Exploring Primary ESL Teachers’ Beliefs and Practices: A Case Study

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Abstract. This study explores the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and the pedagogical practices of two English-as-a-second-language (ESL) teachers for the primary grades in the US public schools— one native English speaking teacher (NEST) and one non-native English speaking teacher (NNEST) in an elementary school in northern California. Drawing on classroom observation and interview data, the researcher describes the pedagogical practices of both teachers, and then investigates the relationship between beliefs and practices. Based on the data, the author has concluded that both teachers’ beliefs tend to be consistent with their respective teaching practices, but the NEST and the NNEST hold different beliefs with regard to the nature of second language (L2) learning, the role of learners’ first language (L1) in L2 learning, the role of ESL learners’ cultural background in L2 learning and teachers’ role in L2 teaching. This study serves to add empirical evidence to the growing body of literature on teachers’ beliefs and practices. In so doing, it also sheds light on further research that could be done on the NEST and the NNEST’s beliefs.

1. Introduction

English Language Learners (ELLs) are the fastest growing student population in the US public schools. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education [1], there were about 4.5 million students accounting for 9.3% of the student population in the school year 2013-2014, which was higher than in 2012-2013 with 4.4 million students accounting for 9.2% of the student population. There were 1,373,724 English learners constituting 22.1% of the total enrollment in California public schools in Fall 2015, which makes California as the state with most ELLs across the US [2]. Therefore, English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) teachers in the US public schools will shoulder responsibility for helping ELLs achieve the expected learning outcomes.

A similar recent study done by Farrell and Bennis [3] proves that teachers’ beliefs play a very important role in their practices. The present study intends to add empirical evidence on how primary ESL teachers’ beliefs about second language learning and teaching and how these beliefs serve to shape the nature of their pedagogical practices.

2. Methodology

The researcher employs a case study design because a qualitative case study is regarded to be both holistic and context sensitive. Hence, through the use of a case study, one can get an in-depth understanding about what a case is all about, especially when it is important that such an understanding be context-based [4]. In addition, case study research is regarded by Yin and Davis [5] as the best approach to investigate teachers’ beliefs and the interrelationship between pedagogical beliefs, classroom interactions and professional practices.

2.1 Sampling

A purposeful network sampling strategy is employed. The researcher intends to do an explanatory case study – focusing on two primary grade ESL teachers from the public elementary school in California. Based on voluntary participation principle, the researcher settles on two experienced ESL
teachers, one is a native English speaking teacher (NEST) and the other is nonnative English speaking (NNEST).

2.2 Research Questions

The guiding research question for the present study is: In what ways do primary grade ESL teachers’ beliefs about second language learning and teaching affect their pedagogical practices?

Two critical sub-questions that emerge from this guiding question are:

(1) What are primary grade ESL teachers’ beliefs about second language learning and teaching?
(2) What pedagogical strategies do primary grade ESL teachers employ in second language classroom instruction?

2.3 Data Collection

Based on the research plan, the researcher collects data from different sources with regard to each of the two participants: one background questionnaire survey, two 30-minute observations of class sessions, one 30-40-minute interview after class, lesson plans, syllabi and related teaching materials and other supporting documents. These latter items include the photocopies of the teachers’ manuals, textbooks, teaching agendas, practice readers, some of the assessment rubrics for students, and sample tests given to the ELLs during English language development classes.

2.4 Data Analysis

Creswell [6] provides a template for coding a case study using a multiple or collective case approach. For each case, codes exist for the context and description of the case; next, themes are elicited from each case and then themes across different cases, i.e., similarities and differences between these two cases, are also extracted. Therefore, the researcher adopts the coding procedures by Creswell. When conducting data analysis in this case study the researcher regards each participant and all related materials as separate units of analysis. The researcher explores the personal experience of each participant as an ESL teacher and elicits their reflections on classroom practices including teaching strategies and activities, classroom management, and teachers’ roles. The data analysis processes for this study draws from the research findings of William and Burden [7]. They find that language teachers’ beliefs can be divided into three areas: (1) about language learning, (2) about language learners, and (3) about language teachers. Therefore, the interview questions are designed to elicit an ESL teacher’s beliefs about the above three aspects. Themes concerning teachers’ beliefs about second language teaching and learning are coded and organized in the above three mentioned areas.

The interpretation of data in this study is analyzed through the description of each case and the themes emerging from each case and themes that run between the two cases. Data from classroom observations and teaching documents are examined and analyzed, thus each teacher’s pedagogical practices are identified and reported in a table, which serves as a summary of each teacher’s pedagogical practices. Each interview is transcribed verbatim and then a code book is created to check the two participating teachers’ beliefs about second language teaching and learning from three areas, i.e., beliefs about language learning, learners and teachers. Then the themes emerging from the semi-structured interview reporting their beliefs about L2 teaching and learning are elicited and then checked with their classroom practices. After reporting the pedagogical practices and beliefs of the teachers, the researcher tries to examine the connection between teachers’ beliefs and practices, and then continues to report the similarities and differences between the NEST and the NNEST.

3. Findings

The researcher will first present the pedagogical strategies and activities employed by each participating ESL teacher in their second language teaching based on classroom observation and discussions from the interviews. The next step is to explore the connections and/or disconnections between beliefs and practices for each case. After the description and interpretation of each case, the similarities and differences between the two cases, i.e. the NEST and the NNEST, will be discussed in the discussion section of the paper.
3.1 NEST’s pedagogical strategies in ESL teaching

Wanda is the Native English Speaking Teacher. During the two observed class sessions, Wanda teaches some academic vocabularies from the core textbooks, upper-case letters, lower-case letters through a game, and organizes a pair work session based on students reading a story from the practice reader in a game setting. The teaching activities she employs include direct teaching of vocabularies, i.e. demonstrating the pronunciation of a new word and explaining the meanings with body language; rhyming songs; games with role playing; pair work in reading stories; card games to teach uppercase and lowercase letters; and physically performing the meaning of a given word and singing songs.

The following table is a summary of what the researcher has observed in Wanda’s classroom instruction.

### Table 1. Teaching activities in Wanda’s class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day One</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Time (Min.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Vocabulary learning through oral explanation, performing, illustration</td>
<td>Academic vocabularies: perform, entertain, audience, enjoy, brilliant</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Teacher reads a story</td>
<td>Teacher reads the story “Trish Gets a Pet”</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Students read story book and role play</td>
<td>Ask students to read and role play</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day Two</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Time (Min.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Card game of finding partners</td>
<td>Teacher demonstrates the game: Each card with an Uppercase letter or a lower case letter</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ask questions to each other</td>
<td>I have a upper case A, what do you have? (If the other student happen to have lower case “a”, they two form a group</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Pair reading</td>
<td>Each pair read the practice reader with a story, each is supposed to read the story to each other</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Teacher assessment while students reading to each other</td>
<td>While students read to each other, teacher go to each group in turn to check for fluency and accuracy of words</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>Teacher explain the errors in students’ reading and modeling correct reading certain words</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2 NNEST’s pedagogical strategies in ESL teaching.

Sally is a NNEST from Mexico and Spanish is her first language. She teaches the 8 ELLs in the fourth grade and her teaching activities through the observed sessions are summarized in Table 2:

### Table 2. Teaching activities in Sally’s class.

4. Discussion

The analysis of data collected through classroom observation and interviews on the two cases, one NEST and the other NNEST, suggests that there are similarities and differences between the NEST teacher and the NNEST in their teaching beliefs and practices.

4.1 Similarities between the two cases

The similarity between the NEST and the NNEST in teaching ESL is that both Wanda and Sally design their pedagogical activities based on the requirements of Common Core State Standards for ELLs and their personal beliefs. So, there is a remarkable consistency in terms of the relation of teachers’ beliefs to their classroom practices. The data gathered from this study align with the results of previous studies like Woods [8] and Wang [9], which found that ESL teachers’ practices are greatly influenced by their teaching beliefs.
There are, however, differences between the NEST and the NNEST regarding their beliefs about the nature of second language learning, learners and the teacher’s role.

Table 2. Teaching activities in Sally’s class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Time (Min.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day One</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1   Passage reading</td>
<td>Students read a passage “A Lump in the Throat” on the “Language Development Practice Book” for Grade 4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2   New words learning</td>
<td>Teacher explain “lump” “throb” and “sprang”, its noun form and verb form, and then translate it into Spanish</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3   Q &amp; A Session on the passage</td>
<td>Why Henry felt a lump in his throat? Why his heart throbbed?</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4   Exercise on phonics: 3-letter blends</td>
<td>The words shred, throat, sprang, splash, script, and stream have 3-letter blends shr, thr, spr, spl, scr, &amp; str.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day Two</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1   Assessment on vocabulary</td>
<td>Teacher assess students’ vocabulary, e.g., “varied”, the teacher point to the picture with varied types of buttons and ask the student to describe picture with the word “varied”, teacher check for accuracy and fluency of students’ expressions</td>
<td>3-4 mins for each student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2   Students assigned to read level readers</td>
<td>While the teacher assesses one student at a relatively separate place in the classroom, other students are assigned to read “Horses in the Old West” on their own. The level readers are informational nonfiction passages about American history or culture and etc.</td>
<td>25 mins for self reading</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2 Differences between the two cases

4.2.1 Beliefs about language—interactional view vs. structural view

Wanda and Sally differ in their beliefs about the nature of the English language and language learning. According to Richards and Rodgers [10], there are three theoretical views of language in the literature: the structural view, functional view and interactional view. The structural view focuses on four aspects of language including phonological units (e.g., phonemes), grammatical units (e.g., clauses, phrases, sentences), grammatical operations (e.g., adding, shifting, joining, transforming elements), and lexical items (e.g., function words and structure words). The functional view (also known as the communicative view) addresses the role of language as a tool for expression of functional meanings. The interactional view sees language as a vehicle to realize interpersonal and social relations.

Wanda, the NEST, holds an interactional view of second language learning and believes that skills for communicating and interacting with people are very important for learning a second language. She also emphasizes that students need to use vocabulary to ask questions and communicate with others, and, therefore, to interact with people in general. However, Sally, the NNEST, believes that the English language should be learned through acquiring phonetics, vocabulary and skills of listening and speaking - a more structural view of language. We see that their classroom practices largely derive from their beliefs. Wanda tries various means, games and performances, to provide students opportunities to practice the vocabulary through asking questions and interact with other people. Sally focuses on students’ acquisition of vocabulary and developing core skills in reading, listening and speaking.

4.2.2 Beliefs about L1 use in L2 learning

The two ESL teachers are different mainly because one is NEST and one is NNEST, therefore, they have very different beliefs about L1 use in L2 learning. The NEST (Wanda) expresses in the interview her worries regarding her students using too much L1 in class. When asked about the influence of L1 on L2 learning, Wanda says she has no idea about this and has never thought about the question.
While the NNEST (Sally) firmly believes that L1 will help students learn L2 effectively. Concerning L1 use in L2 learning, whether or not students should use L1 in classroom, to what extent L2 can be used, whether L1 will have positive or negative transfer effects on L2, the extant literature does not show a consensus of opinion. However, according to Ellis [11], a renowned professor in Applied Linguistics, L1 use and L1 transference in L2 learning is an important issue for ESL teachers to consider and should continue to be extensively researched in second language acquisition.

4.2.3 Beliefs about learners’ cultural background and its role in learning L2

Based on interview data, the researcher finds that the NNEST (Sally) pays a great deal of attention to students’ social background and think that ESL teachers should be attentive to students’ background in order to help them learn L2. This may be demanding for many teachers, but as a NNEST, Sally shares the same cultural backgrounds with many of the ELLs in her class and she has met similar difficulties in learning a second language. This might help the teacher understand the students better and thus provide the basis for effective scaffolding in support of powerful student learning. However, the interview and observation data seems to suggest that the NEST (Wanda) largely ignores this important information about her students. Due to the diversity of the student population in K-12 American classrooms, many researchers and educators have already brought this question to the forefront—that is, how to adopt culturally responsive teaching in classes with diversified cultural populations [12]. It appears that this should be another question of importance for ESL teachers.

4.2.4 Beliefs about teachers’ roles in L2 learning

The findings of this study seem to indicate that these two teachers’ social background and personal experiences, especially their former experiences of L2 learning (or lack thereof), affected their beliefs about the teacher’s roles in teaching L2 to students. The NEST (Wanda) seems to regard her role as a helper of students’ learning and she believes that the teacher should be constantly encouraging the students to learn more. However, the NNEST (Sally) appears to believe that she needs to “interpret” and “transmit” language knowledge to the students. Due to the limitations inherent in the sampling procedures and sample size, these results may not be generalizable to larger populations of NESTs and NNESTs. Nonetheless, it may shed light on critical issues that apply to the conduct of future studies on the differences between NESTs and NNESTs in their teaching beliefs.

Researchers in language education, such as Matsuda and Matsuda [13], Moussu and Llurda [14]; Phillipson [15], have reported significant differences among NESTs and NNESTs in language teachers’ self-perceptions and teaching behaviors. The present study suggests that the NESTs and NNESTs are dramatically different in their beliefs about second language teaching and learning, and that this guides their teaching practices in the classroom. Whether or not these differences in pedagogical strategies and activities are derived from their beliefs inherent from their different status as a native English speaker or a nonnative English speaker is a topic that should be explored. In addition, it would be interesting to pursue the study of additional participants with varying lengths of service to determine what effects, if any, this has on their beliefs and pedagogical practices.

5. Conclusion

In this exploratory case study, the researcher investigates ESL teachers’ beliefs and practices. One of the two participants is a NEST and the other is a NNEST. The major findings indicate that ESL teachers’ practices appear to be consistent with their beliefs because both teachers have adopted pedagogical strategies that grow out of their teaching beliefs and these beliefs may be related to their own learning and life experiences. Nonetheless there exists significant differences between the NEST and the NNEST in their beliefs about 1) the nature of language learning; 2) L1 use in L2 learning; 3) learners’ cultural background and its roles in learning a second language; and 4) teachers’ roles in L2 acquisition. These differences may possibly be due to their status of being a native or a nonnative English speaker, which has been emerging as a concern and research topic in the second language acquisition and language education fields.
In light of the millions of ELLs who are studying English as a second language in American public schools, the present study has the following potential benefits: first, it can serve to explain primary grade ESL teachers’ beliefs about L2 learning and teaching; second, it will explore how ESL teachers’ beliefs affect their instructional practices; finally, it has practical instructional and policy implications for in-service teachers, teacher educators, program administrators and pre-service teachers in teacher preparation programs.

However, due to the limitation of the small sample size done in this study, these differences may be the product of individual personality or life circumstances instead of native English speaker versus non-native speaker status. In sum, then, this pilot study may shed light on areas that could apply to the conduct of future studies examining different teaching beliefs held by NESTs and NNESTs.

6. **Acknowledgment**

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7. **References**

[1]. Information on https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=96