Role of EFL teachers' beliefs in speaking practice: The case of a Mexican university

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What is the aim of this article???

This study firstly measures and describes interactional features of three EFL teachers and learners during speaking practice in this Latin American context and then explores the teachers' beliefs about speaking practice in interviews.

Introduction

In the last few decades, teachers' reliance on their beliefs as cognitive constructs to make sense of their everyday practices and to make decisions in specific teaching situations has been extensively documented.

In the field of Second Language Acquisition, the construct of 'belief' has been conceptualized in several ways.

We can define beliefs as an array of propositions that are called on by a teacher to justify or explain their teaching behavior and decisions, recognizing that these propositions may be grounded not only in experience, knowledge and emotive responses but also in locally situated needs.

The relationship between beliefs and practices may be marked by tension where teachers' beliefs contradict their knowledge.

Research questions

1. What is the nature of classroom interaction in the three EFL classes in relation to teacher questions (display or referential), the fluency and complexity of learner responses, and amount of teacher and learner talk across different speaking activities?

2. What beliefs do these teachers express about speaking practice in interview?

3. What relationship does there appear to be between these teachers' stated beliefs and their teaching strategies during speaking practice?

RQ1:Teacher questions and learner responses

Table 2 reveals that the most frequent elicitation technique during speaking practice in the three classes was teachers' use of display questions (ranging from 52.0% to 69.6% of all the questions). In stark contrast, teachers' referential questions ranged from 20.3% to 27.9% of the questions.

Table 2 Types of questions during speaking practice in the three classes

	A2		B2		C1	
	María	**Learners**	**Tanya**	**Learners**	**Aranza**	**Learners**
Display Questions	129 (69.4%)	0 (0.0%)	93 (52.0%)	0 (0.0%)	48 (69.6%)	0 (0.0%)
Referential Questions	46 (24.7%)	11 (5.9%)	50 (27.9%)	36 (20.1%)	14 (20.3%)	7 (10.1%)
Total	186 (100%)		179 (100%)		69 (100%)	

RQ1:Teacher questions and learner responses

Table 3 shows that the teachers' display questions during speaking practice motivated lower fluency and complexity levels than the referential questions. Thus, Tables 2 and 3 suggest that the use of display questions during speaking practice in the three classes limited learners' opportunities for oral production and complexity in their spoken utterances.

	María (A2)		Tanya (B2)		Aranza (C1)	
	Display	Referential	Display	Referential	Display	Referential
Fluency (syllables per minute)	10.5	22.2	14.3	29.5	3.7	19.2
Complexity (dependent clauses per total number of clauses)	0.06	0.2	0	0.2	0.1	0.2

RQ1: Amount of teacher and learner talk

The quantitative analysis of the interactional data suggests that the three teachers considerably dominated the classroom discourse during speaking practice in terms of questions and amount of talk. Learner talk, in contrast, appeared to be shaped by the kind of questions asked, display or referential.

Specifically, display questions motivated lower fluency and complexity in the learners' responses than referential questions. Moreover, the amount of learner talk tended to vary depending on the focus of the speaking activities, with less talk taking place in the accuracy-focused than in the meaning-focused speaking practice.

RQ2&3: Beliefs about communicative principles and limitations to speaking practice

The three teachers point to the importance of oral communication and speaking practice in their classrooms.

They suggest that speaking practice provides opportunities for learners to develop communicative competence as well as knowledge of language forms and the ability to "become language teachers" and teach the language.

Evidence that the teachers' claims are not necessarily reflected in their classroom practice can be found in the interactional data, which suggested that 1) the opportunities for students to speak were limited, 2) the speaking activities served different pedagogic purposes (meaning or accuracy practice), and 3) the features initiated by the teachers were not consistently centered on the communicative aspects of speaking practice.

RQ2&3: Beliefs about communicative principles and limitations to speaking practice

Maria and Tanya's statements suggest that their conflicting beliefs about the importance of practicing speaking and about practical matters (Maria points to time constraints and Tanya mentions class size) may have encouraged them to rely on questions as a way to promote speaking practice despite the constraints.

In fact, the use of questions about grammar or vocabulary, the answers to which are already known by the teachers, may limit the students' opportunities to construct elaborate and creative utterances.

What this suggests is that, although teachers may initiate question-and-answer routines during speaking practice that follow their stated pedagogic principles concerning a communicative approach, other more pressing constraints and beliefs may compel them not to fully address these principles by, for example, using display rather than referential questions during speaking practice.

RQ2&3: Prioritizing of grammar teaching

The three teachers' responses suggested that they had to carefully balance the practicing of the four language skills and the teaching of grammar and vocabulary, and that they did not always devote equal time to each.

We can conclude that the teachers' belief in the importance of grammar alongside their belief in the importance of speaking practice may have motivated them to carry out speaking practice focused on accuracy.

Discussion

1. The analysis of the teachers' questions indicated that display questions dominated the speaking practice. It was found that these questions motivated low levels of fluency and complexity. Display questions seem to be a strategy used by these three teachers in order to try to reconcile these potentially competing beliefs.

2. The perceptual data suggested that the teachers' beliefs in the relative importance of grammar and vocabulary may have compelled them to design speaking activities that focused on accuracy, a claim that was corroborated by the interactional data.

3. Teachers' dominance of the classroom interactions, as evidenced in the interactional data, may be explained in part by a similar interplay of teacher beliefs, as they sought to conduct "communicative" activities in a highly controlled, teacher-led and thus time-efficient way, given what they saw as the constraints on their practice and their continuing beliefs in more traditional methods.

Conclusion

The study found that speaking practice and the opportunities for language learning in this Latin American context were shaped by the interplay between various beliefs held by the teachers, not only concerning the need to implement communicative principles, but also the importance of traditional grammar teaching and a range of practical constraints, including class size and lack of time.

The attempt to reconcile their communicative principles with their beliefs about practical constraints appeared to influence the teachers' decision-making during speaking practice.

We can suggest that Mexican education programmed should include procedures which regularly help teachers make connections between communicative approaches, real-life contextual factors, and their own beliefs.