

The Effect of Teachers' Beliefs on Second Language Writing Practice: Case Studies in a Saudi University

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to fill in a gap found in the literature regarding the Saudi higher education context in terms of the second language (L2) teachers' perception on second language writing (SLW), and their practice in their classrooms. A case study was employed to explore the beliefs and practices of four female EFL teachers in association to second language writing practices. First semi-structured interviews were conducted whereby the beliefs of the teachers' writing practice. A series of questions related to the teachers writing classes specifically and teaching writing as a whole in the centre. This study has focuses on the teachers' own personal beliefs on how teaching SLW should take place by looking back at their background, educational vision, and the methods/approaches used/thought in the classroom. The study explores the teachers' practice of SLW in the classroom and compared them to their teachers' beliefs of SLW.

Keywords: Second language writing, Teachers' beliefs, Teaching practice

INTRODUCTION

Second language teachers have been a focus of discussion, specifically second language teachers' beliefs, which Borg (2003) defined as 'teachers' cognition' that is a collection of their perspectives, knowledge, and beliefs about teaching and learning. Teacher's beliefs in terms of how they learned a second language, their learning experience, and indeed their teaching experience (Lortie, 1975) shapes the way they perceive how to teach and how learners learn (Borg, 2001). This is how beliefs can be defined, but it also can be views as the teacher's personal view of the world, ideas and personal values and/or conception on how teaching and learning should be conducted (Thompson, 1992 & Williams and Burden, 1997). However, teachers' beliefs can also include educational context, personal characteristics, and their teaching practice (Richards and Lockhart, 1996). For the purposes of this paper, teachers' beliefs are defined as the teacher's understanding on how teaching and learning should take place in the classroom based on their reasoning on how they came up with that perception, meaning their own evidence of truth. Each teacher therefore, will hold her/his own 'truth' on how learning and teaching should take place, and a reasoning of their own originality.

This study is significant in determining the role of teachers, their attitudes and beliefs regarding writing competencies among various Saudi EFL learners. Since students' learning and development while acquiring a second language is solely dependent on teachers, the present study holds critical importance in demonstrating the practices, methods and approaches of language teachers in teaching EFL learners. In addition to this, special focus will be provided to teacher's ability to assess student's capacity of writing, while implementing useful strategies in

the process of ESL learning. Various EFL teachers can benefit from the study as it provides quality data regarding teachers' perception and attitudes towards writing skills of EFL learners. Furthermore, results of the given study can be important in understanding the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices. Lastly, data provided in the given study can assist future researchers in continuing the idea through other important perspectives regarding the given framework.

Studies in SLW Teaching and Teachers' Beliefs

Research enquiry in the area of teachers' beliefs in SLW investigated different topics, one of such study was conducted by Min (2013) who explored the relationship between teacher's belief and practice concerning written feedback through a case study. Data was analysed through content analysis of her journal and log by critically examining them. The changes in her teaching beliefs were traced through a learning log of reflection journal entries. By analysing the collected information and explicit articulation of her beliefs, findings indicated that her practices were consistent with her beliefs. The study recommended that constant reflection through writing should be a component course in EFL and ESL teaching degree programs. This study proves the importance of reflection through journals. Another case study was conducted by Teng (2016) wherein Chinese teachers' beliefs were monitored after they attended a professional development project (PDP) for teaching SLW. Results indicated that the PDP provided the teachers with new perspectives on teaching writing through various teaching approaches related to SLW. Another case study was carried out by Matsuda, Saenkhum and Accardi (2013) who reported a case study whereby writing teachers' perceptions about the needs and presence of second language writers were investigated through a perception survey on teachers who teach mainstream and L2 composition course. Both sets of teachers were positive about working with students, however there were issues such as time constraints, lack of materials, and professional preparation which limited their ability to meet students' writing needs. The study concluded with the suggestion to better comprehend the needs of teachers to therefore accommodate their students' needs.

Another study was conducted by Yigitoglu and Belcher (2014), who attempted to draw meaning between teachers' beliefs and practice of teaching SLW and their first and second language experience. The study lasted for 15 weeks wherein teachers were observed and interviewed after the observation by using a stimulated recall. Results indicated that the decision-making in teaching SLW were related to the teachers' beliefs related to the writing in L1 and L2 along with their learning experiences. Writing strategies play a significant role in moulding teacher's beliefs, as demonstrated in the study of Bidabadian and Tabatabaei (2015) who explored teachers' beliefs about writing strategies among EFL teachers in an English institute in Iran. The study further investigated the relationship between teachers' degree of qualification and their attitude towards writing strategies. Findings revealed that teachers held a positive belief towards most of the strategies mentioned in the research questionnaire. However, teachers failed in bringing these theories of writing strategies into practice. Besides, teachers tended to give great importance to the social aspect of writing strategies and ignore other cognitive and meta-cognitive writing strategies which were considered sufficient and vital in simplifying the task of writing. Finally, no relationship between teachers' degree of qualification and their beliefs towards writing strategies was found. Through findings, the researcher further claimed that teachers may have acquired their beliefs about writing strategies in the early stage of their education.

Another important study was conducted by Farrell and Bennis (2013) who examined the beliefs about teaching writing from the point of view of one ESL novice teacher and one ESL experienced teacher teaching in a Canadian school. It also investigated how their practices align with their beliefs in the classroom. Data was collected through background survey, classroom observation, teaching materials used in the observed classes, and interviews. The researchers mentioned that the participants were not aware of their beliefs and this was the first time they were asked to talk about their belief about teaching writing. Findings indicated that, in practice, the experienced teacher was more consisted with his beliefs than the novice teacher. However, there were occasions when the experienced teacher practices were not reflecting what he mentioned in interviews about his teaching beliefs. This was due to classroom needs as there were situations that required adjustments and changes of plan by the teacher. The study drew attention to the importance of making teachers aware of their beliefs to compare them to their teaching practices. It also brings about the value of teachers' reflections. Teachers' reflections upon their actions in the classroom would help them adjust and change their teaching practices according to their students' needs in any learning area of knowledge. Another study conducted by Yang and Gao (2013) investigated the connection between beliefs about writing and practices among four EFL experienced teachers. Findings highlighted that teachers' beliefs and experience are the heart of teaching and learning. It guides and shapes teachers practices in the classroom and intervene in their choices of pedagogical strategies. The study also suggested that teachers should be given the opportunity to bring their experience and beliefs into professional development activities and curriculum design. Teachers are the active participants who could put theory into practice, thus, it is important to give them the chance to have their own say on curriculum design and professional development activities. They know how classrooms operate and the realities of the learning environment. Accordingly, they can make their judgment of what appropriate strategies could be implemented in the classroom. The study recommended the use of ongoing critical reflection as a way of assisting teachers to understand their beliefs and apply them in the classroom.

A recent study conducted in Ethiopia by Guadu and Boersma (2018) reported on EFL teachers' beliefs and practices in SLW formative assessment in Debre Makos University, approached it from a quantitative point wherein data was collected through closed-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and students' marked paragraphs and essay papers. Their results revealed that teachers held positive beliefs towards the need of formative assessment, and their practices demonstrated that they practice this at a medium level. However, this study also used semi open-ended interviews whereby its results revealed that teachers' beliefs and their teaching practice in the classroom were not compatible. Teachers were found to appreciate formative assessment and held a positive belief on its importance and usefulness. However, their classrooms practices were not a reflection of their beliefs. There was a mismatch between their beliefs and what they implemented in the classroom. The study found that while teachers knew what is formative assessment and their role in it, they never implement it as intended. They used to assess their students through continuous tests which did not offer that much of feedback for teachers to find remedies to improve students' writing skills.

Another study by Khanalizadeh and Allami (2012) investigated teachers' beliefs about teaching writing in a private language institution. The researchers explored the relationship between teachers' socio-demographical factors such as their gender, experience, and qualification and their beliefs towards writing. The data was collected using a questionnaire of 15 sentences and

open-ended questions about the nature of writing. The Data was analysed in respect of the theoretical orientation of writing instructions held by teachers. The three-major theoretical orientation to writing are: writing as a formal, cognitive, and social activity. The results indicated that teachers' belief that writing is a form- based activity. They focused on language correction and sentences construction. The study found no relationship between teachers' socio-demographical factors such as their gender, experience, and qualification and their beliefs towards writing.

METHODOLOGY

A case study was employed to explore the beliefs and practices of four female EFL teachers in association to second language writing practices and enable the researchers to understand the meaning of a phenomena within a specific context (Yin, 2003). This case study was investigating if teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning writing actually matched their practices a specific context that is an EFL centre in the Saudi context. It was phenomena that we could not control or manipulate and this according to (Yin, 2003; Ellinger, Watkins, & Marsick, 2005) makes the use of the case study an appropriate approach for this study design. It attempts:

1. To fill in the gap in the literature on teachers' beliefs on SLW in higher education in Saudi Arabia.
2. To gain a deeper and rich understanding on teachers' beliefs on how SLW should take place.
3. To compare the teachers' beliefs to their practice.
4. To highlight the success of their beliefs and failures in the classroom.

For data collection, we used semi-structured interviews and classroom observation. First semi-structured interviews were conducted whereby the beliefs of the teachers' writing practice. A series of questions related to the teachers writing classes specifically and teaching writing as a whole in the centre (see Appendix1). Interviews were conducted once with each participant and lasted between 35-40 minutes in total. The second set of data were classroom observations conducted in the teachers' classrooms. One classroom observation was conducted with each teacher and lasted around 30-40 minutes only. This was to gather data information on how writing was taught and whether or not it matched their beliefs.

THE CONTEXT

The study is conducted in an English centre in a Saudi university. The centre runs an intensive English program called the preparatory year program (PYP), which is in line with Common European Framework of References (CEFR). Teachers were recruited through e-mail invitation and face-to-face invitation for participation. Four teachers in total were interviewed, and an observation of their SLW class was conducted upon their consent. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identities: Sara, Fatin, Lama, and Sunny. Teachers in this study are of two categories: three teachers hold MA in TESOL and one teacher hold BA in English language without a teaching diploma meaning that she is qualified in language as a science but not in pedagogical practices and knowledge (see Table 1). Male and female campuses are segregated, so therefore, we only able to recruit from our campus.

The text book is not locally designed but by a native speaker publisher. It includes 14 units. Teachers are not involved in policy planning the curriculum or setting teaching instruction instead, all teaching practices, assessment, and instruction are prescribed to teachers by the

Academic Unit. Thus, teachers have limited power over the teaching material and must follow a strict pacing guide.

DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data was analysed by coding the material. The first set of data was read and coded according to themes that reoccurred. The second data of the observation notes was also coded into themes. This was done simultaneously by both researchers to ensure both its validity and reliability. The sets of data were exchanged, and then discussed by both researchers who decided on the main themes. Specific notes were made when the teacher described her beliefs on teaching writing and was then compared to her classroom practice. By doing so we were able to draw a comparison between what the teacher believed and what they did in their classrooms. We drew on the rest of the data conclusions on recommendations on how writing may be improved by finding common themes that occurred with our four teachers.

Table 1: Profiles of EFL teachers

Pseudo Names	Qualifications	Years of Experience	Age
Sara	BA in English Literature	6	Mid thirties
Fatin	MA in TESOL	16	Late thirties
Lama	MA in TESOL	6	Mid thirties
Sunny	MA in TESOL	12	Late Thirties

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teaching Beliefs and Practice

Sara believes that writing is an important skill. She believes it takes great encouragement on her side to motivate her students to write, because they find it a difficult skill to learn. She describes her students as having “zero confidence in writing” and that they “fear writing”. She believes that writing should begin with simple sentences, a building block approach to teaching writing is most efficient in her view. She provides her students with pictures and verbs to make sentences. She also says that she believes that free writing is a useful approach. She says group work is a success when getting students to write, and we see this during her teaching practice. Sara uses the word “fun” many times to describe how she believes writing should be taught while at the same time teaching the necessary elements needed to write correctly. Her teaching practice matches her beliefs. She focuses on form identifying grammatical elements of sentences structure. She uses group-work to assist students to write together.

Sara believes that writing is a neglected skill in her workplace. Time is not allocated for successful instruction. Also, students are not in their designated levels making it hard for her as a teacher to meet her students’ needs. She identifies that her language centre focuses on writing sentences and paragraphs with great emphasise on form.

Sara feels guilty because she does not meet her students’ needs. She is unable to do so, because she feels an immense pressure to keep up with the pacing of her curriculum. She feels “disappointed” and it gets her down. A notable negative reflection upon herself as a teacher not being able to meet her students’ needs. She is in conflict with that and how she is being instructed to do by her superiors and her own beliefs on how she sees herself as a teacher. She

attends workshops and discusses her ideas with colleagues so that she can adjust and modify her teacher accordingly.

Fatin believes that writing should be carefully planned. It should be outlined its purpose and students should be made aware of it. This did not match her practice as she merely wrote on the board "Students learn to write by writing" but did not elaborate beyond that. Fatin's teaching beliefs match her practice as she believes in the process way of teaching writing. She follows this way of teaching in her classroom. During Fatin's interview she stresses the importance of identifying how students learn meaning their different learning styles. However, this is not demonstrated in her classroom during observation. Furthermore, she used to the process approach to writing in her classroom but does not seem to stress on how students learn differently while in class. She pairs her students but again it does not appear that there is a strategy as to how they are paired. She focuses on form in her teaching approach which is an element that she did seem to mention during her interview.

Workplace Reflections

Fatin believes that her teaching beliefs does not match how she is instructed to teach. Lama believes that writing too is a challenging task for students. Lama believes that she is a passionate teacher and feels emotionally connected to her students. She says that she focuses much time on her relationship with her students. She focuses a lot on form when teaching writing. Although according to her observation, she focuses on form but also on guided writing, providing the students with questions allowing the students to answer in full sentences and those sentences are then formed into a paragraph. She integrates the writing with all other skills such as reading and listening. She identifies group work as an element that she uses to encourage her students to write. We see that her belief follows her teaching practice. Lama believes that her students' low proficiency levels in writing is due to poor instruction in previous levels. This is why she teaches writing from level one even though the curriculum does not outline it, yet she provides her students with opportunities to do so in preparation for the upcoming levels.

Unlike the other teachers, Lama believes that the rubric hold high standards for her students. She believes it does not assess what the students need to be assessed. She says that she assists them during examination because she believes that rubrics will bring their grades down.

Lama does not communicate her thoughts about teaching with colleagues. She recalls one teacher who used to have an interest in writing but who left the workplace. She watches videos on YouTube to enhance her teaching skills but does not attend workshops given by her language centre.

Sunny is a PhD student/teacher and specialised in writing. She has a fair knowledge on writing and teaching writing in general. She views writing as a crucial skill but highlights that reading should come first. She stresses the importance of a guided approach to writing, the importance of focus on form and the building block approach. The evident in her classroom whereby she focuses a lot on the writing mechanics, grammatical structures and so forth. Even though genre is highlighted an essential teaching approach to writing in her interview, her teaching practice does not reflect such an approach, rather she focuses on the structure and form of the writing. Sunny's profile is unique in that she focuses a lot on feedback during writing and its importance

on her students' writing progress. She believes that learning through mistakes is the way to go with students. Even though she faces resistance from students who just want to gain a high grade rather than go through the process of writing itself and learning "how to write". She asserts that using different teaching approaches depends on the students' level of interest and how motivated they are to write.

Sunny highlights the importance of giving more importance to the writing skill that needs more time and space in the English language Centre. Topics are not relevant but rather the curriculum should be designed towards equipping students with writing that feed into their major in university. The assessment again like with other teachers does not seem effective as it does not reflect the students' "real" competence. Furthermore, the fact that the topic is known to students and that they memorise defeats the purpose of assessment. The assessment is reinforced by the higher administration and so she and other teachers are unable to alter it.

Standardization and the fact that teachers have to merely to do as they are told without the need to meet the students' needs weaken the teaching and learning process. Sunny highlights that teachers "go with the flow" and are used to getting into "the institutional culture of doing things". She points out that being in one single place is not healthy for ones' professional development as teachers start to "nest".

Study implications

Exploring teachers' beliefs and comparing them to their classroom practices may contribute to the body of literature. We identified a gap that needs to be filled. There is no study that investigated teachers' beliefs and their practices in a Saudi context in Higher education. Therefore, this study may provide readers and educators with an in-depth understanding on how EFL teachers in a Saudi university construct their beliefs about SLW and put them into their classroom practice. This knowledge may provide educators and policy makers with information required in planning professional development programs for teachers. It may also assist researchers to reassess how the writing structure programs in the Higher education is planned and they may revise its instructions and components.

CONCLUSION

Teachers' participation and beliefs regarding everyday EFL teaching practice are of greater value in creating an impact over student's writing skills. Teachers' through the employed classroom methodologies interpret different meanings that are related to the students' level of expertise in the given area. Saudi EFL learners demonstrate low levels of writing competency in target language due to the significant contradiction between teachers' beliefs and practices. This has created a burden over language practitioners and majority of ELIs of Saudi Arabia to evaluate the beliefs and practices of language experts, as it creates a direct impact over students' ability to understand and demonstrate high level achievements in acquiring EFL writing skills.

Findings of the given study indicated that Saudi EFL teachers contradict in their beliefs and practices due to certain factors. Firstly, students' realization of learning writing skills is of greater importance that would help EFL experts to formulate a course based on interesting approaches and methodologies to develop a sense of interest in the learning process. Secondly, a proper time must be allocated for each class that would help teacher to analyse the students'

level of expertise related to EFL writing skills. Lastly, this study emphasizes the need of implementing necessary changes as per teachers' recommendations to improve the process of learning EFL writing skills for Saudi EFL learners.

The study is limited on the basis of the collected information. Future researchers are suggested to study the given by interviewing and observing a large sample size. Findings of this study serves an important contribution to the existing literature. Various academics, language professionals and ELI can highly benefit from the given study.

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