

Do Online Courses Change Teachers' Beliefs? A Study of Omani Teacher-trainees' Beliefs in Second Language Acquisition¹

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Abstract

Teachers' beliefs on language learning play a pivotal role in teachers' classroom practices and are thought to be stable. This article aims to show the change in the teacher-trainees' beliefs after taking an online second language acquisition (SLA) course as opposed to the traditional face-to-face SLA course from previous studies. The participants are sixteen teacher-trainees from a rural university in Oman. All participants attended a 16-week online SLA course. The data was captured by juxtaposing pre-course and post-course questionnaires. The results show that teachers' beliefs on language learning theories, language policies, and classroom practices present a change, whereas teachers' beliefs on error correction are resistant to change. Furthermore, teacher-trainees with some teaching experience reported dramatic changes in their beliefs regarding classroom practices. This study provides preliminary evidence that semester-long online courses may affect teachers' beliefs.

Resumen

Las creencias de los docentes sobre el aprendizaje de idiomas juegan un papel fundamental en las prácticas de los docentes en el aula y se cree que son estables. Este artículo tiene como objetivo mostrar el cambio en las creencias de los maestros en formación después de tomar un curso de adquisición de un segundo idioma (SLA) en línea en comparación con el curso SLA tradicional presencial de estudios anteriores. Los participantes son dieciséis profesores en formación de una universidad rural de Omán. Todos los participantes asistieron a un curso SLA en línea de 16 semanas. Los datos fueron capturados al juxtaponer cuestionarios previos y posteriores al curso. Los resultados muestran que las creencias de los docentes sobre las teorías del aprendizaje de idiomas, las políticas lingüísticas y las prácticas en el aula presentan un cambio, mientras que las creencias de los docentes sobre la corrección de errores son resistentes al cambio. Además, los futuros maestros con alguna experiencia docente informaron cambios dramáticos en sus creencias con respecto a las prácticas en el aula. Este estudio proporciona evidencia preliminar de que los cursos en línea de un semestre pueden afectar las creencias de los maestros.

Introduction

According to Nasser and Abouchedid (2000), the Arab World has a poor understanding of online learning and a preference toward a traditional knowledge delivery system in tertiary education (Abouchedid & Eid, 2004). Indicatively, Omanis view online degrees as inferior to traditional higher education (Sadik, 2016). However, due to the CoViD-19 pandemic, higher education in Oman switched to an online mode in March 2020. Although all entities (i.e., faculty members, the university, etc.) involved in the adoption of online courses were quite reluctant in this regard at the beginning (Osman, 2020), the universities themselves gradually conformed to the exceptional circumstances; they offered very appealing online options through synchronous and asynchronous platforms where students could even use their mobile phones to join the lectures.

This present study took place at an Omani institute of tertiary education in 2021. Sixteen students took part in this experiment. All students (or teacher-trainees in this case) were studying in the Bachelor of Education (B. Ed.) in English language teaching (ELT) programme, and they were in their junior or senior (3rd-4th) year. Thus, after graduation, they could work as full-time English language teachers in the schools of Oman. One of the core courses that the teacher-trainees had to attend was a second language acquisition (SLA) course. SLA has been an integral component of the majority of language teacher education programmes worldwide (Abreu, 2015). This course was delivered online due to the CoViD-19 pandemic, and it was the second semester that it was running online. The face-to-face SLA course had been well-attended throughout the years it had been offered, and students' feedback had always been very positive, with several students commenting that this course had changed their teaching/learning mindset. However, this semester, the course was offered online to students who considered online education inferior to full onsite attendance (Sadik, 2016).

In order to learn if an online SLA course could change teacher-trainees' beliefs on language learning/teaching more than a traditional onsite SLA course does (Davis, 2003; MacDonald et al., 2001), participants filled out a 5-scale Likert online questionnaire about their own perspectives on language learning and teaching before they started the course on SLA. The course lasted for 16 weeks, and after

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the end of the course, the students filled out the same online questionnaire, yet the order of the questions had been altered.

The aim of this study is to provide initial evidence that a semester-long online SLA instruction may affect certain teacher-trainees' beliefs on language learning and teaching. The present study was guided by the following research questions:

1. *Do the language learning beliefs change over the trainees' 16-week of attending an online second language acquisition course?*
2. *What are the language learning beliefs that present change, if any?*
3. *Are there any differences in the beliefs between the pre-service teacher-trainees and their in-service peers?*

Literature Review

Defining teachers' beliefs

Pajares (1992) argued that one of the significant problems of researching teachers' beliefs is caused by several definitions of beliefs. Borg (2006) attempted to offer a definition that links beliefs and mental constructs: teacher beliefs about learning and teaching are the "tacit, personally-held practical system of mental constructs" (Borg, 2006, p.35). Pajares (1992) also agreed that beliefs and knowledge are inextricably intertwined. While defining language teaching and learning perspectives is challenging, Williams and Burden (1997) believed that they are culturally bound, developed early in life, and hard to change. As a result, by the time a student reaches college, his or her views on teaching appear to be well set (Weinstein as cited in Davis, 2003).

Beliefs and knowledge

Richards and Lockhart (1994) stress the link between beliefs and knowledge:

... what teachers do [in the classroom] is a reflection of what they know and believe, and teacher knowledge and teacher thinking provide the underlying framework or schema which guides the teacher's classroom actions (p. 29).

Declarative knowledge is knowledge about teaching subject areas (i.e., English language) and the theory of education. In contrast, procedural knowledge is knowledge of how to teach (i.e., classroom instructional routines) (MacDonald et al., 2001). Lightbown (1985) distinguishes between teacher education (declarative knowledge) and teacher training (procedural knowledge), while Richards (2015) suggested there is a link between teacher training and teacher beliefs (MacDonald et al., 2001).

Importance of teachers' beliefs in the classroom

It is vital to comprehend the beliefs on which teachers base their knowledge in order to understand how they approach their profession since their belief systems influence several facets of teaching, and affect how new information is received, accepted or rejected (Borg, 2001). The teachers' beliefs result from teacher training, and they are well set, so they are reportedly resistant to change (Lortie, 1975) since teacher trainees have observed other teachers during their many-year studies. What is more important is that teacher beliefs affect teachers' actions in class (Allen, 2010). In fact, Pajares (1992) found that teachers' beliefs had a higher impact on the way teachers organised their classes, the kind of decisions they made, and their overall classroom practice than their expertise. On the other hand, Guskey (1986) suggested that teachers' practice, self-awareness, and teacher education programmes (Bailey et al., 1996) may change their perspectives on language learning and teaching.

Importance of the SLA course

The SLA course was chosen specifically since it is a core course of TESOL education programmes. Abreu (2015) confirmed that linguistics and pedagogic knowledge had been seen as beneficial for language teachers since it boosts their acquaintance with second language acquisition and aids the decision-making process in the classroom. Knowing how language learners develop linguistically can help teachers set realistic expectations for pupils (Rogers, 1988). Most language teaching decisions can be made more effectively when one has a thorough understanding of the language (Wilkins, 1972). Teachers have not always been able to acquire this knowledge because of the academic jargon used in describing the field of linguistics, even though many people think that knowing linguistics is useful. Despite the importance of understanding language and language development, Bartels (2005) pointed out that what instructors do in practice goes beyond the knowledge of SLA, as they are professionals who join teacher education programmes having their already-formed belief systems.

Research on teachers' beliefs

Several studies have shown that in certain circumstances, changes in teachers' beliefs may take place. Busch's (2010) study employed the widely-used *Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory* (BALLI) (Horwitz, 1988) before and after teaching an SLA course to 381 pre-service teachers over three years. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the 23 statements in BALLI. One of the study's findings was a significant shift in participants' beliefs about the time needed for learners to acquire the L2, providing insight into the EFL courses curriculum. Özmen (2012) conducted a longitudinal study in Turkey with 49 teacher-trainees who attended the four-year ELT education programme. He found that initially, the participants held behaviouristic views toward language learning and teaching; however, after the fourth year, the participants' perspectives changed toward constructivism. Richards and Schmidt (2010) described behaviourism as a theory that stated that "human behaviour should be studied in terms of physical processes" (p. 51) rather than mental. Basically, learning starts with a stimulus (an event) that produces a response "based on a history of reinforcement" (p. 15). After the teacher trainees' fourth year of studies, Özmen (2012) found that the participants favoured constructivism which is socially constructed knowledge rather than passively received (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). Finally, Özmen (2012) stressed that the teaching practicum was the most influential component of the programme.

Davis (2003) used the Lightbown and Spada (2013) questionnaire to research the language learning beliefs of 18 English language teachers and 97 Chinese students of English. He found that students had stronger beliefs on immediate error correction, as nearly 85% of them agreed that teachers should correct their students immediately when they make a mistake. The Lightbown and Spada (2013) questionnaire was also used in MacDonald et al. (2001) study, who found that students, after attending an SLA course, moved away from the Behaviourist perspective on L2 learning. The studies that show changes in teachers' beliefs after an online course are very scarce, and they show change after one year of study. More specifically, Wong (2016) found that STEM teachers may change their beliefs after one year of online instruction. The STEM teacher education course emphasised inquiry-based instruction, and the beliefs of the participants moved toward a more student-centred instructional approach.

Methodology

Research Instruments

The theoretical framework that underpins eighteen statements of language learning provides the foundation for this study of teacher trainees' beliefs. These statements were derived from Lightbown and Spada's (2013). A pre-course questionnaire aimed at obtaining trainees' existing beliefs on language learning. The pre-course and post-course questionnaires on language learning beliefs were adapted from Lightbown and Spada (2013). The questionnaires consisted of 18 Likert statements relevant to language learning. The questionnaire for the post-course was identical to the pre-course one; however, the statements were in jumbled order. Both questionnaires employed the 5-scale Likert type: 1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: undecided, 4: agree, 5: strongly agree.

SLA Course

The planned experimental procedure was the SLA course delivered online. The SLA course is a core course for the Bachelor of Education (B. Ed.) for English language teaching (ELT) students in their 3rd year. This course focuses on introducing the second language acquisition theories to the ELT trainees. More specifically, students are exposed to the most prevalent theories / perspectives with regards to learning the first language (L1) and second language (L2), grammatical, lexical, and phonemic L2 acquisition theories, individual differences in learning, oral and written corrective feedback. The local context was taken into consideration and frequently used as an example. Trainees often shared their experiences as learners of English in Oman, as well as their (albeit limited) teaching experiences. Furthermore, the course included research-based activities, and teacher-trainees (students) had to interview parents and English language students about their learning English experiences.

Participants

Sixteen B. Ed. in ELT-majored students participated in this study. Two out of the sixteen students were males with some (although minimal) formal teaching English experience at elementary schools in Muscat. The fourteen female students did not have any teaching experience. All students came from Oman and had studied in public schools in Oman. Their average age was $M=23.1$. Most participants were in their senior year of study, while five of them were in their 3rd year of the B. Ed. programme. A form of consent

was signed by the participants after they were informed about the scope of the study and were ensured that the questionnaires were anonymous and their identities would be protected.

Data collection

The pre-test questionnaire was distributed to the students before the start of the course via the online asynchronous platform *Moodle*. Students were given 20 minutes to complete each questionnaire and submit it to the instructor via *Moodle* with hidden students' IDs so that the participants' identities were protected. A separate submission link was created on *Moodle* for the two experienced participants, and their students' IDs were also hidden.

Data analysis

For the analysis of the quantitative data, *Apple Numbers* was used to define descriptive statistics, i.e., the mean score, mode, standard deviation, to run the *T*-test for the two questionnaires: the pre-course and the post-course. Then, the descriptive statistics data from the pre-course and post-course questionnaires were juxtaposed. The *P*-value of the *T*-test was 0.0204. A *P*-value less than 0.05 is statistically significant (MacDonald et al., 2001). The averages are presented in the results section. The analysis of the post-course questionnaire showed that most beliefs have changed; however, some beliefs have remained the same. The results section features the beliefs that appeared to alter (*P*-value is less than 0.05) significantly, and the beliefs that remained stable (the mean score remained the same).

Results

The results showed that although some beliefs were changed, others remained stable. The teachers' perspectives that changed were on language learning theories, language policy, and classroom practices. On the other hand, beliefs on error correction seem stable.

Language learning theories

As shown in Table 1, the beliefs that appeared to change more radically were related to language learning theories. Before attending the SLA course, most students rather agreed ($M=3.90$) that Behaviourism was the dominant theory that explained how a second language can be acquired. In contrast, after the course, students disagreed on the importance of imitation in language learning ($M=2.90$). Likewise, participants changed their beliefs on students' learning what they were taught from indecisive ($M=3.50$) to rather disagree ($M=2.80$).

Statement	M (Pre-course)	M (Post-course)
Languages are learnt mainly through imitation.	3.90	2.90
Students learn what they are taught.	3.50	2.80

Table 1: Teachers' beliefs on language learning theories

Language policy

Their participants' language policy views altered as well (Table 2). Students significantly changed their belief that the earlier English is introduced in the school programme, the greater the success in learning, as they agreed before the course ($M=4.21$), but after the course, it seems they were not so certain ($M=3.34$). Furthermore, participants became less certain whether the classroom environment was optimal for developing learners' communicative competence. More specifically, the pre-test was $M=3.60$, while the post-test was $M=3.00$.

Statement	M (Pre-course)	M (Post-course)
Classrooms are good places to learn about language but not for learning how to use language.	3.60	3.00
The earlier a second language is introduced in school programmes, the greater the likelihood of success in learning.	4.21	3.34

Table 2: Teachers' beliefs on language policies

Classroom practices

Teacher trainees' beliefs also changed regarding the classroom practices (Table 3). Before the online SLA course, teacher-trainees believed that 1,000 words might be enough ($M=3.26$) for students to participate in conversations with native speakers, whereas after the course, students rather disagreed ($M=2.78$). Also, participants changed their views regarding the use of authentic materials in the classroom as after

the course, they disagreed ($M=2.68$) with graded English language materials. Participants gave more credit to pair/group work as they changed their views regarding copying mistakes. More specifically, before the SLA course, teacher-trainees were not certain ($M=3.66$) that interaction in pairs/groups in class may lead to students copying their peers' mistakes. However, this belief seemed to have been altered as the participants rather disagreed ($M= 2.98$).

Statement	M (Pre-course)	M (Post-course)
Once learners know 1,000 words and the basic structure of a language, they can easily participate in conversations with native speakers.	3.26	2.78
Teachers should use materials that expose students only to language structures they have already been taught.	3.20	2.68
When learners are allowed to interact freely (in pairs/groups), they copy each other's mistakes.	3.66	2.98

Table 3: Teachers' beliefs on classroom practices

Error correction

On the other hand, some other beliefs remained the same (Table 4). Participants seemed to hold unchanged beliefs on error correction. The teacher-trainees believed that L1 interference might be a logical explanation for students' mistakes (pre-course and post-course $M=3.75$). The other belief that presented statistically no significant difference ($P>0.05$) was that students need immediate correction when they make a mistake to prevent the formation of a bad habit (pre-course $M=4.12$, post-course $M=4.10$).

Statement	M (Pre-course)	M (Post-course)
Most of the mistakes that second language learners make are due to interference from their first language.	3.75	3.75
Learners' errors should be corrected as soon as they are made in order to prevent the formation of bad habits.	4.12	4.10

Table 4: Teachers' beliefs on error correction

Trainees with some experience

The two participants with some experience—both had been teaching for six months before taking the SLA course—presented changes in their beliefs, mainly regarding their classroom practices. As Table 5 shows, the teacher-trainees have radically changed their beliefs regarding the use of authentic materials in the EFL classroom. Before the course, they believed ($M=4.5$) that the learners should be exposed only to graded material, i.e., language structures taught. In contrast, after the course, they disagreed ($M=1.5$) with the students' exposure to graded materials only. Likewise, they became more sceptical about if students learn what their teachers teach, as they clearly disagreed ($M=2.0$) after the course. Before the course, the participants expressed their agreement ($M=4.5$) regarding reading as the best way to learn vocabulary, and after the course, both participants disagreed (2.0). Finally, the SLA course changed the informed participants' beliefs on the communicative value of the EFL classrooms, as they strongly agreed that the classrooms are good places to learn the linguistic structures, but not develop learners' communicative competence.

Statement	M (Pre-course)	M (Post-course)
The best way to learn new vocabulary is through reading.	4.50	2.00
Teachers should use materials that expose students only to language structures they have already been taught.	4.50	1.50
Students learn what they are taught.	4.00	2.00
Classrooms are good places to learn about language but not for learning how to use language.	2.00	4.50

Table 5: More experienced teachers' classroom practices beliefs

Regarding error correction (Table 6), both experienced participants reported changes in their beliefs. Before the course, they agreed that the learners' L1 is responsible for the L2 mistakes; however, after the

course, they disagreed ($M=2.50$). When it comes to immediate correction of learners' mistakes, not to form a bad habit, they seemed to disagree before ($M= 2.50$) and after the course ($M=2.00$).

Statement	M (Pre-course)	M (Post-course)
Most of the mistakes that second language learners make are due to interference from their first language.	4.00	2.50
Learners' errors should be corrected as soon as they are made in order to prevent the formation of bad habits.	2.50	2.00

Table 6: More experienced teachers' error correction beliefs

Discussion

This study found that a semester-long online course may affect some teachers' beliefs, while others seemed more resistant to change. Teachers' beliefs concerning learning perspectives seem to alter after the SLA course significantly. Behaviourism (learning through imitation) seems not to be the major L2 acquisition perspective according to the participants in the post-course survey. This finding is in accordance with Lightbown and Spada (2013), who stressed that learners use novice forms of language which are not the results of repetition. The participants' rejection of imitation in L2 learning also agrees with MacDonald et al. (2001) who found that the participants after the SLA course moved away from the Behaviourist perspective. This might explain why participants changed their beliefs on the use of graded instructional materials in the classroom. The above finding agrees with Berardo (2006), who found that exposure to authentic materials and the internet, as it is readily available, promotes reading habits.

Another belief that changed was the value of pair/group work. Even if students make mistakes when they interact with each other, these mistakes can be seen as an inevitable step in the language acquisition process, as they mainly focus on meaning rather than form (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Teachers' beliefs concerning the optimal vocabulary range for communicative purposes seemed to change as well. The participants seemed to disagree that 1,000 English words were enough for communication, and according to the SLA book, a range of 2,000 words is considered optimal (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). This finding agrees with Busch (2010), who found that learners need 5-10 years to learn a second language. Fewer participants believed that the earlier English is introduced into the school system, the greater the success in learning the L2. Students were aware of the local educational context where currently English is taught for 45 minutes every day, and most students cannot achieve competence in the L2. Lightbown and Spada (2013) found that the "... 'drip-feed' instruction leads to frustration as learners feel that they have been studying for years without making much progress." (p. 205). Participants, without any teaching experience, reported that they were uncertain as to whether classrooms were good places to learn about language, but not to use the language. This finding might be relevant to the local context as Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi (2012) stressed that although English language education had been implemented in the Omani schools since the 1970s' various inadequacies were still present, and students' communicative competence was not reinforced.

On the other hand, error correction beliefs seemed stable. This finding agrees with Davis (2003) as he also concluded that students' views were stronger toward the source of errors (L1 interference) and immediate correction. Although the participants rejected the Behaviourist view in language learning (post-course $M=2.90$), their initial beliefs about immediate correction since errors were bad habits remained stable. One of the basic premises of the Behaviourist perspective is the formation of good language habits and simultaneously the immediate correction of mistakes, as bad habits that learners transfer from their L1.

Teacher-trainees with some teaching experience reported dramatic changes in their classroom practices beliefs; however, their disagreement on immediate correction remained stable. The results agreed with Tajeddin and Alemi's (2019) study, which found that in-service teachers possessed different beliefs than pre-service teachers, due to their teaching experience. Özmen (2012) also found that practicum was the most influential component in teacher-trainees' change of beliefs. Since the two teacher-trainees in this study had some teaching experience, they realised that immediate error correction might deter students from communicating.

Conclusion

The article researched sixteen Omani B. Ed. in ELT teacher-trainees' changing beliefs on language learning after an online SLA course. Although Omani students' attitudes toward online delivery of courses in higher

education have not been positive, as their attitudes toward the traditional on-site instruction are strong, during the pandemic all higher education courses were delivered online. Most teacher-trainees' beliefs were altered after the 16-week long online SLA course, whereas some beliefs remained unchanged. The beliefs that changed were on language learning perspectives, language policy, and classroom practices, whereas beliefs concerning error correction remained unchanged. The students with some teaching experience reported dramatic changes in their beliefs regarding classroom practices. The findings from this study are comparable to previous studies of teacher-trainees' attitudes after onsite SLA classes. Nevertheless, the present study is subject to two limitations: the number of participants, which made it possible to draw only tentative conclusions, and the fact that the study refers to the local Omani context, which might not be applicable to other contexts. Consequently, this study shows initial evidence that semester-long online SLA courses can affect teacher-trainees' beliefs.

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