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The effect of teachers' attitude about communicative language teaching on their practice: Do they practice what they preach?

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Abstract

Besides perceptions, beliefs and metacognitive knowledge, teachers' attitude has been recognized as a significant factor in the learning process and ultimate success in a classroom (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000). However, what teachers express as their attitude cannot guarantee whether they practice what they think or preach. The present study tries to find the discrepancies between what teachers believe about the tenets of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and what they think they do in the classroom regarding those principles on the one hand and what they actually do on the other. One hundred teachers in different branches of a famous language school in Tehran completed a questionnaire about their attitudes on different CLT principles and how often they thought they practiced those principles. However, observation of some of their classes did not show a rosy picture as far as practicing those principles was concerned; i. e. some discrepancies were observed. In the post-observation interview with some of teachers, they put forward their reasons for these discrepancies. © 2010 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

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1. Introduction

Due to the complexity of teaching and learning a foreign language which has been aptly expressed by the chaos theory (Larsen-Freeman, 1997), we are dealing with a labyrinth which has left L2 researchers confused. While a considerable amount of research has been conducted in the language acquisition area, the factor of belief has been a neglected area and if learners' belief has aroused some interest; teacher's belief has not been so lucky in arousing researchers' interest and investigation. However, logically and evidentially one can claim that ignoring such a factor will leave us in educational ignorance (Valderrama, R., & Cruz, A. 2009).

Although L2 teachers' role has undergone a drastic change over the last few decades from an omniscient figure in teacher-fronted classes run in Grammar-Translation approach to a counselor, or negotiator in Communicative Language Teaching; this cannot mean that teachers should relinquish their role altogether. They and what they believe are still important in whatever happening in the classrooms. EFL teachers have to make decisions every day about what they should teach and why, when, how and to whom it should be taught. They make decisions that affect the learning of students and their future learning and academic progress. They may be influenced in all of these important decisions by their knowledge and understanding, qualifications and experience (Richards and Rodgers,

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2001) purposes, values, attitudes, and beliefs. The better informed they are, the more likely they are to make sound decisions that they can defend (Al-Mekhlafi & Ramani, 2009). Teachers' attitude is a determining factor in the success and failure of implementing various theoretical as well as practical L2 teaching and learning issues. The literature on curriculum innovation and implementation, for example, suggests that one of the causes of the discrepancy between teachers' claims and practices may be teacher attitudes (Karavas-Doukas, 1996).

The main area of concern in this paper is to find out whether CLT approach which is supported and propagated by the principals in prestigious language schools in Iran has been able to have the support of the teachers on its side or not and what are the possible causes for the discrepancies observe (Cavus, N., Uzunboylu, H., & İbrahim, D. 2008).

2. Review of Literature

Several roles are perceived for teachers in CLT. Breen and Candlin (1980:99) describe it in the following terms: the first role is to facilitate the communication process between all participants in the classroom, and between these participants and the various activities and the text which is done mainly through the negotiation of different sorts (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000). The second role is to act as an independent participant within the learning-teaching group.

The latter role is closely related to the objectives of the first role and arises from it. These roles imply a set of secondary role for the teacher; first as an organizer of resource and as a resource itself, second, as a guide within the classroom procedure activities. This notion runs contrary to the concept of a teacher as a mere consumer, it rather depicts someone who has free hand to exert some necessary adaptation for the sake of communication (Nunan, 1988; Widdowson, 2003). A third role of the teachers can be that of researcher and learner with much to contribute in terms of appropriate knowledge and abilities, actual and observed experience of the nature of learning and organizational capacities. In this latter view the clear border between the teacher and researcher gets blurred and according to Widdowson (1990: 33) it is done for a good cause. We have to admit the point that none of these roles will be taken by the teachers if they do not believe in them.

However, like many other evident but controversial concepts in the field the concept of belief is far from clear or agreed upon unanimously. According to Wenden (1999) metacognitive knowledge makes up a system of related ideas, some accepted without question and other validated by their experience. She views beliefs as separate from metacognitive knowledge, because beliefs are value-related and tend to be held more tenaciously. So while metacognitive knowledge is amenable to modification in the case of being falsified, the case is not that easy in modification of belief. It can partly explain why teachers react to anything which contradicts with their held belief.

Apart from being seen as a component of metacognitive knowledge, other definitions of beliefs--depending on one's theoretical perspective--have been identified by other experts: For Hosenfeld (1978), belief is mini theories, and in this regard is amenable to modification more than the case expressed by Wenden, For Clark (1988), it is implicit theories and so less visible or traceable to the holder of that belief.

For Omaggio (1978), belief is the insight we have towards something and for Victori & Lockhart (1995) students' belief is general assumption that they hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning, and about the nature of language learning and teaching. Beliefs have also been said to act as very strong filters of reality (Arnold, 1999).

Richards (1996), considers the following factors as the source of teachers' belief: (a) their own experience, (b) personality factor, (c) their experience of what works best, (d) established practice, (e) principles derived from approaches or methods, and (f) insight based on research-based principle (p. 30-31). Borg (1998) believes that teachers' pedagogic system is shaped by their educational and professional experience in their life. Epstein (1990) states that beliefs (about learning a language, *and most probably teaching a language as well*, italics added) are

intertwined with factors such as self-concept and identity, self-efficacy, personality, and other individual differences.

3. Methodology

The research questions in this study are:

1. What is EFL teachers' belief about different CLT principles?
2. How do EFL teachers practice CLT principles in the context in which they teach?

The subjects for this study were 100 EFL teachers who taught part-time as well as full time in different branches of one of the well known language schools in Tehran. They were selected randomly from among 600 teachers in 12 branches of this language school. Out of this, 38 were male and 72 female which is roughly proportionate with the total percent of male/female teachers (30% and 70% respectively). Forty percent held BA and 20% held MA in English. The rest studied other fields and had learned English non-academically in different language school like the one this study was carried out. The teaching experience varied from two to 25 years. The age range was from 22 to 50.

3.1. Procedure

The subjects completed a questionnaire (extracted from Richards and Rodgers, 2001) comprising 20 statements to which they responded on a 6-point scale of agreement.

4. Results and discussion

The following table shows the result of teachers' attitude in Licker scale and correlation with how often they thought they adhered to those principles.

Table 1. Teachers' attitudes

CLT principles	Percent total agree	Correlation with perceived implementation
Emphasis on communication not mastery of language form	74.7%	0.317
Class should not strictly be dependent on text book	93%	0.69
Grammar should not be taught formally/explicitly	77%	0.70
Grammar first communicative activities next	63%	0.85
Students should interact primarily with each other rather than with the teacher	92%	0.62

As the table shows the correlation between what they believed about CLT principles and what they 'thought' they did in the class based on those principles seems to be quite high. However the class observation of 30 of the teachers showed that they violated substantial number of these principles and they acted contrary to those tenets or even to what they claimed they did.

The post observation interview with the teacher showed that they have their own reason to depart from the principles they agreed on or the claim they made about what they did. One justification was that their positive attitudes towards CLT principles should not necessarily be indicative of their following CLT procedures in their classrooms. In addition, they mentioned that because they were tired of the previous method which was Audio-lingual, they welcomed the new approach, confirming that new things are always alluring. Introducing new approaches and talking about their merits and positive effects on learners' achievement attracted their attention at

first. However, very soon they realized that implementing some of the rules were not conducive to learning in Iranian context. The other categories are in table 2.

Table 2. Other Categories

CLT principles	Percent total agree	Correlation with perceived implementation
Group work is a better way to learn a language than teacher-fronted class	92%	0.74
Error should be treated infrequently	49.4%	0.29
Language is created differently by different people through trial and error	93%	----
Teacher should assume the responsibility for responding learners language needs	90%	-0.017
Students should be helped in any way that motivates them to work with language	96%	0.751

What can we see here is murkier than before when it comes to what teachers believed, what they thought they did based on those beliefs and what they really did in the classroom. Discrepancies were rife in the observed class as if the classes were not expected to be run based on CLT principles. In fact the classes were managed in a combination of Grammar-translation and CLT approach. The post observation interview with 25 teachers showed that most of them lacked adequate professionalism and updated teaching skills as indicated as a probable reason by Gheitanchia & Hazratzad (Proceedings of the 10th METU ELT Convention). Another problem with the newly graduated teachers was that, after taking methodology courses at university, or TTC classes and becoming familiar with and develop a positive attitude towards CLT principles; however, while teaching in the real classroom context, they followed the method through which they were taught during their school years or the method they were observed teaching in during their practical classes. In other words, they have difficulty putting their theoretical knowledge into practice; or maybe do not really know how. This shows that mere being familiar with a concept cannot guarantee its successful implementation in the classroom. They did not feel the need and necessity of implementing communicative approaches as they did not believe in enabling students to communicate. The main reason mentioned was that most of the students attended the classes to be ready for university entrance exam which was completely grammar-based, so they had to cater to the immediate need. Therefore, the kind of feedback they need as the sign of their success or failure in teaching this group of students was quite different from what the authority expected.

5. Educational implications

Regarding teachers' modified yet influential role in CLT classes, it cannot be denied that their belief system has an impact on the way they run the class. One can be certain that no theory or principle or techniques, makes little difference how meticulously worded by the researcher, will be applied well or satisfactorily unless it meets some of the teachers' system of belief about the nature of learning and teaching and CLT is not an exception. Since it is at the acme of language pedagogy theoretically, to make it conquer the acme of pedagogy in practice, we need to take teachers' influential beliefs or attitudes about the different CLT components into account. To bridge the gap

between how they believe and express it verbally and what they really do in the class; knowing those beliefs seems necessary and logical because any lack of positive attitudes about certain aspects of CLT will consciously or unconsciously move the class from communicative norms favored by this dominant teaching principle to.

From practical point of view knowing teachers' belief about CLT seems beneficial for the school authorities, because any investment in CLT without having teacher's full support seems a waste of budget and energy due to fact that it is the teacher as the final figure in implementing any technique or principle who can make or mar CLT.

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