comprehension. TEFL and Literature, as two different fields of language studies, by placing the emphasis on form or meaning, in essence, view it differently. It is assumed that those who have educated in these majors have gained, in effect, different educational experiences, that might serve as a source of variability in the way they approach language knowledge and comprehension in their classroom practices.

Reading comprehension, depending on teacher's approach may be seen as practice, product or process (Wallace cited in Carter and Nunan, 2001). The first is concerned with reading and writing practices as linked to their everyday life, not merely within schooling. The second orientation focuses on the form and meaning of written texts and their constituent parts. The third perspective pays relatively greater attention to the role of the reader in the ongoing processing of written language and the strategies that she or he draws on in constructing meaning from text.

The present study aims to explore the influence of teachers' beliefs as well as their educational background on the approaches and methods they apply in teaching reading comprehension as practice, product or process. Based on the crucial importance of the teacher's beliefs and the different nature of the orientations practiced in TEFL and Literature courses, several assumptions underlie the teachers' approaches to teaching reading comprehension:

1. Teachers whose core beliefs about language learning and teaching come from their different educational background tend to take a substantially different approach to teaching reading comprehension.

2. TEFL and Literature are two relatively different disciplines in which language is practiced and processed in different ways; therefore, they assume different beliefs about the nature of language and language learning.

3. Differences in teachers' practices are the

result of teachers' beliefs.

The present study is prompted by an interest in the kinds of beliefs teachers describe in relation to their educational background and how they conceptualize their own process of teaching reading comprehension. Based on the assumptions several null hypotheses are suggested in the study:

1. There is no systematic relationship between the variables of the instructors' educational background and their beliefs about learning processes, that is, the beliefs of the instructors educated in TEFL and Literature are the same toward learning principles.

2. There is no systematic relationship between the variables of the instructors' educational background and their beliefs about teaching principles, that is, the beliefs of the instructors educated in TEFL and Literature are the same toward teaching principles.

3. There is no systematic relationship between the instructors' educational background and the approach they apply in teaching reading comprehension.

Review Of Literature

Research on the interaction of teachers' beliefs and practices has examined a number of issues in order to develop, as Freeman and Johnson (1998) point out, a knowledge base of language teaching supported by 'the activity of teaching itself . . . the teacher who does it, the context in which it is done, and pedagogy by which it is done'.

One of the most productive issues has been the nature of grammar teaching as teachers perceive it. Findings from this perspective indicate that most teachers believe in some sort of grammar teaching, although the exact nature of this teaching varies considerably from teacher to teacher (Eisenstein Ebsworth and Schweers, 1997). As Borg (1999; 2003b) notes, the cognitions behind this variability are generated by key educational and professional experiences such as teachers' language education, teacher education program, and classroom experience. For this reason, knowledge of the L2 grammar may only become pedagogically

significant when combined with other kinds of teacher knowledge, like knowledge of learners, L2 learning and self (Johnston and Goettsch, 2000).

Classroom Practices

Teachers' beliefs are assumed to interact with their attitudes toward employing the target language as a means of communication in their classes (see, e.g., Levine, 2005; Turnbull and Arnett, 2002). This has been another area of growing interest that deals with teachers' uses of the target (TL) and first (L1) languages in the L2 classroom. Even though the emphasis here is still on theoretical perspectives and empirical analyses of classroom teaching practices, some studies have provided qualitative descriptions of language use from the teacher's perspective (Macaro, 1997; Polio and Duff, 1994), while others have focused on the teachers' difficulties with using the TL in their classrooms due to conflicts with the curriculum, the students and with the persons considered as their original models for teaching (Morris, 1998).

As the field of research continues to generate data through a variety of methods applied to more diverse samples, recent studies have addressed the thinking and actions of experienced teachers (Breen et al., 2001), the different meanings that teachers may develop about communicative language teaching (Mangubhai et al., 2005; Sato and Kleinsasser, 1999), the influence of new language policies on the teachers' professional identity, social relationships with others in the work context, and their classroom practices (Breen, 2002), or the extent to which new constructs like the Standards for Foreign Language Learning (1996) may affect the beliefs and practices of FL teachers (Allen, 2002).

Teacher's Experiences

Teacher's own language learning experiences plays an important role in determining his beliefs about the language, learning and teaching. Clark and Peterson (1986), (cited and summarized in Breen, 1991, pp. 47-48) proposed that:

(a) the most resilient and "core" teachers'

beliefs are formed on the basis of teachers' own schooling as young students while observing teachers who taught them,

(b) professional development which engages teachers in direct exploration of their beliefs and principles may provide the opportunity for greater self-awareness through reflection and critical questioning as starting points for later adaptation,

(c) the teacher's conceptualization of, for example, language, learning, and teaching are situated within that person's wider belief system concerning such issues as human nature, culture, society, education and the like.

Other researchers (e.g., Bailey, 1992; Golombek, 1998) affirm the notion that changes in teacher's beliefs precede changes in their teaching practices. Similarly, Hampton (1994) notes that "teachers' beliefs" or "personal constructs" determine how they approach their teaching. For example, Harste, Woodward, and Burke (1984) identified nineteen separate beliefs about teaching and learning that were built into a simple primary-one level activity. Teachers' beliefs strongly affect the materials and activities they choose for the classroom. Breen (ms) describes the core belief of a group of 167 teachers who participated in a language learning experience and who reported on the practices they thought facilitated the learning of the language. These are summarized in terms of nine principles.

1. Selectively focus on form of the language.
2. Selectively focus on vocabulary or meaning.
3. Enable learners to use the language.
4. Address learner's mental processing capabilities.
5. Take account of learner's affective involvement.
6. Directly address learner's needs or interests.
7. Monitor learner's progress and provide feedback.
8. Facilitate learner's responsibility or autonomy.
9. Manage the lesson and the group.

Views on Reading Comprehension

Wallace (1992), depending on the perspectives of different fields of study, has identified four aspects of reading comprehension that might be applied differently by instructors in their English language teaching practices. They are as follows:

Reading as Practice: Focus on the Uses of Reading

The emphasis of this type of reading is of relevance to teachers whose learners wish to attain English language with diverse experience of literacy in their processes of first or second language learning. In this approach it is important to see reading and writing as part of language behavior beyond the learning of specific skills or strategies. Street (1984), cited in Carter and Nunan (2001), introduces a dichotomy between an autonomous model of literacy which sees reading and writing as the learning of skills which are supposedly universally implicated in literacy instruction, and a view of literacy which is called 'ideological' and by which reading and writing practices have currency and prestige, not because of any inherent value but because of social and historical factors particular to the cultural setting. Heath (1983), Gregory (1996), and Cope and Kalantzis (2000) extend the discussion on literacy to look beyond reading and writing as the recognition and production of linear text to new, diverse forms of literacy for a global age, which they term 'multi-literacies'.

Reading as Product: Focus on Text

In some accounts of reading, priority is given to the text and parts of the text with varying attention paid to form alone or the relationship between form and meaning. At the same time, particular reader skills may be identified as linked to the focus on special textual features. The term bottom-up has been used for approaches to reading which emphasize text-based features at word and sentence level. Adams (1990) and Olson (1990) show a strong link between phonemic awareness, the ability to process words automatically and rapidly, and reading achievement. Chapman (1983), drawing on

work on cohesion (Halliday and Hasan, 1976), note the kinds of difficulties which cohesive ties cause in texts, such as pronouns, for L1 learners as old as 14. Such difficulties are likely to be correspondingly greater for L2 learners. Weir and Urquhart (1998), (cited in Carter and Nunan, 2001) discuss the role of grammatical processing by L2 learners, claiming this as a neglected area of research. Martin (1989), Cope and Kalantzis (1993) seek to make explicit to learners the salient grammatical and lexical features not just of written texts in general but of different types of texts. They recommend providing students with extensive, reading especially knowledge about how texts work, is particularly important for many L2 and minority children who may be less familiar than mainstream learners with a wide range of genres.

Reading as Process: Critical Reading

Reading as process is sometimes referred to as top-down, on the ground that it gives greater emphasis to the kind of background knowledge and values which the reader brings to reading. The nature of this knowledge can be characterized as a 'schema', or mental picture model, allowing a reader to relate new, text-based knowledge to existing world knowledge. Weir and Urquhart (1998) see the reading process as primarily a cognitive activity. Others give greater emphasis to the reader's affective or critical engagement with text. Widdowson (e.g. 1984b) talks of readers taking up an "assertive" or "submissive" position.

Reading as Social Process

More recently there has been interest in reading as a social, critical process (Wallace, 1992; Baynham, 1995, cited in Carter and Nunan, 2001). This strand of enquiry pays greater attention to social and ideological factors which mediate in readers' access to text. Critical reading is concerned less with the individual author's communicative intent than with ideological effect: the claim is that readers need not accept the words on the page as given, but that a range of interpretations are legitimate, providing that

textual warrants are offered. L2 readers, in particular, may bring different kinds of cultural and ideological assumptions to bear on L2 texts, thereby offering, it is argued, fruitful challenges to mainstream or conventional readings. Wallace, (1992); Lankshear et al., (1997); and Cope and Kalantzis, (2000) attend to reading as critical process in which readers are encouraged to consider the underlying cultural contexts and purposes of texts.

Examining language teachers' beliefs should therefore help clarify how teachers adopt their approaches to teaching and learning in reading comprehension classes.

Method

In this study, dealing with the influence of teachers' educational background and beliefs on their approaches to teaching reading comprehension in TEFL classes, data came from three questionnaires (A,B and C) that investigated the teachers' personal beliefs and attitudes about reading, teaching and learning. The first questionnaire, which contained 25 questions, investigated the teacher's personal beliefs about learning. The main focus of the questions was to examine if the teachers viewed language learning more as a behavioristic, inductive, interactive or cooperative process. The second questionnaire with 25 questions asked the teacher's personal beliefs about teaching processes. The main focus of the questions was to examine if the teachers viewed language teaching rather a structural, functional, interactional or a task-based process. The third questionnaire with 10 questions investigated the teacher's beliefs about the approaches and methods of teaching reading comprehension.

Participants

Twenty teachers participated in the research ten of whom had been graduated in Literature and the other ten had educated in TEFL. The participated teachers were selected from the ones who had the experience of teaching reading comprehension for at least five years in academic levels to the students of

Translation at different branches of the Islamic Azad University (IAU) as well as other institutes involved in teaching English language. The information revealed by these two groups of teachers who had two different educational orientations was intended to provide kinds of data on teachers' beliefs and the approaches they tended to apply in their reading comprehension classes. These methods sought to answer five questions: (1) is there a difference between the beliefs of these two groups of instructors about the processes of learning? (2) Is there a difference between the beliefs of these two groups of instructors about the processes of teaching? (3) Can the educational background serve as a source of differentiation? (4) Is there any difference in the beliefs these two differently oriented language teachers hold about teaching reading comprehension? (5) Is there any difference in the methods these two different groups of language teachers apply in teaching reading comprehension?

Materials

The first questionnaire contained 25 questions about learning mechanism. The answers to these questions will reveal the beliefs of the teachers about students' learning mechanism; they will also indicate if there are any significant differences between the beliefs of the teachers who have different educational backgrounds. The second questionnaire with 25 questions about the teaching beliefs will show the different beliefs that different teachers might have about teaching as well as the different approaches they might apply in their classes. The third questionnaire asks 10 questions whose answers will indicate the teacher's tendency toward the application of more specific models of reading comprehension, whether they tend to apply the practice, product, process or social model. These questions will also show the teacher's inclination toward the different ways of teaching reading comprehension as top-down, bottom-up, interactive or procedural models of teaching reading. The main argument is that the teachers with different educational backgrounds will answer differently to

these questions and that their different educational orientations lead them to different beliefs about teaching, learning and the application of different teaching approaches toward reading comprehension courses.

Results

The statistical procedure of the study was based on a *t*-test procedure which made a comparison of the means between the groups of different educational background. Thus, *t*-test was applied for the groups of Learning TEFL and Learning Lit, Teaching TEFL and Teaching Lit, Comp TEFL and Comp Lit. A table of descriptive statistics is also presented.

Table 1 illustrates the descriptive statistics of the study, including the number of subjects, the minimum and the maximum, the means and the standard deviations of the scores obtained on each questionnaire.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Learning TEFL	10	74.00	107.00	89.0000	11.22497
Teaching TEFL	10	73.00	96.00	86.4000	7.35149
Comp TEFL	10	29.00	39.00	33.4000	2.83627
Learning Lit	10	82.00	101.00	91.3000	6.99285
Teaching Lit	10	62.00	108.00	87.9000	13.69063
Comp Lit	10	19.00	46.00	36.5000	10.28753
Valid N (list wise)	10				

Hypothesis 1

Table 2 represents a comparison of the means, standard deviation and standard error of measurement between the groups of Learning TEFL and Learning Lit. The questions on this questionnaire indicate the teachers' beliefs about learning principles.

Table 2. Basic Statistics for Beliefs about Learning

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 Learning TEFL	89.0000	10	11.22497	3.54965
Learning Lit	91.3000	10	6.99285	2.21133

Table 3 represents the correlation coefficient between Learning TEFL and Learning Lit groups. The obtained correlation is .099 which indicates almost no relationship between the variables. The

observed value (*p*) is also set at .76 which is much greater than .05, thus, the difference is not considered to be significant.

Table 3. Correlation Coefficient for Beliefs about Learning

	N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1 Learning TEFL & Learning Lit	10	.099	.785

Table 4 represents the result of a paired samples *t*-test between the two groups of Learning TEFL and Learning Lit. The result shows the difference between the subjects' opinions about teaching processes in a language teaching class. As the table reveals, the observed value (*P*) is greater than .05, which fails to reject the first hypothesis of the study. The α level is .05 and the *df* is 9 in this study.

Table 4. Paired Sample Tests for Beliefs about Learning

	Paired Differences			t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean			
Pair 1 Learning TEFL - Learning Lit	-2.30000	12.62317	3.99180	-.576	9	.579

Hypothesis 2

Table 5 represents a comparison of the means, standard deviation and standard error of measurement between the groups of Teaching TEFL and Teaching Lit. The questions on this questionnaire indicate the teachers' beliefs about teaching principles.

Table 5. Test Statistics for Beliefs about Teaching

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 2 Learning TEFL	86.4000	10	7.35149	2.32475
Teaching Lit	87.9000	10	13.69063	4.32936

Table 6 represents the correlation coefficient between Learning TEFL and Learning Lit groups. The obtained correlation is .24 that indicates almost no systematic relationship between the two variables. The (*P*) value is also .5 which is considerably greater than .05, which shows no difference.

Table 6. Correlation Coefficient for Beliefs about Teaching

	N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 2 Teaching TEFL & Teaching Lit	10	.240	.504

Table 7 represents the result of a paired samples t-test between the two groups of Teaching TEFL and Teaching Lit. The result shows the difference between the subjects' opinions about teaching processes in a language teaching class. As the table shows, the observed value (P) is .74, greater than .05, and unable to reject the second hypothesis of the study. The α level of the study is set at .05 and the df is 9.

Table 7. Paired Sample Tests for Beliefs about Learning

	Paired Differences			t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean			
Pair 2 Teaching TEFL - Teaching Lit	-1.50000	13.89844	4.39507	-.341	9	.741

Table 8 represents a comparison of the means, standard deviation and standard error of measurement between the groups of Comp TEFL and Comp Lit. The questions on this questionnaire indicate the teachers' beliefs about teaching methods of reading comprehension courses.

Table 8. Basic Statistics for Beliefs about Reading Comprehension

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 Comp TEFL	27.9000	10	3.69534	1.16857
Comp Lit	42.6000	10	3.83551	1.21289

Table 9 represents the correlation coefficient between Comp TEFL and Comp Lit groups. The correlation between the variables is found to be .35 that is not strong enough to reveal any significant difference. The observed value is also .31, greater than .05 which does not indicate any relationship.

Table 9. Correlation for Beliefs about Reading Comprehension

	N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1 Comp TEFL & Comp Lit	10	.357	.311

Table 10 represents the result of a paired samples t-test between the two groups of Comp TEFL and

Comp Lit. The result shows the difference between the subjects' opinions about teaching methods in a reading comprehension class. The observed value in this table is .00 that is lesser than .05. The result indicates that there is a significant difference between the variables. Thus, the third hypothesis of the study is rejected. The α level of the study is set to be .05 and the df is 9.

Table 10. Paired Samples Test for Beliefs about Reading Comprehension

	Paired Differences			t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean			
Pair 1 Comp TEFL - Comp Lit	-1.47000E1	4.27005	1.35031	-10.886	9	.000

Discussion

Current foreign (FL) and second language (L2) methodologies have shifted from traditional teacher-centered instruction to a learner-centered classroom, where learning, learner needs and purposes, and meaningful processes of communication are integrated (Nunan, 1988; Tudor, 1996). In this context, teacher and learner roles are redefined as dynamic rather than static dimensions of the communicative process, and the classroom is, in theory, considered as "a bridge to the outside world rather than as a linguistic quarantine station where learners are protected from the risks involved in having to engage in genuine communication" (Nunan, 1999: 77).

The present study made an attempt to explore the relationship between the teacher's beliefs about learning, teaching and reading comprehension, and educational orientations these teachers have. It was a matter of interest for the researcher if there was any type of relationship between these two variables. Reading comprehension as a basic course that is commonly offered at the beginning of the academic programs is believed to be a crucial course and success in it depends considerably on the way the teacher approaches it. On the other hand, because the approaches that a teacher might apply to teach this course is considered to be under the influence of his beliefs that stems in his educational background, the

reading comprehension was selected to be studied as a dependent variable in this study. The main argument was that the attitudes towards the reading approaches as practice, product or process originate in the teachers' educational background as TEFL or Literature. Anyhow, the answers of the two groups of teachers to the third questionnaire showed a significant difference between the results.

Though it was first assumed that different educational backgrounds would produce different results about the principles of learning and teaching, the answers of the TEFL teachers to the first and second questionnaires were found to be not different from the answers given by the Literature teachers. On the contrary, a considerably high correlation was found between variables. Thus, on the basis of the study, it can be claimed that the way these two groups of teachers see the principles of learning is not different and the beliefs they bring to their classes are somehow the same. Thus, it can be concluded that the teachers' educational background does not make them have different beliefs about teaching or learning principles. Thus, it was indicated that teachers who have different personal constructs choose different approaches of reading comprehension teaching methods in their English language classes.

The answers to the third set of questions revealed that TEFL teachers and Literature teachers tend to apply different beliefs about nature and function of reading comprehension and accordingly apply different methods in their classes. The difference in the methods of these two groups of teachers is, much probably, due to different educational backgrounds that were the main variables controlled in the study.

Implications and Suggestions

In order to show the difference between beliefs and performance of the teachers with different educational backgrounds, the researcher made use of some questionnaires to investigate the teachers' beliefs and the way they teach in their classes. It seems that one way to increase the response validity is to take the advantage of other instrumentations

such as interviews and direct observation. More stratified samples may also reveal facts about the influence of educational background on teachers' beliefs and the way they perform in their classes. Features like sex, exact years of experience, age, and so forth, might be taken as important variables in the study. The views to reading comprehension used in this study was taken from Carter and Nunan (2001), nevertheless, other views might also be beneficial to be taken in account.

An attempt may also be made to explore the degree of learner's success in either case. It is not known which group of teachers can lead the students to more success and achievement; which group creates more comfortable and secured situation for the learners in which they can achieve more.

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