BELIEFS AND PRACTICE OF EFL TEACHERS: CONSTRUCTIVIST OR TRADITIONAL

Sibel Kaymakamoğlu

The European University of Lefke

skaymakam@yahoo.com

Biodata

Dr. Sibel E. Kaymakamoğlu received her EdD from University of Leicester, UK. She has been in ELT as a lecturer and a teacher trainer for many years. She is working as a lecturer in the Department of English Language Teaching at The European University of Lefke. Her interest lies on Teacher Cognition and Constructivist Learning. She has conducted qualitative and quantitative research studies on teacher beliefs, craft knowledge, the influence of social context on teachers, teachers' role in educational innovations and social constructivist learning.

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Abstract

This study investigated the EFL teachers' beliefs about the nature of EFL teaching and learning in the Cyprus Turkish State Secondary Schools context to see to what extent their beliefs and perceived classroom practice were compatible with the new curriculum which was based on Constructivist view of learning and teaching. A questionnaire which consisted of 17 items about teachers' beliefs (first part) and 17 corresponding items about teachers' practice (second part) was employed to collect the data. The theoretical foundations of the items were 'EFL Teacher's and Learner's Role', 'Learning Environment', and 'EFL Learning'. In both parts, a 5 point Likert-scale format was used. Frequency distributions, percentages, means and standard deviations were calculated to provide information about the teachers' beliefs and classroom practice. Two-tailed t-tests were also employed to investigate whether there were any differences between the male and female teachers regarding beliefs and practice. The statistical analysis of the teachers' responses to the questionnaire indicated that the EFL teachers' beliefs and practice, in general, were in line with the new curriculum. The t-test results showed that the male and female teachers' reported perceptions of their beliefs and practice were very similar to each other.

Keywords: Educational Reform, ELT, teacher beliefs, teacher practice

1. Introduction

This study was conducted to investigate the EFL teachers' beliefs about the nature of EFL teaching and learning in the Cyprus Turkish State Secondary Schools context to see to what extent their beliefs and perceived classroom practice were compatible with the new curriculum which was based on Constructivist view of learning and teaching. Since a new EFL curiculum which holds firmly Constructivist views has been introduced into Cyprus Turkish state secondary schools, it is believed that exploring teachers' beliefs in learning and teaching EFL from this perspective might shed light on issues of implementation of this reform in practice. The next section presents a brief outline of the general structure of the New Cyprus Turkish Education System.

1.1. Educational Reform in Cyprus Turkish State Schools

The Cyprus Turkish Education System has begun a process of reconstruction due to the influence of other significant changes in the society. The impact of politics has been the main cause of this. The referendum for the European Union membership in April 2004, which caused rapid changes in many aspects, was a turning point in Cyprus Turkish society. To keep up with the modern education systems of the western world and the requirements of the new century, and in an attempt to satisfy a demand for quality education in Cyprus Turkish society, a reform of the education system was inevitable.

As part of this process, a Constructivist perspective has officially been adopted in the place of Traditional teaching. The curricula are designed within an understanding of education as learner-centered and Constructivist. In this new program the development of understanding and skills replaces the transmission and memorizing of knowledge. Learner-centered education is aimed for, in contrast to teacher and program-centered education (Ministry of National Education and Culture, 2005, p.40). This new education reform has brought 8 years Compulsory Basic Education which was 5 years in the old system. The grades were changed as 6, 7 and 8 corresponding to grades I, II and III in the old system, respectively. Such a radical change has never before been experienced in the educational arena of Turkish Cyprus.

1.2. The Traditional and Constructivist Perspectives

Here, Traditional and Constructivist perspectives will be discussed briefly for further clarification of the current educational context in North Cyprus (Cyprus Turkish). In this study, the term "Traditional" will refer to a teaching approach where learners are seen as passive recipients of the teachers' knowledge. A fixed body of knowledge is transmitted from the teacher or text to the learners. This view (i.e. transmission of knowledge) tends to lead to a teacher-centered classroom. Foreign language is taught through exposing the learners to mechanical exercises and drills. "[Students] learn facts about language rather than how to use it communicatively" (Nunan, 1999, p.74). The teacher presents and explains knowledge and learners memorize what has been taught. It is "empty" (McInerney & McInerney, 2002) learning in which the instructional sequence is important rather than real learning (i.e. spontaneous use of language in which learners can use the language available spontaneously and automatically without stopping to think and to check the rules of the language in their mind). In this teacher-centered teaching, the teacher is the controller/authority in the class and learners are believed to learn through conditioning behavior with the use of positive and negative reinforcement. "The primary role of the learner is as a passive recipient of teacher's knowledge. The teacher's role is to provide that knowledge by transmitting it to the learner, largely through lockstep, teacher-fronted modes of learning" (Nunan, 1999, p.74). In North Cyprus (NC) this is the prevalent approach to teaching, which the new curriculum is now aiming to replace.

In contrast, Constructivists (e.g. von Glasersfeld, 1995) view learning as a process of construction in which learners develop new knowledge through active participation.

Similarly, Woolfolk (2004) indicates that "Even though there is no single Constructivist theory, many Constructivist approaches recommend that educators:

- embed learning in complex, realistic and relevant learning environments;

- provide for social negotiation and shared responsibility as a part of learning;

- support multiple perspectives and use multiple representations of content;

- nurture self-awareness and an understanding that knowledge is constructed;

and

- encourage ownership in learning (Driscoll, 2000 cited in Woolfolk, 2004,

p.327).

In this process, the focus is on self-regulated (i.e. autonomous), contextualized learning in which the aim is to engender intrinsically motivated learners. Constructivism emphasizes learners' understanding and meaning making and aims to adopt a learner-centered teaching in which learners are supported, guided and assisted through scaffolding (i.e. supporting) to become autonomous learners (i.e. to take control of their own learning). McInerney &

McInerney (2002) emphasize that "Learners ultimately appropriate and internalize the knowledge transacted through assisted performance so that it becomes their own" (p.46). In this new perspective, the importance of peer interaction is emphasized to help learners construct knowledge in a social setting since "learning occurs in social contexts" (e.g.Vygotsky's Social Constructivist view summarized by McInerney & McInerney, 2002, p.46).

In Constructivism, learning is viewed as not only learning subject knowledge but also learning how to learn. This approach aims to motivate learners intrinsically through making use of authentic (i.e. spoken or written language that have not been specifically written for the purposes of teaching language (Nunan, 1999, p.270)), stimulating activities, tasks and materials, and creating real life situations in which learners can practice real life language in class. Besides, it suggests providing students with challenging tasks, especially problem-solving tasks, to promote higher-order thinking rather than making the students memorize knowledge.

Woolfolk (2004) claims that "Constructivists believe that students should not be given stripped down, simplified problems and basic skills drills, but instead should encounter complex learning environments that deal with "fuzzy", ill-structured problems" (p.327).

It is expected that this study will provide insights into the teachers' beliefs and practice. This study is expected to contribute to the understanding of teacher cognition in the English language teaching and learning arena and thus to have some impact on theoretical and methodological assumptions about teacher education and teacher development (i.e. in teacher training).

2. Method

This study aims to explore the EFL teachers' beliefs about the nature of EFL teaching and learning in the Cyprus Turkish State secondary schools context to see to what extent their beliefs and perceived classroom practice are compatible with the new curriculum which is based on a Constructivist view of learning and teaching. The key research questions in this investigation were:

1. What are the beliefs held by the EFL teachers and how do they perceive their classroom practice regarding learning and teaching?

2. Are there any differences in beliefs and practice according to gender?

In this study, a questionnaire was employed to investigate the teachers' beliefs and practice.It was distributed to all the EFL teachers (N= 140) in Turkish Cypriot state secondary schools (N=20) and 81 teachers (67 female and 14 male) participated in the study voluntarily.

The questionnaire consisted of 34 items: 17 items about teachers' beliefs (first part) and 17 items about teachers' practice (second part). The theoretical foundations of the questionnaire were 'EFL Teacher's and Learner's Role', 'Learning Environment', and 'EFL Learning' and these theoretical concepts were reflected in both parts of the questionnaire. The items about beliefs had corresponding items in the practice part. In both parts, a 5 point Likert-scale format was used. To detect possible problems in advance and to modify the instrument before it was used in the actual study, the questionnaire was piloted twice on 20 EFL teachers at tertiary level. The belief and practice items were subjected to relability tests respectively and the Cronbach alpha scores were calculated as .8580 and . 8240, respectively.

For the analysis of the questionnaire data Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 13 was used.Two-tailed "t" tests were administered to test whether there was a significant difference between the means of

1) males' and females' beliefs,

2) males' and females' practice,

3. Data Analysis

3.1. Teachers' Beliefs

The mean scores, as can be seen in Table 1 below, indicated that there was a strong agreement about fifteen Belief items (4.58- 4.03), and an agreement about two Belief items (3.92, 3.30). The reported perceptions of the participants with the item *Belief 17 (B17): Learners should not be mainly passive recipients of teacher's knowledge* showed the highest mean score of 4.58 which means that there was a strong agreement with B17. The descriptive analysis of item *B9: A foreign language teacher should create a learning environment in which students can tolerate uncertainty* showed the lowest mean score of 3.30 which means there was an agreement about B9. The findings revealed that the participant teachers strongly agreed that learners should have an active role in foreign language learning and teaching (B17). They also agreed, although it was not a strong agreement, that in language teaching and learning, the learning environment created by the teacher should enable the learners to tolerate uncertainty. Since there was a small standard deviation (SD), ranging from .63 to 1.07 for the stated beliefs, it seemed that the teachers agreed with each other.

Table 1. *Means and Standard Deviations for Replies Concerning Beliefs about English Language Learning and Teaching*

Item	N	Mean	SD
B17. Learners should <u>not</u> be mainly passive recipients of teacher's knowledge.	81	4.58	.77
B6. Learners need to be active participants in the learning process.	81	4.55	.74
B3. Learners need to learn in a cooperative and collaborative environment.	81	4.53	.67
B11. A foreign language teacher should strive for maximum interaction among the learners.	80	4.47	.69
B8. Learning how to learn needs to be promoted.	81	4.44	.63
B7. Learners should be encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning.	81	4.41	.72
B14. A language teacher should consider the diversity of learning styles and learner needs.	80	4.41	.68
B4. Students' interests have an important effect on learning.	81	4.39	.66
B12. Teaching a foreign language should include an element of fun.	81	4.39	.70
B1. Learners need to be provided with opportunities to discover and construct their concepts and knowledge.	81	4.38	.71
B16.Using games in language teaching is <u>not</u> a waste of time.	81	4.38	.81
B13. Students learn by fitting new information together with what they already know.	81	4.37	.69

B15. Learners need to be encouraged to use higher-order thinking skills.	81	4.37	.69
B2. Learning a foreign language is making meaning.	80	4.36	.66
B5. A foreign language teacher should be a facilitator.	79	4.03	.77
B10. Learners need to be encouraged to take risks.	79	3.92	.90
B9. A foreign language teacher should create a learning environment in which students can tolerate uncertainty.	79	3.30	1.07

The analysis of the teachers' perceptions regarding their beliefs showed that all the teachers' agreed with the ideas of the new curriculum which was based on Constructivist language teaching and learning. This finding indicated that all the participant foreign language teachers' beliefs seemed to be congruent with the ideas of the new curriculum. This would be due to the fact that the new curriculum has been introduced recently and the teachers' might have been influenced by these ideas so that they had tendency to pretend they believe in these ideal beliefs, or they stated their genuine beliefs.

3.2. Teachers' Perceived Classroom Practice

The mean scores, as can be seen in Table 2, indicated that six items are claimed to be always practiced (4.65- 4.08), eleven items are claimed to be practiced most of the time (4.00-3.01). The analysis of the perceptions of the participants regarding item *P34: I encourage my students to participate in the lesson* indicated the highest mean score of 4.65 which means that teachers claimed that they always do this. The reported perceptions of the participants for item *P25: I do not prefer my students to work individually* revealed the lowest mean score of 3.01. In other words, teachers claimed that they do not prefer to give tasks and learning activities to learners that require individual study most of the time. Small standard deviations (SD), ranging from .47 to .96 for the teachers practice indicated that they agreed with each other.

Table 2*. Means and Standard Deviations for Replies Concerning Practice about English Language Learning and Teaching*

ITEM	N	Mean	SD
P34. I encourage my students to participate in the lesson.	81	4.65	.47
P33. I help my students to become autonomous learners.	81	4.35	.61
P31. I encourage my students to learn and use language in context.	81	4.27	.77
P22. I base new knowledge on students' existing knowledge.	81	4.27	.63
P24. I consider my students' interests when I design activities for language learning.	81	4.08	.80
P29. I consider the individual differences among my students.	80	4.08	.71
P30. I encourage my students to make inferences and induce rules about the language.	81	4.00	.72
P28. I encourage my students to evaluate their			.78

own progress.	80	3.90	
P21. I use games to teach language.	81	3.82	.77
P19. I put my students in small groups or pairs to come up with a joint solution or approach to a problem or task.	80	3.75	.77
P26. I give my students challenging tasks.	80	3.70	.75
P23. I provide my students with tasks in which they can practice analysis, synthesis and evaluation.	81	3.67	.86
P27. I assign my students tasks in which there are no set solutions to the problems.	81	3.62	.71
P20. I consider the differing needs of individual students when planning activities.	81	3.51	.80
P32. I teach some strategies for my students to check their own learning.	80	3.35	.88
P18. I give my students tasks which encourage risk- taking.	79	3.30	.83
P25. I do <u>not</u> prefer my students to work individually.	81	3.01	.96

The findings indicated that the teachers' reported perceptions about their perceived practice were in line with their stated ideal beliefs since they all agreed on all the practice items which reflected the ideas of the new curriculum based on Constructivism. This indicated that all the participant teachers claimed that they implemented what they believed in regarding the ideas of the new curriculum in their perceived classroom practice. Another interpretation of this finding might be that since all the teachers were expected to implement the ideas of the new curriculum in their classroom teaching by the authorities, they might have pretended to be implementing the new curriculum in their teaching.

3.3. Analysis of Gender-related Differences for 'Beliefs'

In order to test for differences between the mean scores of males' and females' perceptions regarding 'beliefs', a t-test was employed. As can be seen from Table 3., the results of the test showed that the differences were significant at the 0.05 significance level for 2 belief items: B1 and B7.

The significance for item *B1: Learners need to be provided with opportunities to discover and construct their concepts and knowledge* was $p=.027 < 0.05$. The mean score of males' responses was 4.00 while it was 4.46 for females. This showed that males' and females' reported perceptions of Belief 1 were significantly different with female teachers being more in favour.

For item *B7: Learners should be encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning*, the significance in the reported perceptions was $p=.036 < 0.05$. the mean score of males' perceptions was 4.76 and it was 4.34 for females. This revealed that the reported perceptions of male and female teachers differed significantly for Belief 7 with male teachers supporting this statement more strongly.

Table 3**.** *Perceptions of 'Beliefs' by the Variable 'Gender' (Independent Samples "t" Test Table)*

Beliefs	Gender	N	Mean	Mean Difference	t- value	df	P
B1	Male	14	4.00	-.46	-2.25	79	.027
	Female	67	4.46				*
B7	Male	14	4.79	.44	2.13	79	.036
	Female	67	4.34				*

*Significance

The analysis showed that the male and female teachers' beliefs were different significantly only in these two belief items.

3.4. Analysis of Gender-related Differences for 'Practice'

A t-test was also employed in order to test for differences between males' and females' perceptions regarding 'practice'. As can be seen from Table 4.1. below, the mean score difference reported was significant only for item *P26: I give my students challenging tasks* as p= .007 < 0.05 at the 0.05 significance level. Female teachers agreed more with this statement than the males.

Table 4. *'Practice' by the Variable 'Gender' (Independent Samples "t" Test Table)*

PRACTICE	GENDER	N	MEAN	Mean Difference	t-value	Df	P
P26	Male	14	3.21	-.67	-2.46	78	.016
	Female	67	3.80				*

*Significance

The analysis thus indicated that the male and female teachers' were significantly different only in one practice item.

4. Discussion

Here, the research questions will guide the discussion of the findings.

The first research question is as:

1. *What are the beliefs held by the EFL teachers and how do they perceive their practice regarding learning and teaching?*

The quantitative findings obtained from the questionnaire about teacher beliefs and practice gave the impression that the EFL teachers' beliefs and practice about English language learning and teaching, in general, were in line with the new curriculum. In other words, regarding the teacher and learner roles in language learning and teaching, learning environment and EFL learning, all the teachers stated agreement with Constructivist teaching and learning. The teachers indicated strong agreement on fifteen belief items and agreement on two belief items. *B17: Learners should not be mainly passive recipients of teacher's knowledge* received the highest mean score (4.58). This could be interpreted as the teachers believing in the importance of their students' constructing their own knowledge, in line with a Constructivist learner role, though other interpretations are possible.

In regard to the teachers' perceived classroom practice, the teachers claimed always practice for six items and most of the time practice for eleven items. The highest mean score was for replies to *P34: I always encourage my students to participate in the lesson* (4.65), which would seem to be in line with a Constructivist learner role. The questionnaire results indicated that all the teachers gave the most importance to the learner's role in language learning and teaching since the items reflecting learner's active involvement received the highest mean scores in relation to the teachers' beliefs and their perceived practice.

2. *Are there any differences in beliefs and practice according to gender?*

The earlier studies indicated gender differences in teachers' adopting specific educational beliefs (e.g. Kalaian& Freeman, 1994, Li, 1999, Sang et al., 2009). The quantitative findings of this study are in line with these earlier findings yet in this study statistical analysis of the data showed that the difference in beliefs according to gender was small. The t-test results have indicated that the female and male teachers' reported beliefs were very similar to each other. Among 17 belief statements only in 2 were there significant differences. The female teachers agreed more strongly than the male teachers on *B1: Learners need to be provided with opportunities to discover and construct their concepts and knowledge* (p=.027 < 0.05) representing a Constructivist view of learning while the male teachers favoured *B7* more than the female teachers: *Learners should be encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning* (p=.036 <0.05) that puts emphasis on self-directed learning. It seems that the female teachers favoured a more active, facilitating role for the teacher than the male teachers since 'providing opportunities' for learners requires more organized effort (e.g. particular tasks) than simply 'encouraging' learners to take responsibility for their learning.

Similarly, the reported perceptions regarding practice were also found to be very similar for the females and males. There was a significant difference between the females' and males' perceptions only for 1 item *P26: I give my students challenging tasks*, (p= .007 < 0.05). The female teachers agreed more with this than the male teachers. From a Constructivist point of view, 'challenging tasks' are an important way of helping learners develop beyond what they already know. This finding could indicate that the female teachers had a greater tendency to put their Constructivist beliefs into practice.

The difference between male and female teachers confirmed the findings of Singer (1996) who investigated 443 college faculty members in Mathematics, English, Biology and Psychology in 163 institutions found that female teachers showed more tendency to promote learning environments that are more student-oriented, facilitative and effective driven. In addition, they tended to use class discussion more often, encourage collaboration and affective learning strategies. The differences in males' and females' beliefs and practice regarding the above mentioned items might have been related to some other factors, such as personality differences and experiential differences influencing the teachers' beliefs and practice since the difference is small. Therefore, the relationship among the teachers' beliefs, practice and gender needs further investigation.

5. Conclusions

The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of teacher cognition in EFL teaching and learning arena. It also provides evidence regarding the teachers' beliefs and practice about EFL teaching and learning in Cyprus Turkish EFL context. It shows the importance of understanding teachers' beliefs for teacher education and teacher development.

This study also yielded evidence in advancing our understanding of how compatible the teachers' beliefs and practice were with Constructivist view of learning and teaching in Cyprus Turkish secondary state schools context. It has also provided evidence to increase our

understanding of how and to what extent teachers' practical frameworks for EFL learning and teaching are influential in the implementation of the educational practices within the new Cyprus Turkish Education System. Although generalizations cannot be made for the whole EFL teachers working in Cyprus Turkish secondary schools contexts, to a certain extent it has the potential to help the educators to draw a picture of English langauge teaching in the state schools. However, since this study did not reveal any evidence about the teachers' actual classroom practice there is a need for further investigation to explore the actual classroom practice of the teachers. Besides, teachers' beliefs can be explored more deeply by means of qualitative investigation. Therefore, a further investigation employing interviews and observations would reveal better understanding of the phenomenon.

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