

EFL Teachers' Beliefs about Language Teaching and Learning: Implications for Teaching Unplugged

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Abstract

The role of teaching materials in ELT has usually been a controversial issue in terms of what type of materials teachers should use and how important these materials are to language teaching and learning. This controversy got heated by the advent of calls for material-light classrooms and using teachers and learners as resources to liberate ELT from the 'tyranny' of course books. Nevertheless, these calls remain to carry a relatively little weight in mainstream ESL/EFL teacher education circles. They are communicated to teachers and educators, mainly through professional development arenas. Since we know very little about what attitudes teachers hold to these calls, we cannot assess their magnitude and influence. This article investigates Egyptian EFL teachers' beliefs concerning the tenets of Dogme (i.e., an approach that advocates material-free English language teaching) in relation to teachers' gender, years of experience, and the age group they teach, intending to explore the variable(s) that may influence beliefs about Dogme. Data were collected from 70 Egyptian EFL teachers using a questionnaire. Quantitative analysis of data revealed that generally, there is no significant relationship between teachers' beliefs about Dogme and the variables mentioned above.

Keywords: *EFL teachers' beliefs, Dogme, Teaching Unplugged, material-light teaching*

INTRODUCTION

Dogme can be better understood if seen as one way of curriculum design. The term 'curriculum' here refers to how a course's content is shaped into a set of plans for teaching and learning to accomplish the set learning outcomes (Richards, 2013). According to him, Dogme represents 'central' curriculum design, which starts with choosing the teaching methods, techniques, and activities rather than developing a

syllabus or specifying learning outcomes. The main characteristic of this approach is that it is much more learner-centered and learning-oriented than objective-driven.

Dogme is based on the idea that teaching should basically draw on the teacher and students as the primary resources, and that learning should be "jointly constructed out of the talk that ('evolve') in that simplest, and most prototypical of situations" (Thornbury, 2000, p. 2). The teacher's primary responsibility is to support this talk through scaffolding and promote a classroom 'dynamic' that fosters dialogic emergent language, representing the 'material' to be learned. In this way, the classroom can be freed from the dominance of 'imported' teaching materials (Thornbury, 2005). In this sense, "the syllabus or language focus is not pre-planned, and language and content emerge from the processes of interaction and negotiation that the teacher initiates" (Richards, 2013, p. 18).

Criticism was leveled at 'dogmetists' for what was perceived to be a lack of 'moderation.' In this sense, Gill (2000) referred to learners' expectations, constraints imposed by the school administration, the unsuitability of Dogme for application in classes taught by inexperienced teachers and the need to reach informed choice about the usefulness of teaching material – through using inside the classroom – before rejecting it as reasons for expressing severe reservations about Dogme.

However, the tenets of Dogme seem to be grounded in pedagogy. Dogme bears similarity to both the Natural Approach and Humanistic Approach. The former approach proposes that learning occurs when students are exposed – through meaningful interaction – to comprehensible input, which is a little above their current level of competence. At the same time, the latter turns the classroom into a community where learners' experience, interaction, and response to learning are considered central to teaching and learning (Richards, 2013). Besides, Lucas, Villegas & Freedson-Gonzalez (2008) contended that scaffolding represents the realization of Vygotsky's theory of learning known as Zone of Proximal Development, which refers to that 'metaphorical zone' where a learner can accomplish learning tasks with help from the teacher or a more capable peer. As the learner develops skills, this assistance is gradually removed. Closely related, research in language acquisition proposes that conversation is central to language development of children whose "level of language performance ... depends not only on their underlying competence but also on the support provided by the setting and the conversational partner that, both, scaffold it" (Veneziano, 2010, p. 246). She also averred that adults employ scaffolding techniques to clarify and facilitate children's access to their own language by linking them to a 'shared' context.

It is worth noting that the primary concern of this study is not to advocate or discredit Dogme. Instead, the main focus here is to explore the possibility of its successful application in the ELT context in Egypt. In this regard, this study comes as a response to the call of ELT educators who introduced Dogme. They stated that they "do not pretend to have all the answers, but we hope to indicate how you can confidently explore unplugged teaching where you are, and to find the answers yourself" (Thornbury & Meddings, 2009, p. 83). This endeavor aims to achieve this aim by exploring teachers' beliefs about issues considered central to the application of Dogme.

Over the past two decades, the study of ESL/EFL teachers' beliefs about various aspects of language teaching and learning and how these beliefs influence classroom practices has received growing attention. Borg (2001) defined a belief as "a proposition

that is accepted as true by the individual holding it, although the individual may recognize that alternative beliefs may be held by others" (p. 186). There is a consensus among researchers that ESL/EFL teachers' beliefs profoundly influence teachers' decisions inside classrooms (Farrell & Bennis, 2013; Gatbonton, 2008; Woods, 1991; Zacharias; 2005). Similarly, Miller & Aldred (2000) argued that the investigation and articulation of teachers' beliefs illuminate insight into the nature of language teaching and learning. In the same way, Pennington & Richards (1997) considered it essential for the success of novice ESL/EFL teachers to "develop certain attitudes and regular behaviours in addition to specific bodies of knowledge and skills" (p. 153). Beliefs are also thought to dominate the way teachers view their teaching and themselves as teachers (Mak, 2011). It was argued that teachers' interactive instructional decisions that come in response to learners' participation might depart from set plans and be attributable to those teachers' beliefs (Tsang, 2004). In these situations, teachers come to weigh alternative courses of action and prioritize one over others, referring to the underlying set of beliefs they have (Pennington & Richards, 1997; Woods, 1991).

Areas of investigation in this extensive line of research included the study of conflicting beliefs of novice teachers (Mak, 2011), reconfiguration of beliefs during first-year teaching (Pennington & Richards, 1997), teachers' beliefs about internationally-published teaching materials, teachers' beliefs about ESL curriculum (Woods, 1991), teachers' beliefs about the influence of Second Language Acquisition research on ESL pedagogy (Nassaji, 2012), pre-service teachers' beliefs about language learning (Busch, 2010), the relationship between pre-service teachers' beliefs and interactive in-class decisions (Tsang, 2004), and comparison between novice and experienced teachers' beliefs (Farrell & Bennis, 2013; Gatbonton, 2008).

Of particular interest was the study of pre-service teachers' beliefs about the communicative language teaching method's applicability in Asian ESL contexts (Miller & Aldred, 2000). The authors argued that it is the teacher educators' responsibility to identify pre-service teachers' beliefs about the applicability of a specific teaching method or approach in a particular ELT context before tailoring teacher training programs and implementing them. In a similar vein, Mak (2011) provided another reason for scrutinizing teachers' beliefs about newly-introduced approaches, stating that when a teaching approach is introduced into a context, "tensions between beliefs about different traditions of language teaching begin to surface and influence [teachers'] perceptions and practice of new teaching methodologies" (p.54). However, far less is known about the beliefs ESL/EFL teachers hold about the applicability of Dogme. In this light, it is the interest of this study to investigate Egyptian EFL teachers' beliefs about principles that correspond to the precept of Dogme. In particular, this study aims to find answers to the following research questions:

1. How do the beliefs teachers hold about Dogme-related aspects of language learning and teaching correlate to their gender?
2. How do the beliefs teachers hold about Dogme-related aspects of language learning and teaching correlate to the students' age group?
3. How do the beliefs teachers hold about Dogme-related aspects of language learning and teaching correlate to the years of teaching experience they have?

METHOD

Data Collection

Data were collected utilizing an electronically distributed questionnaire (see Appendix 1). Along with the questionnaire, a letter of invitation was sent to the prospective participants in the study. The letter provided necessary information about the research study and the researcher. It also indicated that participation is voluntary and confidential.

The data collection process took place over two weeks. The study participants were drawn from a larger pool of teachers who were randomly selected. Whereas the questionnaire was sent out to 230 teachers, only seventy teachers (30.4%) completed and submitted it. Due to the low response rate, a gentle reminder was sent a week after the survey was sent out to the prospective participants. All the participants responded to the questionnaire anonymously.

The questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative data. It consisted of two sections. The first section aimed to gather information about the participants' background (i.e., their gender, years of teaching experience, age group of their students, and the language proficiency level(s) they teach). All the questions in this section were multiple-choice questions. The second section investigated teachers' beliefs about statements that pertain to the nature of EFL teaching and learning and have a direct bearing on the Dogme Approach. Most of the items in this section correspond to Dogme's precepts, stated by Thornbury (2001; 2005). All these items were in the format of a five-point Likert scale. In this section, items were classified under five categories (i.e., beliefs about the nature of language learning, beliefs about language teaching and curriculum design, beliefs about students and other stakeholders, beliefs about teaching materials, and beliefs about the role of the teacher). Cronbach's Alpha, a statistical tool used to test a psychometric test's reliability for a sample of examinees, was employed to investigate the questionnaire items' reliability. Based on the questionnaire data, the reliability of the questionnaire was 0.615. According to Cronbach Alpha, a coefficient of 0.6 or more indicates an acceptable level of reliability.

Table 1: The participants' characteristics

	Gender		Years of teaching experience					Age group teaching at the time of the study	
Category	Male	Female	1 st year	1- 2 years	3-8 years	9-14 years	More than 15 years	Young Learners	Adults
Frequency	21 (30%)	49 (70%)	2 (2.9%)	2 (2.9%)	22 (31.4%)	21 (30%)	23 (32.9%)	24 (34.3%)	46 (65.7%)
Mean	1.7000		3.8714					1.6571	
SD	.4616		1.0061					.4781	

Participants

The participants were 70 females and male Egyptian EFL teachers. They were all non-native speakers of English. They were all qualified practicing teachers teaching EFL at various levels of education (i.e., K-12 and tertiary education) in public and private institutions. They all belonged to the professional network of the researcher. Of all the participants, 21 (30%) were males, and 49 (70%) were females. Besides, 24 (34.3%) of the participants reported teaching young learners, while 46 (65.7%) were teaching adults. The participants' years of teaching experience ranged from less than a year to more than 15 years. However, most of the participants were generally experienced. At the time of the study, a large percentage of the participants (52%) taught intermediate and upper-intermediate students. In contrast, the remainder reported that they were teaching beginners (16%), low intermediate (16%), and advanced students (16%). Table 1 gives a summary of the background characteristics of the study participants.

Data Analysis

To answer the research questions mentioned above, the author analysed data obtained quantitatively. The frequency of each choice in every questionnaire item was statistically calculated. The Mann-Whitney U Test (i.e., a nonparametric test used to compare two unpaired groups) and Kruskal Wallis Test (a nonparametric test used to compare three or more samples) were employed to investigate differences between categories of teachers beliefs (i.e., beliefs about the nature of language learning, beliefs about language teaching and curriculum design, beliefs about students and other stakeholders, beliefs about teaching materials and beliefs about the role of the teacher) and the variables of teachers' years of experience, gender and the age group they teach. In light of this statistical analysis, the author attempted to find plausible explanations for the study results to answer the research questions mentioned above.

RESULTS

1. The relationship between teachers' beliefs about Dogme-related aspects of language learning and teaching and teachers' gender

To answer the first research question, the author used a Mann-Whitney U test to examine differences in beliefs about Dogme of male and female teachers. As shown in Table 2, the test results indicate no significant differences between male and female teachers in the different categories of beliefs about Dogme-related aspects of language learning and teaching.

Table 2: The relationship between teachers' beliefs about Dogme and teachers' gender

Categories of beliefs	Number of cases	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Sig. at 0.05
Beliefs about the nature of language learning	Male (21)	38.69	812.50	0.38 (Not sig.)
	Female (49)	34.13	1672.50	
Beliefs about teaching practices and curriculum design	Male (21)	31.62	664.00	0.29 (Not sig.)
	Female (49)	37.16	1821.00	
Beliefs about the role of students and other stakeholders	Male (21)	28.79	604.50	0.07 (Not sig.)
	Female (49)	38.38	1880.50	
Beliefs about teaching materials	Male (21)	42.14	885.00	0.07 (Not sig.)
	Female (49)	32.65	1600.00	
Beliefs about the role of the teacher	Male (21)	31.50	661.50	0.27 (Not sig.)
	Female (49)	37.21	1823.50	

2. The relationship between teachers' beliefs about Dogme-related aspects of language learning and teaching and the age group of the students

Table 3 shows the relationship between teachers' beliefs and the age group of the students they were teaching at the time of the study (i.e., research question 2). The Mann-Whitney U test results indicate that whereas there is a significant relationship between teachers' beliefs about teaching practices and curriculum design and the age group of the students that teachers teach ($U = 0.02$, $p < .05$), there is no significant relationship in other categories of beliefs.

3. The relationship between teachers' beliefs about Dogme-related aspects of language learning and teaching and teachers' years of experience

To answer the third research question, the author employed a Kruskal-Wallis test to investigate differences in beliefs about Dogme in teachers with different years of teaching experience. As Table 4 indicates, the test results suggest no significant differences among different groups of teachers as classified according to the number of years of teaching experience and the different categories of beliefs they hold about Dogme-related aspects of language learning and teaching.

Table 3: The relationship between teachers' beliefs about Dogme and the age group they teach

Categories of beliefs	Number of cases	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Sig. at 0.05
Beliefs about the nature of language learning	YL (24)	32.75	786.00	0.41 (Not sig.)
	Adults (46)	36.93	1699.00	
Beliefs about teaching practices and curriculum design	YL (24)	27.75	666.00	0.02 (Sig.)
	Adults (46)	39.54	1819.00	
Beliefs about the role of students and other stakeholders	YL (24)	30.54	733.00	0.14 (Not sig.)
	Adults (46)	38.09	1752.00	
Beliefs about teaching materials	YL (24)	34.06	817.50	0.66 (Not sig.)
	Adults (46)	36.25	1667.50	
Beliefs about the role of the teacher	YL (24)	32.75	786.00	0.41 (Not sig.)
	Adults (46)	36.93	1699.00	

DISCUSSION

As stated above, this study's main aim is to explore the variables that may influence Egyptian EFL teachers' beliefs about the Dogme approach. In particular, the study investigates the relationship between teachers' beliefs about Dogme and their gender, the age group they teach, and years of teaching experience. Quantitative analysis of data indicates that – in general - there is no significant relationship between these variables and the different categories of beliefs teachers hold about Dogme. The only exception for this overall result is the difference between teachers who teach young learners and those who teach adults concerning their beliefs about teaching practices and curriculum design.

Previous research on teachers' beliefs seems to place little emphasis on the relationship between teachers' gender and their beliefs. The results of the present study – in this regard – lack grounding in the literature, but this can be accounted for by considering the nature of the research study as an exploratory study. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no previous study attempted to scrutinize the relationship between teachers' beliefs about ELT Dogme and their gender. The same applies to the study of the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their students' age group. Previous research seems to have paid scant attention to investigating this relationship. Regarding the present study's findings, the only significant relationship is that between teachers' beliefs about teaching practices and curriculum design and the age group they teach. One plausible explanation is teaching young learners, and teaching adults are different in nature. In particular, they require the use of varying classroom practices and

activities. In addition, teaching children allows a greater degree of flexibility as concerns curriculum design.

Table 4: The relationship between teachers' beliefs about Dogme and teachers' years of experience

Categories of beliefs	Number of cases	Mean Rank	Sig. at 0.05
Beliefs about the nature of language learning	1 st year (2)	63.50	0.11 (Not sig.)
	1-2 years (2)	51.50	
	3-8 years (22)	30.16	
	9-14 years (21)	33.38	
	More than 15 years (23)	38.72	
Beliefs about teaching practices and curriculum design	1 st year (2)	19.75	0.14 (Not sig.)
	1-2 years (2)	05.00	
	3-8 years (22)	35.43	
	9-14 years (21)	35.33	
	More than 15 years (23)	39.74	
Beliefs about the role of students and other stakeholders	1 st year (2)	32.25	0.36 (Not sig.)
	1-2 years (2)	07.50	
	3-8 years (22)	35.70	
	9-14 years (21)	35.02	
	More than 15 years (23)	38.46	
Beliefs about teaching materials	1 st year (2)	44.25	0.77 (Not sig.)
	1-2 years (2)	36.50	
	3-8 years (22)	38.43	
	9-14 years (21)	31.29	
	More than 15 years (23)	35.70	
Beliefs about the role of the teacher	1 st year (2)	58.25	0.32 (Not sig.)
	1-2 years (2)	21.00	
	3-8 years (22)	38.55	
	9-14 years (21)	32.14	
	More than 15 years (23)	34.93	

Research on teachers' beliefs has focused on the role of teaching experience in shaping these beliefs. The majority of studies in this line of research concluded that there are differences between the beliefs held by novice teachers and those of experienced teachers (Brousseau, Book & Byers, 1988; Gatbonton, 2008; Farrall & Bennis, 2013). Also, research conducted on novice and pre-service teachers shows that those teachers' beliefs tend to change due to developing teaching experience (Mak, 2011; Pennington & Richards, 1997; Tsang, 2004). Nevertheless, the present study results do not give credence to the findings presented by these studies. The present study concluded that there are no significant differences among teachers with different teaching experience levels in their beliefs about Dogme. This result may be attributable to the novelty of the ideas about Dogme, which differ from – and even sometimes contradict – the principles of approaches and methodologies according to which those teachers were trained.

It is noteworthy that a belief tends to remain a 'dynamic construct' that can change over time if there are adequate change conditions. The driving force behind change in

beliefs may range from internal factors (e.g., reflection on one's own teaching) to such external forces as adaptation to changes mandated by the educational system. Therefore, this research study's results refer to Egyptian EFL teachers' beliefs during the time in which the study was conducted. Future research studies could scrutinise any possible change in beliefs concerning concepts related to material-light and material-free EFL teaching.

Although the findings of the present study give some insight into the nature of specific aspects of Egyptian EFL teachers' beliefs about Dogme and may initiate interest in investigating other aspects of those teachers' beliefs about Dogme as well as other ELT approaches, it is noteworthy that these findings represent tendencies rather than conclusive findings. It is still a small scale study, and its results may not be generalizable to the entire population. This conclusion is mainly attributable to limited access to larger numbers of the population and the low response rate among the teachers who received the survey. Moreover, this study has the limitations of survey studies. While quantitative analysis of questionnaires that investigate beliefs gives an overall view of the study participants' beliefs, it doesn't offer the opportunity for an in-depth analysis that qualitative analysis of other data collection tools such as follow-up interviews provide. However, the desire to obtain data from as many participants as possible made the option of using such tools unfeasible.

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APPENDIX

Teachers' beliefs about learning and teaching practices

Section I: Background Information

- 1. Is English your native language (L1)?**
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
- 2. Gender**
 - ☐ Male
 - ☐ Female
- 3. How long have you been involved in teaching English?**
 - ☐ This is my first year
 - ☐ 1-2 years
 - ☐ 3-8 years
 - ☐ 9-14 years
 - ☐ More than 15 years
- 4. What age group are you teaching?**
 - ☐ Young learners
 - ☐ Adults
 - ☐ Advanced
- 5. What level(s) are you teaching?**
 - ☐ Beginners
 - ☐ Low intermediate
 - ☐ Intermediate
 - ☐ Upper intermediate
 - ☐ Advanced

Section II: Beliefs about Language Learning and Teaching

Beliefs about the nature of language learning:

6. Learning basically occurs through interaction between the teacher and the students, and among the students themselves.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
 - Don't know
7. Learning takes place through conversation, where the learners and the teacher co-construct knowledge and skills.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Undecided
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
8. Learning can be mediated through talk, especially talk that is supported (i.e., scaffolded) by the teacher.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Undecided
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
9. Language (including grammar) emerges from the learning process rather than being acquired.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Undecided
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree

Beliefs about teaching practices and curriculum design:

10. Language teaching should start with developing the content to be taught (the syllabus), then the teaching process ending with the assessment.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Undecided
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
11. Language teaching should start with the teaching process (teaching activities) through which language content emerges and end with specifying learning outcomes.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Undecided
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree

12. Language teaching should start with specifying learning outcomes, which serve as the basis for deciding on the teaching activities and the content to be taught.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Undecided
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
13. A language lesson should NOT start with specifying any language (grammatical/lexical) exponents to be taught; instead, it should highlight language that emerges from the students through classroom interaction.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Undecided
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
14. No recorded listening materials should be used in the classroom, and the source of all listening activities should be the students and the teacher themselves.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Undecided
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree

Beliefs about students and other stakeholders:

15. Students in your context are likely to accept and got engaged in a lesson where teaching focuses on the language that emerges from classroom interaction, and not that from a coursebook or any other materials.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Undecided
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
16. Supervisors/supervising teachers in your context are likely to accept and approve a lesson where teaching focuses on the language that emerges from classroom interaction, and not on that from a coursebook or any other materials.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Undecided
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
17. Students' parents in your context are likely to accept and approve a lesson where teaching focuses on the language that emerges from classroom interaction, and not on that from a coursebook or any other materials.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Undecided
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

18. Learners' voices should be given recognition through accepting learners' beliefs, knowledge, and experiences as valid content in the language classroom.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Undecided
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Beliefs about teaching materials

19. Materials (in particular, coursebooks) typically address the specific needs of individual learners.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Undecided
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

20. Materials (in particular, coursebooks) typically have cultural content that is relevant to your learners.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Undecided
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

21. Any item included in a coursebook is a vital learning item for students and must be taught.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Undecided
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

22. Explanations and cultural information contained in a coursebook are valid and shouldn't be questioned.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Undecided
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

23. Students are most engaged by the content they have created themselves.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Undecided
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Beliefs about the role of the teacher

24. The teacher should be able to identify and understand students' learning needs and preferences.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Undecided
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

25. The teacher should give absolute priority to students' learning needs over other considerations such as test/syllabus requirements.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Undecided
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

26. The teacher's primary role is to optimize language learning affordances through directing students' attention to language that emerges through conversation.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Undecided
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Adapted from:

Thornbury, S. (2000). A dogma for EFL. *IATEFL Issues*, 153, 2.

Thornbury, S. (2005). Dogme: Dancing in the dark. Retrieved October 11, 2013, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dogme_language_teaching