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## Classroom Interaction: Tension between Belief and Practice, A Case Study of a University Teacher

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*Introduction-* Teaching is mainly an outcome of a teacher's perception. Whatever teachers do in their classrooms is an outcome of their educational beliefs, whether they are aware of their teaching philosophy or not. Teacher's belief about how better a foreign language can be learned plays a significant role in deciding how they will conduct their classes. English teachers have their beliefs and perceptions about various classroom activities and accordingly they execute these beliefs and knowledge in their classroom practices. But, does it always happen? Very often it is found that their classroom practices bear the poorest samples of their beliefs. This case study investigates a university teacher's beliefs about classroom interaction and her real classroom practices. A questionnaire will be used to elicit the teacher's belief about interaction. Observation of her classes in the light of interactive activities will be done. An attempt will be made to see if there is any mismatch between belief and practice. Does belief change over time through training? Is there anything that resists change?

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# Classroom Interaction: Tension between Belief and Practice, A Case study of a University Teacher

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Teaching is mainly an outcome of a teacher's perception. Whatever teachers do in their classrooms is an outcome of their educational beliefs, whether they are aware of their teaching philosophy or not. Teacher's belief about how better a foreign language can be learned plays a significant role in deciding how they will conduct their classes. English teachers have their beliefs and perceptions about various classroom activities and accordingly they execute these beliefs and knowledge in their classroom practices. But, does it always happen? Very often it is found that their classroom practices bear the poorest samples of their beliefs. This case study investigates a university teacher's beliefs about classroom interaction and her real classroom practices. A questionnaire will be used to elicit the teacher's belief about interaction. Observation of her classes in the light of interactive activities will be done. An attempt will be made to see if there is any mismatch between belief and practice. Does belief change over time through training? Is there anything that resists change?

### a) Teachers' Beliefs

Beliefs consist of opinion, knowledge, perceptions and a lot of other constructs. Beliefs are understood, in research literature, in terms of concepts such as, values, preconceptions, theories and images (Woods, 1996; Pajares, 1992). Knowledge is closely linked with belief. Kagan (1992) argues that much of a teacher's professional knowledge can be more accurately regarded as belief. Richards & Lockhart (1994) too maintain that beliefs are built up gradually over time. They argue that beliefs consist of both subjective and objective dimensions, and serve as the background to much of the teachers' decision making and classroom actions.

There is a distinction between knowledge and belief. While knowledge can be equated with facts that are given and shared, beliefs may be contestable. They are very much personalized too. Nespor (1987) maintains that while the two often conflict with each

other, beliefs can be considered to be a form of knowledge. Comparing beliefs with knowledge, Nespor claims that while knowledge is conscious and often changes, beliefs may be unconsciously held, are often tacit and resistant to change.

All beliefs are not fixed. Many beliefs can be changed through constructive enlightening and knowledge. When teachers are open to persuasion and positive thinking, training and sound knowledge can positively change beliefs and consequently bring about change in teaching practice.

On the other hand, some beliefs are fixed. Beliefs with different degrees of strength can be inflexible, and inconsistent (Nespor, 1987). Some teachers' beliefs which are largely derived from their prior experience may adversely affect their learning approach to teaching. Teachers' beliefs filter the ways they conceptualize teaching and themselves as teachers and develop explanations for their own classroom practices which may many times lead to an extremely narrow view of teachers and teaching as well as classroom practices.

### b) Interaction

Interactions in language teaching which gained popularity since the 1980s, is explained in many ways by applied linguists. Rivers defines the interactive perspective in language education saying, 'Students achieve facility in using a language when their attention is focused on conveying and receiving authentic message (that is, messages that contain information of interest to both speaker and listener in a situation of importance to both). That is interaction' (Rivers 1987, cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001:21). In a communicative class, language teaching content may be specified and organized by patterns of exchange and interactions to meet the purpose of communication which mostly entails spoken form of language (Richards and Rogers, 2001:21). Effective classroom interaction has two implications. The first one concerns a pleasant atmosphere in the classroom with friendly relationships among the participants of the learning process. The second one encourages students to become effective communicators in a foreign language. This can be achieved through various ways: by implementing different student and teacher roles, by

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exposing students to a varied classroom organization, by employing a variety of activities, by helping students to express themselves and by encouraging their use of communication strategies. If the two implications are joined, we get a pleasant classroom atmosphere in which students are trying to communicate in the foreign language. Research has shown (Long et al. 1976 in Nunan 1991, 51) that students use more language functions in pair- and group-work than in other forms of interaction. It has also been proven that students perceive them as the most pleasant ways of learning, because they feel relaxed and subsequently communicate better (Phillips 1983 in Hatch 1992, 93). Such work encourages independent learning and gives some responsibility for learning to students. It approaches real-life communication where students talk to their peers in small groups or pairs.

c) *Where does Interaction fit in CLT?*

Brown (2001, 165) relates interaction to communication, saying, "...interaction is, in fact, the heart of communication: it is what communication is all about". So, when language teaching methodology started to emphasize on the function of language, a new perspective of language teaching came into prominence. So, the designers of CLT syllabus have sought to replace some of the characteristics of structure-based instructions with those more typical of natural acquisition contexts. What Lightbown and Spada (2006, 112-113) say in this connection They say worth quoting. "In communicative and content-based instructions, the emphasis is on the communication of meaning, both between teachers and students, and among the students themselves in group or pair work.....The assumption is that, in focusing on meaning, learners will acquire the language in a way that is similar to natural acquisition." In Bangladesh, CLT was introduced in all levels of English education keeping this objective in mind by the policy makers.

d) *Types of Classroom Interaction*

Generally a language class is expected to have the following types of interaction. They are-

a. Teacher to the whole class. b. Teacher to individual. c. Teacher to small group. d. Student to student. e. Student to the whole class. f. Small group to the whole class. Among these types of interactions two or three are found to dominate the majority of language classes. They are- Teacher to the whole class. Teacher to individual and Student to student. These three types of interaction patterns have the following features and they will be discussed.

e) *Teacher to the whole class*

In this type of interactions, teacher works as director, model and a resource person. Communicative Language Teaching has given a variety of roles to teachers. Breen and Candlin say that the teacher has

three main roles in the Communicative classroom. The first is to act as facilitator of the communicative process; the second is to act as participant and the third to act as an observer and learner" (Breen and Candlin, cited in Nunan, 1998:87).

f) *Teacher to Individual*

In this type of interactions, teachers single out an individual for any of the functions he usually does. Teachers also attend to individual needs. It is done through reassuring, motivating, drawing a student back into the flow of the class, supplying information that a student needs to progress with the work.

g) *Student to Student*

Communicative Language Teaching method has assigned many roles to learners. Breen and Candlin comment, the learners' roles in Communicative Language Teaching in the following terms. The role of learners as negotiators between the self, the learning process, and the learning object – emerges from and interacts with the role of joint negotiator within the group and within the classroom procedure and activities which the group undertakes. The implication for the learner is that he should contribute as much as he gains, and "There by learn in an independent way" (Cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001:166).

Student to student interaction takes place when teachers set language items and groups students into pair or group. It happens because there students are more interested in coding and decoding information than in practicing their knowledge of grammar rules.

h) *Relation between Teachers' Beliefs and Classroom Practice*

Teachers' beliefs in relation to classroom practice are by far the most researched theme in L2 teacher cognition research. Several studies have highlighted the impact of social, psychological and environmental factors such as school requirements, society's expectations, state policies, mandated curriculum, practice of peers, workload and the availability of resources that have affected teachers' practice in the classroom. Such external factors were seen to play a key role in teachers' decisions, planning and instructional content for the six ESL teachers of beginning adult migrants in Burns' (1996) study. Focusing on the relationships between the classroom practice of three novice ESL teachers in Canada and the pedagogical knowledge they obtained during teacher education, Spada & Massey (1992) found that such contextual factors may have been responsible for the differences between teachers' principles and practices. Crookes & Arakaki (1999) discovered that difficult conditions and heavy workloads had a powerful impact on the pedagogical decisions that teachers made. Teachers in their study who worked approximately 50 hours a week were seen to opt for instructional practices

that were suitable for the context, even if this was at the expense of conflicting with the teachers' beliefs. Johnson (1996) also reports on a pre service teacher on a practicum who struggled with contextual demands that were incompatible with her own beliefs about teaching. Richards and Pennington (1998) describe how a group of first year teachers in Hong Kong attempted – without success – to implement communicative principles by fighting against peer pressure to conform, large classes, unmotivated students, examination pressures and resistance to new ways of learning.

There are plenty of studies regarding the mismatch between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices. In a study, Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis (2004) found evidence of incongruence between L2 teachers' stated beliefs and their classroom practices related to form-focused instruction. These inconsistencies related mainly to when it was appropriate to focus on form during a meaning-focused lesson and the type of error correction techniques to be employed. Basturkmen et al indicate that it may be better to view the stated beliefs of teachers to be "potentially conflictual rather than inherently inconsistent" (p. 268), suggesting that the differences between beliefs and practices are challenges that teachers need to resolve. This follows from several reports of incongruence between teachers' stated beliefs and observed (or reported) practices in mainstream education (Fang 1996). As Fang notes, such inconsistencies are not unexpected due to the demands and complexities of classroom life which constrain teachers' abilities to provide instruction that aligns perfectly with their beliefs.

## II. METHODOLOGY

A longitudinal study of the participant teacher covering two months was done. We observed two of her classes. The second class was held at the interval of one month from the first one. The participant is named Somiya, a pseudonym and she is working as a lecturer in English at a private university in Bangladesh. She achieved mainstream primary, secondary and higher secondary education in Chittagong. She also has graduation and post graduation degree in English from a university, and she has 5 years of teaching experience in total (three years as a lecturer and 2 years as a teacher in an English medium school). The participant teacher has undergone training in CLT.

## III. INSTRUMENT

First of all, questionnaire was used to gather the participant's perceptions about interactive language teaching approach. The questionnaire contained questions to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. The opinions in the questionnaires were compared with one another to see if there is any mismatch

between perceptions and classroom practice as well. An interview was arranged to discuss and clarify various points of the questionnaire. Then observations of two classes were arranged and follow up interviews were taken after the observation classes. Each of the classes had 30-35 students. The duration of the first class was 46 minutes. The teacher had sketches of lesson plan. After the class in the stimulated recall session the teacher was asked to reflect on her first teaching and think over how she could improve the same lesson after one month. Another class was arranged and observed after 1 month with the same lesson activities to see whether any improvement has occurred by this time. Before that the researcher had a long discussion with the teacher about the various kinds of communicative activities. The researcher arranged a demonstration class of the same lesson with a different group of students where the participant teacher was invited to observe the class.

## IV. FINDINGS

### a) *Analysis of the Questionnaire*

Though CLT is the followed method of ELT at the secondary and higher secondary level in Bangladesh and the teaching method being used at university level is not bound to be CLT, the course teachers of ELT are expected to follow CLT as a method without any obligation because it is the method in vogue at universities. The questionnaire and observation centre on some major issues like the following:

1. The knowledge about interaction.
2. The perception about the importance of interaction.
3. Does the teacher's classroom behavior correspond with her belief?
4. What prevents her from executing these activities?

Many of these interactive activities mentioned in the questionnaire are extracted from literature on interactive activities. It is seen that she can correctly identify the majority of interactive activities as student to student types except a few, such as, doing grammar exercise individually and filling in the blanks individually which are in fact, individualistic activities. However, she misses a few important ones, such as, identifying the differences in two pictures. It is true that, many of these activities are teacher controlled and accuracy targeted interactive activities. The teacher opines for three major interaction patterns, such as, student to student, students to students and student to the whole class. The teacher also gives the highest importance to interaction like pair work and group work in the class for developing communicative competence of the learners. She also finds the course book very useful in making the learners communicatively competent. The teacher thinks that it is the responsibility of teachers to motivate the learners to interact with the teachers and other learners in English. The teacher says, "Teachers should try to make the

lesson interesting. Instead of making students humiliated, teachers should correct their mistakes. A friendly environment is very much necessary for a successful language classroom. Teachers should plan their lesson and ensure active student participation”.

The teacher admits that she sometimes engages students in communicative activities. To her fluency is more important than accuracy and to attain it she corrects students not while they are speaking, rather after they have finished speaking. Though she says that she plans her lesson, but when she was asked whether she engaged the students in the interactive activities as required in the lesson plan of that day, she replied in the negative. She said that she omitted the listening part owing to lack of logistic support which was really important for the students. She also said that she left the speaking activities out for the lack of time. In reply to my query about if she sought the logistic support for herself, she said that her classroom was not logistically equipped.

She identifies the following factors as impediments to the execution of the student-student interaction on a 6 point Likert scale. Among the 14 factors which are assumed to be impediments, 7 are marked at the point 6 (strongly agree). It is interesting to note that of the 7, 6 are beyond the control of teachers e.g. serial nos. 1,5,6,8,10 and 12. Only one factor, 13 is what teachers can have something to do through classroom management techniques. The factors 4, and 9 are marked at point 1 (strongly disagree) and 2 (slightly disagree) which again conform thematically with the teacher’s views of factors 1,5,6,8,10 and 12. These two factors reveal the fact that the participant teacher believes that teachers are not responsible in any way for not making the lessons interactive. That is, she attributes the non-implementation of interactive activities to the lack of logistic support and policy.

**Observation-1**

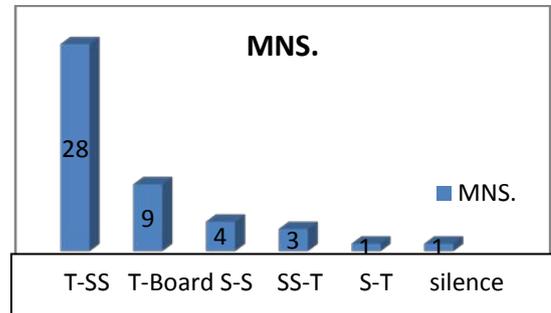
Several elements associated with CLT were initially selected as foci for the classroom observations (a) patterns of activity (for example, pair work, group work). (b) use of communicative tasks and (c) interaction types. The book used by the teacher is New Headway (Pre-intermediate). The activities were communicative in nature. The teacher was not told the focus of the study. Though the class was not audio recorded, a pen and pencil recording of all types of interaction patterns with time taken for each one was recorded meticulously. This method was used by Segovia and Hardison in recording the patterns of interactions in their observations of 3 Thai teachers’ classes in Thailand (2009). The teacher’s class duration was 46 minutes. Some salient features of her class are:-

1. Teacher leaves out the two pair works that entail speaking practice.

2. Teacher monitors while students are doing exercises.
3. Teacher checks answers individually.

The interaction patterns and time taken by the teacher during the class can be shown through a graph-

Graph-1



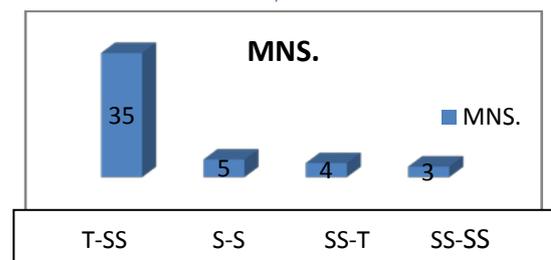
What appears from the interaction patterns is that it is a totally teacher-controlled class with the teacher-student interaction pattern engulfing the most of the class time. Teacher-student interaction and teacher boarding the answers taken together is (28+ 9=37) minutes. The post observation interview revealed the following facts about her class. She also said that she left the speaking activities out for the lack of time and she attributes the non implementation of interactive activities to the lack of logistic support and policy.

**Observation-2**

The second observation was arranged with the same lesson and activities after one month. The observation of the second class after one month reveals the following phenomenon. The second class almost has the same quality and characteristics with a few exceptions. The teacher’s class duration was 47 minutes.

What appears from the interaction patterns is that the second class has become more teacher-centered than the first one. The teacher-student interaction pattern takes 35 minutes. The difference is that the teacher does not board the answers but provides the answers as a whole class feedback. And she terms this more interactive in the sense that students are getting more oral inputs. Student-student interaction pattern has increased by 1 minute. What is important is that group work is also allotted 3 minutes. The group work was implemented with students comparing their answers with one another.

Graph-2



b) *Findings from class observation and interview*

The class observations reveal the following facts. The student-student interaction has not increased in spite of training, discussion and stimulated recalls with the participant teacher. The teacher was asked to be reflective about her previous teaching practice and asked to improve from the previous ones. These researchers referred to some parts of the class where she could improve her lesson. The teacher agreed that she could have addressed those suggestions to improve her lesson and change her teaching practice to address the students' needs of attaining communicative competence and making the class interactive. The training through demonstration class could not make any conspicuous impact on her teaching practice. Her knowledge and training in CLT also failed to bring any significant change in her behavior. There is plenty of research about the proposition whether teacher education has any impact on teaching behavior. The following research done in this regard can be discussed.

Peacock's (2001) longitudinal study found evidence of the stability of beliefs over time, with key beliefs remaining unchanged even after training. The study found that after three years' of pre-service training, the beliefs of the 146 trainees involved had changed 'very little', with 'far too many' of them still believing that learning an L2 meant 'learning a lot of vocabulary and grammar rules' (p. 186). This finding led Peacock to theorize that detrimental beliefs are more likely to resist change. While student expectations, tradition and syllabus requirements all shaped their beliefs and practices, prior learning and professional experiences were by far the strongest influence. But, the participant teacher here has both knowledge and training in CLT which calls for interactive teaching practice. Though it is a fact that syllabus requirement and testing requirement are key issues for consideration in deciding the teaching practice, she did not refer to these two issues in her reply or interview. Listening and speaking skills are not tested in the examinations. But, do we always test everything we teach in the classes?

In contrast to the above studies, Almarza (1996) too found variability in the way a teacher education program at a British university impacted on four trainee's beliefs. Freeman's (1993) longitudinal study of four high school French and Spanish teachers in the USA reported how a master's degree impacted on in-service teachers' beliefs with some evidence of behavioral change. Sendan & Roberts (1998) and Cabaroglu & Roberts (2000) provide further evidence of the positive effects of teacher education on trainees' beliefs. Sendan & Roberts (1998) report on how over the course of 15 months a trainee's personal theories of effective teaching had altered, by the addition of constructs to his existing belief system and the re-organization of existing constructs. It is true that reflection is an integral part of

an ongoing, cyclical process which brings positive change in teaching practice. As Wallace (1991) argues, it is through repeated cycles of professional development, practice and reflection that professional competence arises. But, reflection alone is found to be ineffective in many cases. Similarly, reflection was also found to be ineffective in this teacher's case study. With reflection teachers' realization of what is implementable in the classroom goes hand in hand. The participant teacher's excuse for non-implementation of interactive techniques such as pair work, group work can be recalled here in this connection. We know that majority of teachers in EFL countries attribute the non-implementation of communicative activities to lack of logistic support in the classrooms. The following study subscribes to this perception:

Sandholtz's (2002) study revealed that teachers regarded hands-on activities that were directly relevant to their teaching situation and which they could utilize in their classrooms as being essential to a teacher development program. They saw little value in learning about techniques and strategies that were impossible to implement. It is therefore necessary for teachers to do something important, and not simply hear about it. Integrating the creation of lesson plans and teaching materials that can be used in their own classrooms as a key part of the in-service is therefore crucial. Hayes (1995) suggests that teacher development sessions should make it possible for teachers to practice new ideas in a non-threatening environment, such as through micro teaching, before expecting them to apply the ideas in their own classrooms. But, this is not always the case for teachers. Many teachers in EFL countries are allergic to change and innovation by nature. They do not themselves want to change. It is the attitude of the teachers that should change first. Otherwise any training can have little impact to change their beliefs and subsequently their classroom behavior. Fullan (1993) argues that innovations fail to be successfully diffused not necessarily because of the suitability of the innovation itself or the method of implementation that was used, but more often because of the attitude of the teachers involved. For successful change to take place, it is the attitude towards change that should first change.

## V. CONCLUSION

It is clear from this case study that the participant teacher has correctly identified the communicative activities but her classes are not communicative. To simplify, her classroom practices do not correspond well with her perceptions and beliefs about interactions. The teacher evades the communicative classroom practices, such as, pair work, group work, role play and persists in the traditional teacher-fronted language teaching techniques, such as,

explaining grammar rules, writing answers on the board. We see in this study that teacher education does not help the teacher to make her classes interactive. That is, she is a poor implementer of her knowledge and training. She resists change in her teaching practice. Apart from the practical constraints that thwart change effort, teachers themselves are regarded as being impediments to change. Many teachers do not like to follow other peoples' track and they are reluctant to implement other people's ideas. So, for successful change to take place, it is the attitude towards change that should first change.

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