

“I doesn’t know English”: Beliefs and Practices in the Teaching of Speaking in ESL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

“What happened to the 11 years of learning English? A distinction in SPM but cannot speak in English?” Poor communication proficiency among Malaysian learners has become a national problem. Speaking proficiency in ESL is important if Malaysia wants to produce a generation of global communicators, which is in line with the country’s mission to become a fully developed nation. However, we often hear of grievances that many Malaysian graduates are not employed due to their poor communication skills in English. This study seeks to investigate challenges faced by ESL teachers in developing students’ speaking skills. The study involved 47 ESL teachers and 100 students who represented different regions in Malaysia. The respondents were chosen using purposive sampling. Meanwhile, semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data, which were then analyzed using content analysis. The results suggest that both teachers and students perceive speaking as an important language skill. However, teachers face numerous challenges in translating this belief into practice. This has led to a mismatch between what teachers and students perceive they need and the actual practice in the classroom.

Keywords: ESL, oral communication skills, mismatch between beliefs and practice

INTRODUCTION

“Why can’t our students speak fluently in English even after 11 years of schooling?” “How is teaching speaking skill taught in the English language classroom?” These are the disturbing questions that haunt ESL teaching and learning in Malaysia. There are 80,000 graduates who are jobless and this figure does not include the over 100,000 graduates who will enter the job market (New Strait Times, 2005). It is also reported

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that one of the contributing factors why school leavers and graduates are unable to secure a good job is because of their poor command in English. This is supported by a survey conducted by the Malaysian Government on Malaysian graduates, where they found that two out of the three main reasons for the 60,000 Malaysian graduates failed to be employed are related to their proficiency in ESL. First, the graduates have poor English Language proficiency and second, they have poor oral communication skills in English (Malaysia Today, 2005). Academic publications, medicine, science and technology, economics and business use English as the leading language. Without a doubt, being equipped with the competency in English is empowering especially in the world of global connectivity. In contrast, poor command of English language could weigh down a person's acquisition of knowledge and opportunity to a greater job prospect. If this situation continues, Malaysia will face problems in the competency of its Human Resources which may affect nation building and the economy growth of the country. Thus, realizing the importance of English language communication skills, the researchers carried out this study.

According to Anderson (1981), human affective characteristics influence their way of thinking, acting and feeling in different situations. Among these affective characteristics is belief. In relation to teachers' beliefs in teaching and learning, Richards and Lockhart (1996) define teachers' beliefs' as "systems founded on the goals, values and beliefs teachers hold in relation

to the content and process of teaching, and their understanding of the systems in which they work and their roles within it" (p. 30). They further summarize these beliefs derived from a number of different sources, which include the teachers' experience as language learners, their experiences of what works best, their established practice, the personality factors, educational based or research-based principles and principles that are derived from an approach or method (p. 30-31). Borg (1998) found that it is the teacher's educational and professional experiences in life that help shape his or her pedagogical system.

In relation to beliefs and practice, it is found that teachers' beliefs influence their pedagogical practice. Beliefs are what they think they should do and classroom practice is what they actually do based on what they believe. Zheng (2009) asserted that teachers' beliefs are important concepts in helping us to understand teachers' thought processes, instructional practices, change and learning to teach. What teachers believe will be expressed in realities as these concepts will influence their decision making and instructional classroom practices. Davis (2003) added that 'beliefs do affect behaviour' and 'given the significant role that belief can play in determining behaviour, beliefs relating to language learning are important' (p. 207). What teachers do to promote learning in the classroom or their pedagogical practice is a reflection of their beliefs about teaching and learning that have been accumulated through the years.

On the other hand, learners' beliefs of language learning involve their beliefs about the time needed to be fluent in that language, the relative difficulties of language, the roles of grammar, vocabulary and communication in language learning and other aspects (Huang, 2006). Block (1994) stated that the teachers may control the experiences that the learners are exposed to, but it is the learners who select what is learnt from those experiences.

Riley (1996) asserted that learners' beliefs about language learning will directly influence or determine their attitudes towards language and how it is learned, plus the learner's motivation will have direct and indirect effects of their behaviour. For example, if learners believe that having a good command in English, especially in oral communication skills, could give them better opportunities in finding a job in the future, they will concentrate on improving their oral communication skills in English. This is also because "...human motivation is to a large extent socially shaped in this contextual dependence is particularly prominent when target behaviour is the learning of a L2..." (Dornyei, 2001, p. 65).

In other words, beliefs affect the behaviour and also the teaching and learning outcomes for both the teachers and students. Intraprasert and Wang (2009) asserted that if both learners and teachers share more similarities than differences in their beliefs, the learning and teaching environment would be more successful and satisfying for both. However, beliefs, actions and outcomes do not always complement each other. Argyris

and Schon (1974) argued that one person has a set of beliefs that contain many conditions and expectations. The person who performs an action based on those set of beliefs may expect a certain kind of results and there may or may not be a relationship between beliefs and behaviour. If the outcomes of the actions are not as expected, the beliefs and behaviour will change. There may be other factors that prevent the person from putting into practice what he or she believes in. From the aspect of teaching, there must be a reason why teachers have failed to put their pedagogical beliefs into practice. Consequently, the discrepancy between teachers' beliefs and classroom instructions could leave an impact on the students' learning performance because the types of activities that the teachers choose, while the questions and feedbacks given will also influence the students' learning.

Previous studies have suggested that teachers' beliefs in teaching oral communication skills in the English language classroom are seldom put into practice. The teachers' beliefs do not always go hand in hand with their practices in the classroom. There is a gap that exists between their pedagogical beliefs and their classroom practice and this hinders them from applying what they believe in the language classroom. Wang (2000) conducted a study on English teachers at tertiary level in China to investigate to the extent to which the teachers employed the pioneering practices in CLT and the results showed positive outcomes, i.e. the teachers indicated that they have become

more communicative-oriented. However, the results also show that teachers still employ traditional classroom practice such as textbook-based teaching. In addition, the results also reveal that what determines the teachers' classroom instructions in CLT is not the training that they received but the type of students they teach. The students' low proficiency level somehow makes the teacher switch to traditional classroom practice that is more teacher-centred.

In Japan, the dilemma faced in the teaching of oral communication skills through CLT is like wearing two pair of shoes – a dichotomous curriculum of two distinct methodologies. The teachers believe in the importance of CLT, yet they are obliged to conduct teacher-fronted non-communicative activities. One of the teachers, Mr Fujimoto reported:

At the moment, I think English teachers in Japan, especially in high schools, are forced to wear two pairs of shoes. One is for the entrance exam...at the same time; we need to teach English for communication. I find it difficult. But for my wish, I think English is a means of communication. I would like to achieve it.

What causes this problem is the weightage that is placed so much on preparing students for the grammar-biased entrance examinations which rely mainly on textbooks. These textbooks contain the targeted grammatical features that

the students are required to master. This indicates that although the teachers are inspired to employ CLT into their teaching, they are restrained from doing so because they cannot ignore the demands of the examination. They have no choice but to prepare the students for the exam and this means conducting grammar-based, teacher-centred classroom instructions.

The same problem goes with students' beliefs in their English language learning. The classroom instructions in the language classroom could not always achieve the learners' beliefs and expectations and this has led to frustrations among the learners. Kumaravadivelu (1991) asserted that both teachers and learners carry with them personal perceptions towards language teaching and learning. They interpret classroom instructions and activities from their own perspectives and these perspectives may not always match. Ellis (2008, p. 24) claims that "...if beliefs influence the actions that learners perform to learn an L2, they cannot be ignored by teachers. Little learning is likely to take place if there is a mismatch between the teachers' and the students' belief systems". The mismatch between the teachers' beliefs and the learners' beliefs could lead to a big gap in second language teaching and learning, especially in oral communication skills. In a study conducted by Peacock (1999), an investigation on the beliefs about language learning on 202 EFL students and 45 EFL teachers in the Department of English at the City University of Hong Kong. The aim of the study was to determine whether there are differences of

terms of beliefs between the students and teachers regarding language learning and whether those differences will affect the students' language learning. The results found four mismatched learners' beliefs that negatively affect their proficiency. The gaps between the teachers and the students lead to reduced learners' confidence and satisfaction to the class and reluctance to participate in the communicative activities conducted. When the students' expectations were not met, many became dissatisfied and frustrated because they could not grasp the rationale behind the tasks that the teachers carried out in the classroom. In another study, Rasekh and Valizadeh (2004) investigated on the learners' beliefs about different learning activities and the degree of discrepancy between learners' preferences and instructors' awareness of those preferences in foreign language. A total of 603 EFL students and 27 instructors were involved in the study. The results showed that the students' preferences for communicative activities were higher than the instructors' beliefs. This indicates that learners find the traditional methods of language instruction as not helpful enough in developing their communicative competence as they have come to realize the importance of English not only for academic purpose but for communications as well. Unfortunately, the results also show that the instructors are not aware of their students' preferences towards communicative activities. This discrepancy could be lead to an unsatisfying learning outcomes as claimed by Richards and Lockhart (1996),

who stated that the gap between the teachers' beliefs and the learners' beliefs could lead to a mismatch between their assumption to what is useful to focus on in the lesson or resulting in students undervaluing the activities assigned by the teachers as those activities do not match their expectation in language learning.

This study seeks to investigate beliefs and practice in the teaching and learning of Oral Communication skills in the Malaysian ESL classroom. The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What do teachers believe as the most important skill in students' language learning?
2. What do students' believe as the most important skill in their own language learning?
3. Which language skill do teachers emphasize most in their teaching?

METHODOLOGY

This is a survey done through interviews. A qualitative study is especially useful when researchers need to search for meanings about a phenomenon. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) assert that qualitative research can uncover multiple realities of a social setting. This study explored an in depth manner the realities of the teaching/learning situation in various schools in Malaysia. These schools are located in different states and may have different social cultural contexts. Therefore, although such studies have been conducted in other ESL contexts, situational factors, contextual social factors, as well as

services and facilities that are unique to the Malaysian classroom may give rise to the distinctive perspective of the phenomenon.

Subjects

The subjects comprised of 47 teachers and 100 students from 15 schools in the states of Perak, Melaka, Kelantan, Johor, Kedah and Selangor. These schools comprised of elite and normal schools, boys schools, girls schools and also co-ed. Stratified random sampling was used in this study for the surveys and the semi-structured interviews on both the teachers and students as samples from different levels and backgrounds were needed to represent the real population.

Research Instruments

The semi-structured interview was carried out to elicit data on teachers' beliefs and practices in developing students' speaking skills and students' beliefs on what is important in their language learning. According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), interviews are useful in exploring participants' experiences, interpretations and meanings. The semi-structured interview allows for in-depth information gathering and free responses from the teachers.

Generally, the semi-structured interviews on the teachers were designed to reveal their background information, language competency, perception of their students' language competency, teachers' belief about ESL, teachers' attitudes to communicative language teaching, activities in the teaching of speaking skills and factors which influence or prevent teachers from

using CLT. Likewise, the student's semi-structured interview was designed to reveal the students' background information, beliefs in language learning and motivation, willingness to communicate in English, perceived competence in English and activities used in English classes. For the purpose of this paper, the researchers only selected the questions on the teachers' beliefs on ESL teaching and the factors preventing teachers from using CLT and the students' beliefs in language learning and motivation to answer the research questions.

Data Collection

Prior to data collection, permission letters were obtained from the Malaysian Ministry of Education and the various State Education Departments. These letters were then used to seek the permission from the randomly selected schools. The data were collected by a team of researchers from UPM comprising lecturers and graduate students. At the beginning of the interview, the purpose of the interview was made clear to the teachers and the consent for recording the session and jotting down short notes during the session was sought. Each interview session lasted about 15 to 30 minutes.

Data Analysis

The data in this study were concurrently analyzed as the data collection to identify key issues, recurrent events or activities. These were then categorized and became a focus for the researcher as more data were collected. These categories were defined to enable the researchers to identify the

phrases that describe the relevant items. These phrases were then compiled under the relevant categories and coded as themes. The categories and themes were then used to explain the results.

RESULTS

The results are presented according to the various sections of the questionnaires, while the discussion is organized according to the research questions.

Teachers' Beliefs as the Most Important Skill in Helping Students Learn the Language

TABLE 1

Skills	Percentage (%)
Speaking	44.45
Reading	29.63
Listening	11.11
Writing	9.26
All Skills	3.7
Grammar	1.85

44.45% of the teachers believe speaking as the most important language skill in helping the students learn the language (refer to Table 1). The main reasons given by the teachers are 'speaking is an important mean of communication', 'it is important to prepare the students for the real world' and 'speaking helps to learn the language, and thus enables students to express their feelings and share their knowledge'. This is followed by reading (29.63%) and listening (11.11%). The two least important skills are writing (9.26%) and grammar (1.85%). A total of 3.7% teachers believe that all

the skills are equally important to help the students to learn the language.

Students' beliefs as the most important skill in their own language learning

TABLE 2

Skills	Percentage (%)
Speaking	45.45
Reading	15.45
Listening	12.73
Writing	10.90
Vocabulary	8.20
Grammar	7.27

A majority of 45.45% students believe that speaking is the most important skill in order for them to learn a language. Most of them stated that it is important to be fluent in English for the future, especially when attending job interviews and furthering their studies in higher institutions both locally and abroad. Besides that, the students are aware that English is an international language and it is important for them to possess good command in English to enable them to communicate with people from different countries. Reading stands as the second most important skill (15.45%), followed by listening (12.73%), writing (10.90%), vocabulary (8.20%) and grammar (7.27%).

Teacher's teaching emphasis in the English class

TABLE 3

Skills	Percentage (%)
Writing	52.05
Reading	28.77
Speaking	15.07
Grammar	2.74
Listening	1.37

Table 1 indicates that a majority of 44.45% teachers acknowledged speaking as the most important skill in students' language learning. However, the skill that is given the most emphasis in teaching is writing, which is 52.05%. The most prominent reason given is that this is an important element in the examination. In fact, this response was gathered at 100%. Among the main reasons given are 'It is an exam oriented system', 'the system has an effect on our teaching' 'by the end of the day, I'll try my best to fulfil the exam', and 'for exam purpose, we have to write a lot'. Reading (28.77%) is the next most emphasized skill, while only 15.07% is given emphasis on speaking because it is only tested in the oral exam. Grammar and listening are at 2.74% and 1.37% each.

DISCUSSION

1. What do teachers believe as the most important skill in students' language learning?

Most teachers believe that speaking is the most important language skill in helping their students learn the language because this will help them to prepare themselves

for the real world. Besides that, teachers believe that one's proficiency in a language is judged from the way one speaks and speaking itself helps the student to learn about the language. Teachers also believe that the ability to speak or communicate will encourage students to express their feelings, knowledge and ideas, not only at school level but it could also be applied outside the classroom. This corresponds with the studies done by Shibata (2007) on 109 Japanese Teachers of English (JTE), where he found that JTEs believe that they should spend more time to develop students' communication skills instead of focusing on the teaching of grammar because they believe in giving the students the opportunity to use the language for real life purpose, which is important compared to learning drills of grammar.

2. What do students' believe as the most important skill in their own language learning?

The second research question seeks to find out students' belief as the most important skill in their own language learning. Likewise, the students also believe that speaking is the most important skill for their own language learning. They believe it is essential for them to equip themselves with the ability to communicate or to speak in English for real life purposes, for instance, to further studies overseas with English as the medium of instruction in higher institution, communicate with people from different countries, and for job purposes. In fact, the study by Rasekh

and Valizadeh (2004) on learners' beliefs about different learning activities and degree of discrepancy between learners' preferences and instructors' awareness of those preferences painted similar results. The results showed that the students' preferences for communicative activities were higher than the instructors' beliefs. This indicates that learners find the traditional methods of language instruction as not helpful enough in developing their communicative competence as they have come to realize the importance of English, not only for academic purpose but for communications as well. This is further supported by a study by Intraprasert and Wang (2009), who found that students agreed that if they could speak English fluently, they would have a lot of opportunities to use it especially in helping them to get better jobs. In addition, many students wish to practice their English rather than just for the sake of meeting the demand of the examinations they feel the need to equip themselves with good proficiency in English as it is regarded as one of the important criterion for undergraduates to seek for job after their graduation.

3. *Which language skill do teachers emphasize most in their teaching?*

Based on the results, there seems to be a discrepancy between what the teacher believe and what they practice. Teachers believe that speaking is the most important skill in their students' language learning; but despite acknowledging the importance of speaking, the emphasis in their language teaching is given mostly on writing. The

main reason seems to be due to the fact that teachers need to prepare students for the national exam. Writing is an important component in the national exam and teachers need to prepare their students to do well in the national exam. This is supported by Fauziah and Nita (2001) in a study that investigated the reasons for KBSM students' low proficiency in English. They found that the KBSM syllabus is communicative but unfortunately the exam is not. Most of the teachers were found to emphasize on the reading and writing skills because these are the skills that are mainly tested in the examination. In a similar case in Japan, Sakui (2004) reported that the dilemma faced in the teaching of oral communication skills through CLT is like wearing two pair of shoes – a dichotomous curriculum of two distinct methodologies. The teachers believe in the importance of CLT, yet they are obliged to conduct teacher-fronted non-communicative activities. This is due to the weightage that is placed so much on preparing students for the grammar-biased entrance examinations which rely mainly on textbooks. In Hong Kong, Evans (1997) investigated on the implementation of the Hong Kong's communicative English language curriculum at secondary school to the extent to which whether this pedagogical aims have actually been implemented. The results indicated that the communicative curriculum had a minimal impact in the English language classroom, as most of the teachers still favour both product-oriented and teacher-centred approach. They found that product-oriented and

teacher-centred approaches are the most effective in preparing the students for the exam and also ensuring their success in the exam. Therefore, although they believe in the importance of oral communication skills in developing students' language learning, teachers are left with limited choice but to tailor their lessons towards the demand of the examinations.

CONCLUSION

To a great extent, the success of the nation depends on its people. One of the reasons many graduates are not hired is because they are not proficient in the oral communication skills, especially in English. The results of the study suggest that teachers acknowledge the importance of speaking. In fact, most teachers reported that they believe speaking is the most important skill in students' language learning. However, due to the demand of the national examinations, they could not put their belief into practice because speaking is not an important component of the exam. Thus, there seems to be a mismatch between what the country needs and what the country offers. The country needs people who are orally competent, but the students produced seem to be those who are taught to write and to read rather than to speak. Therefore, it is high time that ESL practitioners reflect on this and take positive steps to rectify the situation. There need to be a reformation in the teachers' mindset and practice. Teacher trainers need to train teachers to think that teaching just for the sake of passing the exam is not preparing the students for real-life purposes

and the ministry of education should not put so much weightage on writing in the examination as all language skills should be emphasized equally. Besides that, the teachers should be sent, from time to time, for in-service trainings to equip themselves with the current teaching methods and materials in the teaching of speaking. It would also be insightful and beneficial for future research to investigate how teachers could still implement their teaching practice based on their beliefs in developing speaking skills among ESL learners, even under situational constraints. It is hoped that when more prominence is placed on the teaching of speaking, especially in producing natural and spontaneous utterances, and the country will produce more orally competent ESL learners and graduates, thus a more developed nation.

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