

Impact of Teacher Beliefs on Planning ESL Reading Lessons

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Abstract

The challenges brought about by the pandemic have reaffirmed that individuals' beliefs are integral to humans, as they help orient and interpret our social and personal experiences. Similarly, teacher beliefs towards education are shown to be an ever more important factor in shaping frontline practitioners' teaching practices. In the Chinese classroom, however, teacher beliefs and their knowledge are often downplayed because of the prevailing classroom practices influenced by the enduring Confucian Heritage Culture. Despite the substantial number of studies on the correlation between teacher beliefs and their classroom practices, there are limited studies which investigate the interplay between practitioners' beliefs and lesson planning, a crucial stage that informs and guides the actual classroom practices. This study set out to investigate Hong Kong teachers' beliefs and their interplay with instructional planning for ESL reading lessons. Adopting a multiple case study approach, four in-service teachers with varying years of experience were invited to partake in the study. Data collected from the teachers' self-designed lesson plans, teaching materials, self-reflections, and semi-structured interviews were inductively coded and analysed. The findings revealed that both teachers' epistemological and pedagogical beliefs had significant impacts on instructional planning in terms of structuring and designing lesson activities. However, these elements were subject to the influence of contextual and external factors. Results suggested that there is an urge to further develop teachers' awareness towards their own belief systems through professional development.

Keywords: Teacher Belief, Lesson Planning, Reading Instruction, Case Study, ESL

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Introduction

The study of teacher beliefs has become more prolific in recent years. Researchers have begun to focus more on the belief systems of language teachers and their relationships with classroom practices, with burgeoning studies directing their attention towards the beliefs of language teachers in English as a Second language (ESL) contexts (e.g. Turnbull, 2018). The study herein, as part of a larger study on ESL teacher beliefs and Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), reports preliminary results as to the impacts of teacher beliefs in planning reading lessons in Hong Kong (HK) ESL classrooms.

Literature Review

Nested in the field of teacher cognition, teacher beliefs have long been the subject of investigation in promoting the understanding of teacher development and decision making in classroom settings (Fang, 1996). However, given its complex nature, it has proven difficult for theorists to offer a comprehensive definition. While some argue that beliefs form a general system of “what [teachers] do in the classroom with students and materials” (Eisenhart, Shrum, Harding, & Cuthbert, 1988, p. 59), others propose that it should be segregated into various domains, including but not limited to the subject matter, pedagogy, curriculum, and teaching and learning (Muliyah & Aminatun, 2020; Rubie-Davies, Flint, & McDonald, 2012). Some researchers divide teacher beliefs into epistemological and pedagogical beliefs (Chung, 2018). Regardless of the theoretical grounding one takes, studies have shown that teacher beliefs are closely related to their classroom practices (Burns, 1992).

Within the field of ESL teaching, studies on teacher beliefs focused mainly on its relationship with English language instruction. For instance, Rahman, Singh, and Pandian (2018) explored the relationship between teachers’ espoused beliefs and their teaching practices in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) classrooms. They described the convergences and divergences between belief and practice, specifically in relation to the communicativeness of classroom activities, arguing that external factors, such as lesson time and class size, often had an impact on the actualisation of ESL teaching. Scant attention, however, has been placed on the lesson planning process that led to these instructional practices. Thus, the proposed study aims to address this gap by proposing the following two research questions: (1) What are the beliefs of HK ESL teachers about planning reading lessons? and (2) How do teacher beliefs impact the planning of secondary ESL reading lessons?

Participants

Four ESL teachers (two males and females respectively) teaching at the KS3 level (ages 12 – 15) were solicited via purposive sampling to take part in the current study. Participants had a range of different educational backgrounds and years of professional experiences. Their students were also of diverse abilities and were from different schools across the city.

Methodology

This study adopted a multiple case study approach, in which each individual teacher forms a unit of investigation. The results from each case (each individual teacher) are analysed first before compared across different cases.

In the study, participants were asked to design a reading lesson and instructional materials that they find suitable for their students. Afterwards, they were asked to write a self-reflection on the design process. These documents were then collected and analysed briefly. A stimulated recall interview was then conducted to tease out teacher beliefs that were highlighted through the planning and reflective process. At the final stage, the self-reflections and interview transcripts were coded inductively, and the final codes were aggregated through axial and selective coding (Yin, 2018).

Results

Beliefs espoused by teachers included a range of different epistemological and pedagogical beliefs. First and foremost, participants were shown to hold epistemological beliefs about lesson planning and reading instruction. They believed that lesson planning ensures the quality of instruction and helps promote student learning and engagement. However, they also believe that the process of planning should be flexible. With regard to reading instruction, participants believed that reading is an innate ability possessed by students, and hence the instructional process concerns the development of reading skills and promoting literacy.

Furthermore, pedagogical beliefs of teachers were also highlighted. Not only were teachers found to possess beliefs about the objectives of reading instruction, but also the specifics in the planning of reading lessons. In terms of the goals of reading instruction, participants believed that they hope to help students apply reading strategies and language features to understand a range of different reading texts. Through the teaching process, they believed that students' awareness towards social issues could also be developed. Given the pervasiveness of exam-oriented culture in the HK education system, participants also noted that one of the main goals of teaching reading is to prepare students for summative assessments.

In terms of the pedagogical beliefs in planning a reading lesson, six categories of beliefs were identified. Teachers believed that they factored in the use of teaching materials and students' learning when they planned a reading lesson. They would also consider the interactivity of the lesson at hand, the time that they have and may use, as well as the resources that they possess, including various technological tools. They also believed that the washback effect of assessment had a substantial impact on how they would construct individual reading lessons.

Conclusion

Preliminary results of the study have pointed to the complex and eclectic epistemological and pedagogical beliefs that teachers embody when they plan ESL lessons. Future work may focus more on the interrelationships and possible interactions between different types of beliefs within ESL teachers, and their effects on lesson planning and subsequently, classroom practices.

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