Teachers’ beliefs on strategies based instruction in EFL classes of young learners

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Abstract

Considerable time and effort has gone into the theory and classroom implication of the language learning strategies, yet many of these studies have ignored the beliefs of classroom teachers. Teachers’ theories and beliefs have strong implications for the way they practice teaching. It is especially one of the vital factors on the effectiveness of learning strategies instruction. They should believe that especially low-achieving ones can be successful if they can acquire appropriate strategies since strategies are not innate and they can be taught. Thus, this study focuses on teachers’ beliefs on language learning strategies and strategies based instructions in EFL classes.

Keywords: Language learning strategies; strategies based instruction; teachers’ beliefs.

1. Introduction

During the last few decades, researchers have begun to recognize that teachers, apart from the methods and materials they may use, are central to improving English language teaching (Freeman, 2001; Johnson, 1992a; Richards & Nunan, 1990). This recognition has led a shift from language instruction toward the needs of individual learners. In addition, language teachers have become aware that learning is a process and the role of the teacher is to facilitate that process. Thus, language learning strategies and factors influencing their usage have been the focus of recent studies (O’Malley and Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990; Cohen 1998; Chamot et al, 1999; Chamot 2005, Griffiths, 2007).

Studies on language learning strategies have suggested that teachers should encourage students so that they can experience and use language learning strategies effectively since they are central in the practice of language teaching which can especially be influenced by their beliefs and other factors (Rubin, 1975; O’Malley and Chamot 1990; Anderson, 1991; Cohen, 1998; Chamot et al, 1998; Oxford, 1990; 2002).

Teacher belief is one of the vital factors on the effectiveness of learning strategies instruction. Teachers should believe that students, especially low-achieving ones, can be successful if they can acquire appropriate strategies since strategies are not innate and they can be taught. Teachers should also “have confidence that the individual strategies are effective, and they must communicate this confidence to students” (Chamot et al. 1999, p. 35).

A great number of studies on teacher education have stated that teachers’ beliefs and attitudes are indispensable factors affecting their decision making and teaching practice (William and Burden 1997). In addition, Richards and Lockhart (1996) suggest that teachers’ knowledge and beliefs provide the underlying framework or scheme which guides the teachers’ classroom actions (p. 29). According to Freeman and Johnson (1998), "teachers are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with theoretical and pedagogical skills; they are individuals who enter teacher education programs with prior experiences, personal values, and beliefs that inform their knowledge about teaching and shape what they do in their classrooms" (p.401). Furthermore, Kagan (1992) affirms that beliefs may be "the clearest measure of a teacher's professional growth" and that studying them is "instrumental in determining the quality of interaction one finds among teachers in a given school" (p.85).

There have been numerous studies addressing the goal of understanding the range and type of learning strategies used by good language learners and the differences in learning strategy use between more and less effective learners. However, until relatively recently there have been fewer studies focusing on teachers’ beliefs on strategies based instruction in language learning and
teaching. Thus, reviewing the available research the findings of which suggest that teachers’ beliefs have the potential to provide significant and profound insights into many aspects of teacher’s professional world, we aimed to determine the teachers’ beliefs on language learning strategies and strategy based instruction.

2. Methodology

The research design of the study included both quantitative and qualitative methods of descriptive data collection. The data were collected in 2008-2009 academic during teacher training seminars the focus of which was on the factors affecting English Language Learning and Teaching.

2.1. Instrumentation

Data were gathered from a questionnaire adapted from Teacher Beliefs Inventory for Strategy Instruction prepared by Rae Lan & Kay Moon and revised by Rebecca Oxford. The original inventory consists of six sections and 61 questions the majority of which are four point scaled questions. It was reduced to three sections having a total of 25 questions.

The teachers were first asked to respond to the four scaled statements and then semi structured interviews were conducted with the volunteer teachers. All teachers were asked the same questions, but the researcher then proceeded in a free way to ask questions of clarification and to probe teachers for the meaning of their responses. Interviews were tape-recorded, later transcribed and analyzed. Quotations from the teachers’ comments about the items related to language learning strategies, and strategies based instruction were selected in order to support the quantitative data.

2.2. Participants

The participants of the study were 120 teachers (81 female and 29 male) from 86 primary schools. Their ages ranged from 26 to 38 and the number of years the teachers had been teaching ranged from 3 to 16.

2. Results

The quantitative data were analyzed through SPSS version 12.0. The means and standard deviations of the items were computed to investigate the level of the beliefs identified. As for the qualitative data, the interview responses were content analyzed using the steps suggested by Cohen et al. (2007). Categories as definition of language learning strategies, the role of language learning strategies, application of strategies based instruction for recurrent ideas were established. Then, the responses for each section of the interview were classified according to these categories (a section may consist of either a single interview question or a group of questions referring to the same item in the survey).

The analyzed data is tabulated and presented in two categories; (1) general beliefs about language learning strategies and strategies based instruction; (2) specific beliefs about strategies and strategies based instruction. The tables include the mean scores (M) and standard deviations (St. D) of the responses given to the survey. In addition, the survey results are supported with the excerpts obtained from the interviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>St. D.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 I understand what language learning strategies are.</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>.672</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Using strategies will make learning a second/foreign language more effective.</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>.553</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Knowing how to learn more efficiently is important for language learners.</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>.507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 A strategy is a tool, plan, or method used for accomplishing a task.</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>.598</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 I am concerned about whether parents will be supportive of strategy instruction.</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>.869</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 I am concerned about whether the school authorities will be supportive of strategy instruction.</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>.745</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 I can explain why strategy instruction is important.</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>.618</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 I can integrate strategy instruction into my teaching.</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>.585</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Workshops or teacher training courses on strategy instruction will be very helpful for me to actually strategy instruction.</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>.550</td>
</tr>
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</table>

As seen in the Table I, teachers share several similar beliefs about language learning strategies and strategy instruction. For example, the majority of the teachers agree that a strategy is a tool or method used for accomplishing a task and it makes learning more effective. They also believe that they should attend workshops or teacher training courses on strategy instruction providing classroom practices of strategies and strategy based instruction to implement in the classes. The area teachers’ perceptions seem to be somewhat divergent in the items 5 and 6 which seek the role of other factors such as school authorities and parents.
Table II. Specific beliefs on strategies and strategies based instruction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>St. D.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16 Strategy instruction should start as early as possible.</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>.653</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Strategies should be taught on a regular basis.</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>.651</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Students should be taught about when and how to use an appropriate strategy.</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>.670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Students should be taught why a specific strategy is useful.</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>.661</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Students should have plenty of time and opportunities for practicing strategies.</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>.697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 Teachers need to help students adapt the strategies they already know to other tasks.</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>.596</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 Teachers need to help students choose or modify a particular strategy for specific tasks.</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>.697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 Teachers should demonstrate to students how to use strategies.</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>.783</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 Teachers should encourage students to use learning strategies.</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>.533</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 Teachers should help the student become more responsible, independent, and self-regulating learners.</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>.587</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II. displays an overwhelming agreement among the teachers that language learning strategies should be taught and strategies based instruction should be implemented in language classrooms. The data obtained from interviews supported that there was an agreement on strategies based instruction as “If our students were not given any instruction on how to learn, the development of their language skills would be dubious since they had never been instructed into how to learn.” In addition, the teachers seemed to agree that strategies should be integrated into their courses. The following script is the common idea teachers were holding: “It is difficult to have a course in the curriculum the objectives of which is to teach learning strategies. Furthermore, there should also be the meaningful context student can practice the learned strategies. Thus, if the students are exposed to enough comprehensible input through strategies based instruction without any explicit study of language learning strategies they can improve appropriate ones”

3. Discussion

Teachers believe that a strategy is a tool or method used for accomplishing a task and it makes learning more effective. This accords with the common belief among the researchers that strategies make language learning easier, enjoyable and more comprehensible although there is a considerable debate about how to define them (Oxford, 1990; Cohen 1998; Chamot et al 1999).

The teachers, on the other hand, seemed to be ignoring the role of such factors as parents and school authorities which should be concerned for strategy instruction. The comments obtained through the interview made it clear that teachers do not endorse the role of other factors apart from teachers themselves. The consensus was that there was lack of teamwork among parents, schools and teachers, which seemed to be resulted from “a conservative climate intent on maintaining the status quo and a competitive climate dominated by student testing” (Cornbleth, 2001, p. 4).

In addition, the qualitative data implied that teachers were holding quite optimistic beliefs on language learning strategies and strategies based instruction. Using our inferences of what teachers indicated during interviews as a window through which to view the findings regarding teachers’ being optimistic, the following explanation seems plausible. A considerable number of teachers seemed to believe that good language learners use strategies effectively and if less successful learners could be taught appropriate strategies they could consciously plan their implementation. These findings show somewhat similarities with the substantial amount of literature focusing on the language learning strategies and the frameworks for their practical application (Naiman et al; 1978; Rubin, 1981; Anderson 1991, Chamot 2001; Griffiths and Parr, 2001). In addition, the high mean scores of the items 24 and 25 and qualitative data suggest that teachers are hopeful about overcoming the learning problems of low achieving students by strategies based instruction. Chamot et al. (1999 “if the teacher thinks successful learning is the result of ability alone, which is relatively fixed, it follows that low achieving students are powerless to change” (p. 35).

A reasonable number of teachers, on the other hand, believed that strategies should not be explicitly taught to the students which seem to be conflicting with their wishes. Teachers’ comments, however, made it quite clear that they could not make the distinction between explicit and implicit instruction of language learning strategies. Researchers have stated that students do not develop appropriate strategies if they are not trained explicitly. Cohen (2000) suggests the strategies based activities in which teachers “provide an explicit focus on only part of the time, while the rest of the time the strategies are implicitly embedded into the language tasks” (p. 16).
4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The overall analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data revealed that the majority of the teachers are generally holding positive beliefs on some aspects of the general characteristics, and aims/outcomes of the strategies and strategies based instruction. In addition, the high mean scores of almost all of the items regarding the implementation of the strategies and strategy based instruction showed that a larger group of teachers were holding very optimistic beliefs on the strategies and strategy based instruction.

The results of this study provide two major implications; the first is the clear need of the understanding teachers' perceptions and beliefs on any teaching and learning process since teachers are heavily involved in various teaching and learning processes. Finding from research on teachers' perceptions and beliefs indicate that these perceptions and beliefs have a considerable effect on both on their instructional practices and classroom behavior (Bandura, 1997; Johnson, 1992b; Hollon, Anderson & Roth, 1991).

The other is the agreement upon teacher training program since the educational theories learned in the program cannot be easily transferred into classrooms. Thus, teachers seem to attend teacher training programs providing practical knowledge on strategies and strategies based instruction. Cohen (1998) suggests that “in-service seminars provide the most extensive and efficient means for training teachers for how to conduct their own strategy training in the form of strategies based instruction” (p. 10).

Beliefs are accepted to be difficult to measure though they were measured in this study through a survey supported with semi-structured interview. Thus we suggest that further studies be conducted to infer teachers’ beliefs from the ways in which they act rather than from what they say they believe. In addition, the teaching experiences of the teachers were not within the scope of this study, hence further research is needed to examine how years of experience influence the beliefs and under what conditions beliefs are maintained and enhanced.

References


