Exploring Beliefs of Exemplary Thai EFL Teachers toward Teaching Efficacy

Saksit Saengboon

School of Language and Communication, the National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA),
118 Serithai Road, Bangkapi, Bangkok 10240, Thailand

E-mail: saksit2505@gmail.com

Abstract

The roles of non-native English speaking teachers have been extensively researched. In this small-scale study, I attempted to ascertain pedagogical beliefs and practices of two Thai EFL teachers at the university level, who have received "Best Teaching Awards" from their respective universities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teachers, each lasting 1 hour. The analysis of the transcriptions yielded several salient themes. For example, both teachers were in agreement that eclectic teaching methods and techniques were the most optimal way of teaching and learning. This is in congruence with the argument put forth by Kumaravadivelu (2006) in his postmethod pedagogy. Teaching performances that transpire in the classroom do not lend themselves readily to dichotomous thinking. While the two teachers differed in the use of either Thai or English as a medium of instruction, they concurred that the teaching of grammar cannot be ignored. Also, the two teachers stressed the need for learners to cooperate in the teaching process, which necessitates more efforts on the part of the teacher. What is equally important is the teacher must develop appropriate attitudes towards teaching. For example, teaching is an ongoing development for both the teacher and learner. It is pointless for the teacher to wait for "perfect" instructional situations.
Key words: teachers' beliefs, explicit grammar instruction, context-based teaching

1. Introduction

Research abounds that focuses on both internal and external factors influencing the rate of success in second language (L2) acquisition and learning (e.g., Dornyei, 2009; Hayes, 2009; Liu, 1999; Sanprasert, 2010; Sifakis, 2007). However, whereas a number of studies have been devoted to strategies employed by good language learners (e.g. Cohen, 1998), relatively few studies investigate the role of good language teachers.

The teacher's roles in the L2 learning process are of considerable importance. No matter what approaches are taken to better understand L2 acquisition and learning—be they behaviorism, the cognitive tradition or the critical perspective (Johnson, 2004), it is widely acknowledged that L2 teachers play key roles in helping the learner to learn. And while the notion of learner beliefs has been extensively researched (e.g., Benson and Lor, 1999; Huang, 2005), teacher beliefs are few and far between, especially those concerning Thai EFL teachers. As such, this qualitative case study was undertaken to ascertain beliefs of two Thai teachers of English, who have been recognized by their respective universities as being exemplary teachers. According to Crookes (2009), research into beliefs, values or philosophy in English teaching is gaining in importance, particularly in the area of teacher development. In addition, Lazaraton and Ishihara (2005) reiterate that "[t]he methods of self-reflection and narrative inquiry in the study of language teaching have been shown to be useful and viable tools for teacher professional development…" (p. 529). Moreover, according to Duff (2012), the underlying philosophy of case research "…can reveal important developmental patterns or perspectives that might be lost or obscured in a larger-scale study of populations or in larger sample sizes. These patterns or insights then contribute to theorizing about the phenomenon under investigation" (p. 98). Given this significance, this study will attempt to shed light on this area of L2 teaching and development.

2. Literature Review

L2 teachers do play a key role in L2 learning and development. As Borg (2003) puts it, "teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex practically-oriented, personalized, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs" (p. 81). In the past decade, studies have been extensively conducted investigating teacher beliefs and their effects on L2 learning outcomes. For example, Farrell and Patricia (2005) examined teachers' beliefs and classroom practices about grammar teaching. Some of the major findings reported were that teachers' beliefs systems are complex and do not always reflect their classroom practices and certain beliefs are directly related to their own instructional contexts.

Moreover, Pajares (1992) argues that although the construct "belief" is variously defined, its importance and impact on success and/or failure of L2 learning cannot be ignored. This is because beliefs held by teachers usually reflect strengths and weaknesses of a given teaching context. It is the teacher belief that determines teaching techniques, textbooks to be used, classroom activities, and assessment. According to Eslami and Fatahi (2008), the significance of teacher beliefs and L2 learning efficacy has been well-documented. For example, Eslami and Fatahi studied the efficacy beliefs of nonnative English speaking (NNES) Iranian EFL teachers. EFL teachers' perceptions of their teaching efficacy in terms of personal capabilities to teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and their perceived English language proficiency level were examined. The findings also revealed that the more efficacious the teachers felt, the more inclined they were to use communicative-based strategies. The study has implications for the preparation of NNES teachers and the support they need to develop their language proficiency, which in turn is related to their perceived self-efficacy.

As mentioned above, while the study of teacher beliefs have been conducted in many a context, the Thai EFL context has, to date, not been sufficiently studied. This study constitutes a step in that direction. Given the importance of teacher beliefs and teaching effectiveness, this study sought to address the following research questions:

1. *What are beliefs of the two exemplary teachers concerning English teaching in their respective universities?*
2. *To what extent do such beliefs reflect English teaching challenges in the Thai EFL context?*

3. Method
3.1. Participants

The two participants were purposively sampled because they were recognized by their universities as excellent teachers. I first contacted the first participant whose name is P because I had known the participant as a colleague. I learned about the second participant whose name is C through a website belonging to the university where she teaches, which contained an official announcement that C had been given the teaching excellence award. Both had been teaching English at the university level for more than 20 years: 23 years for P and 30years for C. The universities they taught were public universities widely known in Thailand to be premier institutions of higher learning. Both were located in Bangkok.

3.2. Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the two participants. The interview with P was conducted at her home on November 19th, 2009, whereas C was interviewed at her office on January 24th, 2009. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour. The interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed by a research assistant. The scripts were sent to both participants for member checking. Subsequently, the transcripts were read twice by the main researcher and categorized into several main themes. Each theme was then supported by direct verbatim so as to provide audit trail.

4. Findings and Discussion
4.1. Building trust

Both P and C concurred that building trust among students is the first step to success in teaching and

learning English. While the notion of trust seems straightforward, in practice building trust is no small task. For example, P said,

> *I made it clear from day 1 that English is key to career development in this globalized word. Even in my academic reading class, I emphasized the importance of English and its culture. Reading something in English, even if it contains only 1 or 2 sentences is better than doing nothing…*

While P emphasized the utility of English knowledge throughout her teaching, C approached the issue of trust building differently, by emphasizing the fact that English has to be the medium of instruction. Through the sole use of English in class, C believed it could build trust among her students. As she put it,

> *I used English in teaching English to them, even if the university did not have a policy requiring English only in class. I did it that way because they should be exposed to English as much as possible. You see…learning English in Thailand means, among other things, that English input is not sufficient. So I think I'll need to give them lots of English…so that they'll get used to it.*

It should be noted that building trust is multi-faceted, necessitating the understanding of other aspects of L2 learning, such as the four skills of English and availability of the teacher. For example, P said, "…I usually made sure that students can approach me easily. So my course syllabus contained my office number, email address and even my cell phone number. This is important because students should be made to feel that their teacher is ready to answer their questions about English."

In conclusion, for both P and C, trust needs to be built so that students will cooperate in the lessons and that will make the teaching easier. However, how to build trust (and presumably motivation) depends on both the teacher and students. That is, the teacher needs to take their teaching seriously, paying close attention to such pedagogical details as disciplining them in class, teacher availability, use of the target language as a way to encourage more input to the learners.

4.2. The Issue of Grammar Teaching

In addition to trust building, P and C strongly believed in the importance of grammar teaching in class. Grammar, which for the past two decades seems to have been secondary in importance as compared to communicative ability, has been mentioned as key to linguistic and communicative development for learners. For example, P said,

> *In teaching reading to my students, I always pointed out to them that they would need to differentiate between and among sentence elements. For example, they were taught about "headwords" and "modifiers." Doing contrastive analysis worked for me. I compared and contrasted English sentence structures with those in Thai. This is done through translation. I forced them to try to translate from English into Thai. Indeed, I came to realize that teaching academic reading to less able students, Thai teachers of English who know both Thai and English may be more appropriate than English native speakers. This is because those native teachers who do not understand Thai sentence structures will not be able to correct mistakes made by Thai students…at least when it comes to explanation.*

While P put a considerable emphasis on explicit grammar teaching, C was convinced that grammar has to be part and parcel of English proficiency development. She aptly put it that,

> *Generally speaking, if grammar were not important… although we still can get our messages across no matter what…but how could we be sure that that would not lead to communication breakdown. In other words, learners must be made aware that, on many occasions, accuracy and not just fluency is needed. One's communicative competence entails grammatical and pragmatic competence, you know. But of course how one will learn grammar may differ from learner to learner.*

As for the importance of grammar in L2 class, what P and C said suggests that grammar was pivotal but how grammar should be taught to the learners depends on such factors as the learning goals and English proficiency of the learners. Definitely, for the two participants, grammar has a place in L2 instruction.

4.3. Teacher as an inspirer

Both P and C were in agreement that being an English teacher does not restrict itself to imparting knowledge about English but, more importantly, the teacher must inspire learners. In arguing for the enabling role of teacher, P strongly believed that the teacher must convince students that paying close attention to details in language would help inspire the learners. She said,

> *What I did to inspire my students is to devote myself to the teaching. Oftentimes, I asked them to pay close attention to details of language. Teacher can hope to inspire by becoming very meticulous. For example, the sound of the letter "H" which is quite problematic for Thais needs to be made explicit to them. I even exaggerated my pronunciation of the sound, so that my students would see how important it is to be accurate in the pronunciation.*

As far as C is concerned, what she did to inspire her students was to speak only English to them. From the analysis of the data, it was apparent that C resorted to using English all the time both when teaching in class and when meeting students on campus. She said,

> *I told my students that English is similar to what you have to do on a daily basis… Two of my students had changed completely. They changed their career paths from aiming to become diplomats to being an English teacher. Well, one of the two students mentioned just now was from a province outside of Bangkok; she had no experience of listening to English spoken to her by her English teachers! She told me later that she had been impressed with the fact that I had spoken English throughout the course.*

In addition to serving as a role model herself, C also suggested that students should read as extensively as possible any print materials such as English newspapers. She said,

> *…since you're now at this level of education, you must begin to read various newspapers both in Thai and English. And in reading those papers, you must be able to read with a critical mind in order to differentiate "right" from "wrong." Doing so would help you to go back and forth between the Thai and English versions of the news. Or you may start by reading Thai news first and then English, so that you will be able to appreciate how sentence are structured. Believe me within months, those who practice reading this way will make big progress in English.*

4.4. English curriculum

Both P and C suggested that curriculum that is usually mandated by the Ministry of Education and the Department should be followed with caution. For example, P said,

> *Well…I think English curriculum needs to cater to learners' needs. You know with an emphasis on language skills development as well as grammar. Once again, you'll see that I keep referring to grammar. What makes today's learners rather weak in English is that the curriculum they're taught by overemphasizes speaking at the expense of grammar rules…*

Hand in hand with this concern is what teacher C said,

> *We teachers should have same say about English curriculum. I know that the curriculum is usually mandated by the Ministry of Education and the university. But that doesn't mean that we've to blindly follow everything in there. We teachers need to think for ourselves as well about what will or will not work in class. That is, we need to understand the nature of our students and then apply those teaching theories with caution. This includes how to implement the curriculum as well.*

As can be seen from the findings above, such external factors as curriculum must necessarily be applied with care. Teachers should be in a position to have autonomy to make the most of the language curriculum. Indeed, teacher autonomy and learner autonomy, a more widely known construct, cannot be separated from each other if we are to achieve instructional efficacy.

4.5. Learning assessment

Concerning learning outcome assessment, both P and C viewed this issue as a routine part of a teaching job. That is, assessment needs to follow the common practice as set by their respective universities e.g., mid-term exam and final exam or small quizzes. However, what should be of concern regarding this issue is that writing up exam questions is a task that needs great care. Question items must reflect what has been taught and should be not overly difficult. C said, "exam questions are tailor-made. I'll have to write exam questions following the rubrics previously fixed. And then we'll have meetings to discuss those items and

see if they are appropriate." And P said that, "question items must have multiple levels of difficulty. The exam as a whole must measure what has been taught…You see…it's more an achievement test than a proficiency test. And I think that's appropriate." According to Davison and Leung (2009), the role of the teacher in assessment is gaining currency, leading to "teacher-based assessment (TBA) [that] highlights and problematizes the interrelationship between assessment and many other areas of TESOL such as language policy, teacher development, language teaching methodology…" (p. 389). Based on the above assertion, it is obvious that assessment is now considered a vital part of SLA. Assessment must take into consideration language rights and ethical dimensions of language testing. (Shohamy, 2001)

4.6. The big picture of English Language Teaching in Thailand

When asked to comment on the holistic picture of English teaching in Thailand, both P and C were in agreement that more needs to be done. In her explanation C used a "pendulum metaphor," suggesting that teaching approaches are similar to fashion; they come and go. Before jumping on a bandwagon, the teacher should exercise critical thinking, figuring out him/herself whether such a newfangled teaching innovation rightly addresses his/her teaching concern. As C aptly put it,

> *I think a lot is subject to 'pendulum swing'…You see…But we should not be easily led by such a swing; rather, we need to think for ourselves as to what is right and what is not quite OK. We should think about our own teaching situations, learning goals…Whatever it takes to make our students become better English users…we should do it…I think.*

And P suggested that teaching approaches and methods are like a general framework. We should not be too rigid in our decision either to follow new teaching trends or to reject them first hand. What really matters is our true and sincere understanding of our students. She said,

> *Teaching methods or approaches are guidelines…somewhat like a general framework. We should not become enslaved to them. But what we should do instead is to take our teaching seriously. By that I mean we've to understand our own conditions first: the nature of students, the purpose of teaching…And we adjust ourselves accordingly…You see…*

5. Conclusion

This interview study examined beliefs of two Thai EFL university lecturers who have been recognized as being exemplary teachers in their respective universities. The analysis of interview data pointed to several key components that, in the eyes of the participants, could potentially lead to the improvement of English teaching in Thailand, especially at the university level. Those components are the importance of trust building, the issue of grammar teaching, teacher as an inspirer, English curriculum and learning assessment. The participants strongly believed that being a good teacher means, among other things, an ability to build trust and confidence among the learners. Moreover, considerable improvement is needed when it comes to language teaching. Teaching methods should be chosen with care. Assessment should be a tool to help learners learn from their mistakes rather than a gatekeeper.

From a second language acquisition (SLA) perspective, the participants made it clear that the "input and output" SLA model that emphasizes the cognitive-computational dimension of L2 learning is insufficient in its explanatory power. For what matters most is the nature of interaction that takes place between the teacher and the learners. Being a caring teacher, devoted to the educational "well-being" of the learners is important.

The participants' beliefs as narrated above also reflect English teaching challenges in the Thai EFL context on many fronts. For instance, a long-standing debate as to whether grammar should be taught is no longer an issue, according to the participants. That is, teaching grammar in context (focus on form) must be incorporated in English lessons. Thai learners must be more strongly encouraged to put more effort in learning English. They will have to "make a linguistic living" on their own; waiting to be spoon-fed is not going to be tolerated. Indeed, learner autonomy that focuses on learner becoming more responsible of their own learning will need to be reiterated. Based on the aforementioned discussion, the participants did

provide insightful information about teaching efficacy. Exemplary teachers must always get their hands dirty; they cannot simply talk the talk; they must walk the walk.

References

Benson, P., & Lor, W**.** (1999). Conceptions of language and language learning. *System 27,* 459-472.

Borg, S. (2003). Teacher cognition in language teaching: A review of research on what language teachers think, know, believe, and do. *Language Teaching Research, 36,* 81-109.

Cohen, A. (1998). *Strategies in Learning and Using a Second Language.* London and New York: Longman.

Crookes, G. (2009). *Values, philosophies, and beliefs in TESOL: Making a statement.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Davison, C., & Leung, C. (2009). Current Issues in English Language Teacher-Based Assessment. *TESOL Quarterly, 43*, 393-415.

Dornyei, Z**. (**2009). The L2 motivation self system. *Motivation, Language Identity and the L2 Self.* Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Duff, P. (2012). How to carry out case study research. In Mackey, A, & S. M. Gass (Eds.), Research Methods in Second Language Acquisition: A Practical Guide. (pp. 95-116). Oxford, England: Wiley-Blackwell.

Farrell, T., & Patricia, L**.** (2005). Conceptions of grammar teaching: A case study of teachers' beliefs and classroom practices. *TESL-EJ, 9(2),* 1-13.

Hayes, D. (2009). Learning language, learning teaching: Episodes from the life of a teacher of English in Thailand. *RELC Journal, 40*(1), 83-101.

Huang, J. (2005). A diary study of difficulties and constraints in EFL learning. *System 33,* 609-621.

Johnson, M. (2004). *A philosophy of second language acquisition.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press

Kumaravadivelu, B. (2006). *Understanding language teaching: From method to postmethod.* Mawah, NJ: Larence Erlbaum.

Lazaraton, A., and Ishihara**, N.** (2005). Understanding second language teacher practice using microanalysis and self-reflection: A collaborative case study. *Modern Language Journal, 89,* 529-542.

Liu, J. (1999). Nonnative-English speaking professionals in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly, 33,* 85-102.

Pajares, F. (1992). Teachers' beliefs and education research: Cleaning up a messy construct. *Review of Educational Research,* 62, 307-332.

Sanprasert, **N.** (2010). The application of a course management system to enhance autonomy in learning English as a foreign language. *System, 38,* 109-123.

Shohamy, E. (2001). Democratic assessment as an alternative. *Language Testing, 18,* 373-391.

Sifakis, N. (2007). The education of teachers of English as a lingua franca: A transformative perspective. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics, 17,* 355-375.