Effective Foreign Language Teaching: a Matter of Iranian Students' and Teachers' Beliefs

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study that investigated the beliefs about language learning of 120 Iranian EFL students and 16 EFL teachers. The primary aim of the study was to reveal whether there was any difference between the beliefs of Iranian students and teachers regarding different aspects of language learning such as grammar teaching, error correction, culture, target language use, computer-based technology, communicative language teaching strategies and assessment. Data were collected using a 24-item questionnaire. It was concluded that there were some differences between the Iranian students' and teachers' beliefs regarding what procedures were most effective in bringing about language learning. Discussion of the findings and implications for further research are also articulated.

Keywords: Effective language teaching, Teachers' beliefs, Students' beliefs

1. Introduction

Language practitioners and researchers have already recognized that teachers and their agendas do not have a complete control over what learners learn from English language courses (Allwright, 1984 as cited in Breen, 2001a; Salimani, 2001). The recent emphasis on the holistic approaches to language learning have brought into our focus the fact that learners are not just cognitive beings, that is, they do not approach the task of language learning merely from the cognitive window (Breen, 2001b). But learners are multidimensional beings; they are a combination of a bulk of different variables which help them to learn whatever they are learning in the best possible way. To realize this multidimensionality, teachers and researchers have noted that both teachers' and students' beliefs and attitudes should have a room in the process of language learning and teaching (Brown, 2009). Williams and Burden (1997) claimed that "learners' perceptions and interpretations have been found to have the greatest influence on achievement" (p. 98) and somehow students' and teachers' beliefs may not be the same. The different beliefs that teachers and learners hold towards the process of language teaching can negatively influence the effectiveness of language program (Kern, 1995; Schulz, 1996).

2. Review of the related literature

During the last two decades, second language learning researchers have made a lot of effort determining those factors that seem more likely to have an effect on the process of language learning. Such researchers have identified these factors by different names such as attitudes, expectations, experiences, learning strategies, etc. An important question that has been extensively sought from different perspectives is the underlying cause of the different approaches of students to a specific task. A reasonable answer may be found in learner perception or beliefs: "beliefs about the nature of language, about the language-learning task, about likely outcomes, about learners' personal language learning strengths and limitations" (Sakui & Gaies, 1999, p. 474).

Wenden (1999) posits that the term 'learners' beliefs' is usually used interchangeably with metacognitive knowledge. Flavell (1979, as cited in Wenden, 1999) defines metacognitive knowledge as specialized portion of a learner's acquired knowledge base which consists of what learners know about learning, and includes all that individuals understand about themselves as learners and thinkers, including their goals and needs. According to Wenden (1999), learner beliefs as a subset of metacognitive knowledge may also be appropriately described in terms of the characteristics that identify metacognitive knowledge. At the same time, however, beliefs are distinct from metacognitive knowledge in that they are value-related and tend to be held more tenaciously. These learners' beliefs are usually encountered by the teachers in the classroom. For example, learners' resistance to a specific technique may be due to the learners' conceptions of learners' and teacher's roles. In the same vein, Horwitz (1999) points out that a new subject of interest in the affective domain is the area of students' beliefs about language

learning. By beliefs about language learning, he means the preconceived ideas about the nature of language learning task.

Beliefs have been classified by different researchers in different ways. In one type of classification, Tanaka (1999, as cited in Tanaka & Ellis, 2003) identified two broad dimensions of learner beliefs: (a) beliefs about self as a language learner (e.g., self-efficacy, confidence, aptitude, and motivation) and (b) beliefs about approaches to language learning. The latter could be subdivided into beliefs about analytic and experiential learning. Previous studies have shown that learner beliefs vary according to a number of factors such as age, cultural (or ethnic) background, learning environment, stage of learning, and target language (Tanaka & Ellis, 2003). In another classification, Victori and Lockhart (1995, as cited in Tercanlioglu, 2003) discuss differences between "insightful beliefs" which successful learners hold, and the "negative or limited beliefs" which poor learners hold, and point out that if students develop or maintain misconceptions about their own learning, if they attribute undue importance to factors that are external to their own action they are not likely to adopt a responsible and active attitude in their approach to learning and may never become autonomous.

The pioneering work in investigating the learners' beliefs was stimulated by the Elaine Horwitz's (1988) ten year research on the beliefs about language learning. She believed that foreign language learners arrive in language classes with many preconceived notions about who is a good language learner and how foreign languages should be studied. Some of these beliefs can be helpful while others can be truly counterproductive for language learning. Prior to her research model, learner's beliefs about foreign language learning had not been analyzed systematically. Developing a 34-item question called Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) measuring five categories (nature of language learning, difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, learning and communication strategies, and motivation and expectations), he conducted a series of studies investigating the beliefs of students studying commonly taught languages in the US. Although the primary aim of the questionnaire was measuring learners' general beliefs, several items of the BALLI were related to the learners' attitudes towards grammar instruction. The results showed that learners generally viewed grammar instruction as an integral part of language learning (Horwitz, 1999). Over the years, several scholars repeated the Horwitz study using the BALLI or a variation of it. Campbell, Shaw, Plageman and Allen (1993), for instance, redesigned the study and condensed the Horwitz instrument to seven statements followed by a write-in section. Most of the subjects disagreed that language leaning is mostly a matter of learning grammatical rules.

The studies conducted so far have had either a general purpose aiming just at describing either learners' (Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Schulz, 1996; 2001) or teachers' beliefs ((Tercanlioglu, 2003; Altan, 2006); or specific one comparing both parties' beliefs with each other in specific parts of language learning. One of the recent and probably the most influential studies with general purpose examining L2 learners' beliefs about grammar instruction was conducted by Schulz (1996, 2001). In his 1996 study, Schulz examined the beliefs of US postsecondary foreign language students and teachers about grammar instruction and error correction. The results showed that the majority of the students thought it vital to be corrected while speaking in class, whereas few teachers thought this to be so. Despite this discrepancy, the majority of teachers and students reported that the errors should be explicitly corrected. In 2001, he replicated the 1996 study with a large group of Colombian and US foreign language learners. Data comparisons indicated relatively high agreement between students and teachers across cultures on the majority of questions. The teachers and learners also reported that the grammar instruction is not sufficient but should be complemented with authentic communication. In another study, Tanaka and Ellis (2003) reported an empirical study of a 15-week study-abroad program for Japanese university students, examining changes in the students' beliefs about language learning (measured by means of a questionnaire) and in their English proficiency (measured by means of the TOEFL). The results showed statistically significant changes in the students' beliefs relating to analytic language learning, experiential language learning and self-efficacy/confidence during the study-abroad period. However, Pearson product moment correlations between the students' responses to the Belief Questionnaire and their TOEFL scores both before and after the study-abroad period were weak and generally statistically non-significant.

Other studies have attempted to investigate teachers' beliefs regarding different parts of language learning and teaching. One example of such studies is the one conducted by Tercanlioglu (2003) investigating the language learning beliefs of 118 pre-service EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers (45 male and 73 female) with regard to gender. Participants were pre-service EFL teachers, who completed Horwitz's BALLI. The results of ANOVA provided insight into their beliefs about what is most important in learning English as a foreign language. They said that it was "motivations and expectations to learn". Secondly, it provided insight into the interrelations between belief factors: they were all interrelated. Thirdly, it provided insight into the relationships between belief factors and gender: no significant difference was found. Having the same purpose, Altan (2006) investigated 248 pre-service teachers' beliefs using BALLI questionnaire. The prospective teachers were in the departments of

English, German, French, Japanese and Arabic and they were all going to be the teachers of the language they were learning. Although most of the item alternatives drew slightly different percentages of responses, the overall pattern of responses remained strikingly consistent across language groups. The findings indicated similarity of beliefs among the different target language groups. Thus, the findings confirmed that pre-service teachers arrive at the task of language learning with definite preconceived notions of how to go about it. Therefore Altan (2006) concluded that foreign language teacher educators and teacher trainers could not afford to ignore these beliefs if they expect their students to be open to particular teaching methods and to receive the maximum benefit from them. Altan (2006) summarizes his study in this way that knowledge of learner beliefs about language learning should also increase teacher educators' understanding of how the future teaching of these people would be.

So far the above-cited studies investigated beliefs of either language learners or teachers. But there are bulks of research that have compared language learners' beliefs with those of language teachers regarding specific parts of language learning process. In one of such studies Liao and Chiang (2003), emphasizing that both English learners and teachers have certain beliefs about how to learn English and these learning beliefs are often based on their previous learning experiences and cultural backgrounds, and will further influence strategies these people use to enhance their English learning and teaching, conducted a study on a total of 143 students and 15 teachers. It turned out that the two groups yielded rather consistent results on learning beliefs, although some differences between the learners' and their teachers' beliefs were also found.

Taking into account beliefs about learning and teaching communicative English in Japan, Matsuura, Chiba and Hilderbrandt (2001) examined over 300 EFL student and 82 teacher beliefs using a 36-item questionnaire to assess their beliefs about (a) important instructional areas, (b) goals and objectives, (c) instructional styles and methods, (d) teaching materials, and (e) cultural matters. The results indicated that many students preferred traditional styles of ELT pedagogy including a teacher-centered approach (listening to lectures), learning isolated skills (pronunciation), and focusing on accuracy (Japanese translation). On the other hand, the teachers' preferences appeared to have shifted towards more recent pedagogy such as a learner-centered approach, integrated skills, and a focus on fluency. These results suggested that constant assessment of student beliefs is essential to link ELT theories and classroom practice.

Also, Peacock (2003) probed into the beliefs about language learning of 202 EFL students and 45 EFL teachers in the Department of English at the City University of Hong Kong. The primary aim of the study was to determine if the differences between student and teacher beliefs about language learning affect proficiency. Secondary aims were to develop hypotheses about the origins of Chinese learner beliefs about language learning, and to check the correlation between learner self-rated proficiency and tested proficiency. Data were collected using a 34-item self-report questionnaire (Honvitz's BALLI), a comprehensive proficiency test, an interview, and a self-rated proficiency sheet. Results indicated that four of the mismatched learner beliefs negatively affected EFL proficiency: additionally, learner answers on seven other BALLI items were considered to have implications for the learning and teaching of EFL. It was concluded that a number of different learner beliefs were detrimental to language learning, and also that they resulted in many dissatisfied and frustrated students who could not understand the rationale behind the tasks they carried out in class.

The implications of the above studies are that to achieve an increased level of engagement, students need more control over their language learning experience via taking into account their beliefs and attitudes towards how language learning should be taken place in the classroom. Although the literature is replete with studies dedicated to either students' or teachers' perceptions of various aspects of language teaching and learning (Rubin, 1975, 1981; Naiman, Frochlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1978; Wong-Fillmore, 1979; Nation & McLaughlin, 1986; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Brosh, 1996; Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Horwitz, 1999; Yang, 1999; Cotterall, 1999; Rifkin, 2000; Peacock, 2001; Liao & Chiang, 2003), those studies that have specifically compared and contrasted individual teachers' perceptions of effective teaching practices with those of students are scarce (Kern, 1995; Brown, 2009). Due to its importance, therefore, it seems necessary to investigate and compare the perceptions of both teachers' and students' perceptions in a variety of contexts especially in an EFL context such as Iran in which teachers are doing their best to prepare students to participate in outside world and to communicate with speakers of other languages via the international and intercultural English language.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research questions

As said above, to date very few studies have investigated any differences between individual learners' and teachers' beliefs about effective language teaching (Peacock 2003). Taking into consideration that both teachers' and learners' beliefs about the process of language teaching and learning and specially about an effective language teacher are of vital importance for the success or failure of language teaching, the scarcity of studies done on this particular theme,

and a need for investigating this theme in different contexts, especially in an EFL context such as Iran to have a more comprehensive understanding of probable differences between English language learners' and teachers' beliefs, this study aimed at investigating the following question:

(1).Based on a 24-item Likert scale questionnaire, how do students' beliefs about effective teacher practices compare to the teachers' responses overall?

3.2 Participants

The participants of this study were 120 students studying English literature at BA level at four Iranian universities and aged between 20-22 years old. Majority (N= 80) of the students were female. The participants had relatively good command of English language. Also, 16 Iranian university teachers (10 MA and 6 PhD holders) with teaching experience of 5 to 10 years from the same universities took part in this study. The selected subjects were supposed to represent the Iranian students and teachers population.

Instrumentation

To elicit both students and teachers beliefs regarding the effective way of language teaching, a questionnaire originally developed by Brown (2009) was used. The questionnaire consisted of 24 items and seven overarching categories. According to Brown (2009), the original questionnaire made extensive use of Bell's (2005, as cited in Brown, 2009) questionnaire and evolved after being piloted three times with different beginning-level L2 students (See Appendix A for the Effective English Language Teacher Questionnaire and Appendix B for the questionnaire overarching categories). The instrument was translated into Persian (Farsi). The rationale was to guarantee the students' understanding of questionnaire items. The translated version was given to two highly proficient English-Persian bilinguals to review and give comments on the felicity, intelligibility, and faithfulness of the translated items. Based on the comments, some minor changes were made to the translated versions and then administered to five university English language teachers. Based on the teachers' comments, more minor changes were implemented and the translated instrument was finalized for administration to the participants of the study. Also, as the same questionnaire was administered both to students and teachers, the following constraints were imposed by the study's research design: (a) a minimal amount of technical jargon in order to make the questions comprehensible to all participants, both beginning-level students and experienced teachers; (b) an appropriate number of items that could be responded in no more than 25 minutes of class time; (c) a focus on concrete teaching practices within teachers' control, rather than on the theoretical issues in SLA and L2 pedagogy; (d) the selective use of negatively worded items; (e) the omission of category items; and (f) the use of a forced-choice four category Likert scale.

According to Genesee and Upshur (1996), the multiple-choice answer formats can be used only when most or all of the responses are known in advance and grouped into non-overlapping categories. Despite these disadvantages, this type of questionnaire was chosen as the best possible way of eliciting both students and teachers responses, taking into consideration limitations present in the Iranian teaching context. To ensure the reliability of the questionnaire, it was administered to a sample of 20 Iranian students and 5 university teachers supposed to be representative of the larger intended population. Using KR-21 formula, the questionnaire reliability turned out to be .85.

3.3 Procedure

As said before, data was collected from a group of BA high students. Based on the qualitative nature of the study, the researcher made no intervention in the routine order of the class, that is, there was nothing such as intervention, randomization and data manipulation. To put it another way, an ex post facto design was chosen for the purpose of this study. The questionnaire was distributed among the participants and they were required to answer the closed-ended questions based on their past experiences of participating in the language classes. The students were also told that they could ask any questions about whatever they felt ambiguous. The Iranian university teachers were also asked to fill the questionnaire based on what they routinely did in their classrooms.

4. Data analysis

The main purpose of this study was to run a detailed and comprehensive comparison between teachers' and students' beliefs on the issues in L2 teaching included in the study's questionnaire. For investigating the research question, descriptive and inferential statistics were employed. In comparing the students' and teachers' beliefs, a two-sample, independent group t-test was calculated.

5. Results and discussion

As mentioned above, this research tended to investigate Iranian English language teachers' and foreign English language teachers' beliefs about effective language teaching using a questionnaire. The items were ranked in descending order from the largest to the smallest mean difference using absolute values based on the respondents' responses. In presenting the results, the negative sign has been retained in order to indicate direction of difference;

negative values represent greater teacher than student agreement with the items. In some case, more than one item resulted in nearly equal mean difference values, causing two items to be ranked equally.

Having analyzed the structure of collected data, it came out that the teachers' responses and those of students revealed almost the same amount of variation on the four-point scale with 1 (strongly agree) the minimum and 4 (strongly disagree) the maximum. The teachers' responses ranged from 1.52 to 3.11. But the students' responses ranged from 1.41 to 3.26. Among the raw scores, there were several items with mean differences of .44 or higher on the four-point scale. Practically speaking, a raw score difference of .50 on a four-point scale would appear to represent a notable difference of opinion. Due to space limitations, only those items that showed significant differences between the teachers' and students' responses overall are displayed in the table 1. Out of the 24 items, 6 items resulted in raw mean differences of .44 or higher and several questions not displayed resulted in minimal differences of less than .20. Table 1 presents the teachers' and the students' overall means side by side, the differences between the students' and the teachers' mean responses (Ss-Ts Mean Difference).

Comparing the students' and teachers' responses revealed that the Iranian teachers put strong emphasis on the communicative activities. It was clear from the responses given to the questionnaire. For example the Iranian teachers preferred real-life activities, using activities whose primarily goals were to exchange information and using pair and group work in the class. It seems that the students did not still have an appropriate idea about the value of communication and communicative activities due to the fact that they still preferred focusing primarily on the grammatical items. One possible reason for this is that these students were junior ones and most of their language experience was limited to high school life which primarily relied on the use of rote learning, repetition drills, and communicative activities were not valued very much. This finding corroborates results from Brown's (2009) study, which found that his subjects preferred to have formal grammar instruction over communicative exchanges in the L2 classroom. To bridge this gap between students' and teachers' beliefs, teachers might need to help students understand some empirically proven principles of L2 learning (e.g. the importance of output, interaction, and negotiation of meaning) to justify exercises without a grammar focus or assignments graded for communicative effectiveness rather than for grammatical accuracy. Another possible explanation for the students' disfavor of the communicative activities is the nature of tests that they were required to answer in the classrooms. The tests that were employed in the Iranian L2 classrooms regarded grammatical points as the core and the use of communicative activities as periphery.

Another difference between students' and teachers' responses regarded the timing of error correction. The teachers' responses were more in line with the existing literature on the timing of error correction which emphasizes that errors should not be corrected directly and immediately as their students make errors. But the students had the obverse beliefs, that is, they reported that they expected their teachers to correct their errors as soon as they emerged. One possible reason for this is that the students perceived the classroom as a place for receiving optimal input and not for exploring and sharing each other's ideas. They believed that their teachers should always play a role of model for them and correct their errors as soon as they emerge in their speech or writing.

6. Conclusion

As discussed above, this research intended to explore Iranian students' and teachers' beliefs. It came out that there were some differences between Iranian students' and teachers' beliefs about effective language teaching. According to the existing literature on the beliefs commonly held by language learners and teachers, these beliefs have a pivotal role in the success or failure of language learning and teaching process, that is, to achieve the maximum amount of success, the gap between students' and teachers' perceptions should be bridged as much as possible (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). Also this is an interesting area for the researchers to pursue because L2 teaching practices change over time and idiosyncratic perceptions of it among teachers and students will remain a reality in the L2 classroom.

Also this research study has some pedagogical implications which are of vital importance both for the language learners and teachers. Whatever teachers believe about the memorization of grammatical rules is not important, if students believe that such mastery is essential for speaking or comprehending a new language. Thus the most implication of this research is for teachers to become aware of and acknowledge their students' beliefs about language learning. To make learners aware of their own preconceived notions about language learning and their possible consequences, teachers should include discussions about the nature of language learning as a regular part of their instruction. As student beliefs about language learning can be based on limited knowledge and/or experience, the teacher's most effective course may be to confront erroneous beliefs with new information.

As for the most studies and in this study as well, there are some limitations that should be taken into account for the future research studies. The major limitations from which this research suffers are the elicitation instrument and the

number of subjects. Regarding the instrument, the employed questionnaire cannot give us a complete picture of the students' and teachers' beliefs. To ameliorate this, it is recommended that the questionnaire be accompanied with some other instruments such as observation, diary and/or interview to achieve more reliable data. Also as Genesee and Upshur (1996) pointed out, the exact and unambiguous wording of the questionnaire is a difficult task and may be regarded as one of the pitfalls of the mere reliance on the questionnaire as the elicitation technique. In addition, the closed-ended, multiple-choice format of the questionnaire is recommended to be supplemented with open-ended questions so that to give some freedom be given to the respondents to maintain their own personal voice. Finally, another limitation lies in the number of respondents. As it is suggested in the literature on qualitative research, the number of participants should be more to have a better representative sample.

The results of this study points to several issues in need of future research. First, this study explored the students' and teachers' beliefs about some aspects of language teaching and learning such as grammar teaching, error correction, target language use, culture, etc. But it should be understood that effective language teaching is not limited only to these components and involve many other aspects that need to be researched such as the emphasis on the different language skills, teaching some language learning strategies. Also there are some other questions that warrant further research. One of these questions is how stable the students' and teachers' beliefs are over time and whether there is any association between students' and teachers' beliefs and the classroom practices. Furthermore, some cross-cultural studies should be done to investigate whether the roots of such beliefs are in students' and teachers' living context.

7. Acknowledgments

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APPENDIX A: Effective Teacher Questionnaire

Instructions: Please reflect on your personal beliefs regarding what characterizes effective foreign language teaching. Carefully read each statement and indicate to what extent you agree or disagree by circling the statement that best describes your opinion. There are no right or wrong answers, just those that are right for you. Your sincere, personal responses will guarantee the success of the study. Thank you.

Effective foreign language teachers should:

1. frequently use computer-based technologies (Internet, CD–ROM, email) in teaching the language.

Strongly Agree   Agree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

2. base at least some part of students' grades on completion of assigned group tasks.

3. devote as much time to the teaching of culture as to the teaching of language.

4. require students to use the language outside of class with other speakers of the language (e.g., Internet, email, clubs, community events, etc.).

5. not correct students immediately after they make a mistake in speaking.

6. allow students to respond to test questions in listening and reading via English rather than the foreign language.

7. not use English in the foreign language classroom.

8. only correct students indirectly when they produce oral errors instead of directly (e.g., correctly repeating back to them rather than directly stating that they are incorrect).

9. be as knowledgeable about the culture(s) of those who speak the language as the language itself.

10. not grade language production (i.e., speaking and writing) primarily for grammatical accuracy.

11. teach the language primarily by having students complete specific tasks (e.g., finding out prices of rooms and rates at a hotel) rather than grammar-focused exercises.

12. have students respond to commands physically in the foreign language (e.g., "stand up," "pick up your book," etc.).

13. address errors by immediately providing explanations as to why students' responses are incorrect.

14. require students to speak in the foreign language beginning the first day of class.

15. not use predominantly small groups or pair work to complete activities in class.

16. mostly use activities that practice specific grammar points rather than activities whose goal is merely to exchange information.

17. ask students to begin speaking the foreign language only when they feel they are ready to.

18. not present a particular grammar point without illustrating how the structure is used in a specific, real-world context.

19. speak the foreign language with native-like control of both grammar and accent.

20. teach grammar by giving examples of grammatical structures before explaining the grammar rules.

21. use predominantly real-life materials (e.g., music, pictures, foods, clothing) in teaching both the language and the culture rather than the textbook.

22. not simplify or alter how they speak so that students can understand every word being said.

23. base at least some part of students' grades on their ability to interact with classmates successfully in the foreign language.

24. use activities where students have to find out unknown information from classmates using the foreign language.

APPENDIX B.General Categories of Questionnaire

Category	Effective Teacher Questionnaire Item Number
Grammar Teaching	10, 16, 18, 20
Error Correction	5, 8, 13
Target Language Use	7, 14, 17, 19, 22, 23
Culture	3, 9, 21
Computer-Based Technology	1
Communicative Language Teaching Strategies	11; 12; 2, 4, 15, 21, 23, 24
Assessment	2, 6, 10, 23

Table 1.Overall Comparison of Student and Teacher Means by Questionnaire Item

RQ	Effective English Language Teachers Should	Mean Difference (Ss-Ts)	Teachers' Means (n = 16)	Students' Means (n = 120)
14	Require students to speak in the foreign language beginning the first day of the class	.84	2.82	1.98
2	Base at least some part of students' grades on comprehension of assigned group tasks	.71	1.70	2.41
16	Mostly use activities that practice specific grammar points rather than activities whose goal is merely to exchange information	-.59	3.05	2.46
5	Not correct students immediately after they make a mistake in speaking	.55	1.82	2.38
21	Use predominantly real-life materials (e.g. music, pictures, foods, clothing) in teaching both the language and the culture rather than the textbook.	-.46	1.41	1.88
15	Not use predominantly small groups or pair work to complete activities in class.	-.44	2.88	2.43