Second Language Research and Teachers’ Beliefs and Practices

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Abstract:
This study was conducted to investigate the effect of studying second language research courses on the beliefs of applied linguistics graduate students. Participants of this study are twenty full time M.A students in the field of Applied linguistics enrolled in the Libyan Academy of Graduate studies in Tripoli, Libya. At the time of the study, all have already taken at least a course on second language research. Research tools employed to elicit date were questionnaires and interviews. Responses showed significant changes in beliefs in several areas of language acquisition and learning. Some of these belief changes are the appropriate age for learning a second language, the importance of grammar teaching, and the effectiveness of communicative approach in foreign language classrooms. In semi-structured interviews, participants compared their beliefs concerning these issues before and after the course was taken. The findings, which illustrated how these participants beliefs develop within the perspective of a professional applied linguistic course give practical implications for course design and evaluation in teacher language education programs.

Key Words: Beliefs about language learning; Teacher beliefs; Second language acquisition research; Teacher training; Teaching English as a foreign language.

1. Introduction:
No doubt that language teachers need to know about linguistic fields such as sociolinguistics and phonetics, as well as second language learning and teaching (i.e., applied linguistics). Research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has a lot to offer these teachers (Ellis, 2012; Flynn, 1996; Tyler & Lardier, 1996). In graduate applied linguistics programs the assumption is that in-service teachers should make use of the information taught in core courses such as linguistics and SLA in order to become effective practitioners (Busch, 2010).
However, the impact of these research-based knowledge courses on teacher beliefs, knowledge and profession is a topic of debate by a number of teacher educators and researchers (Freeman, 1998; Liu, 1999). Some studies (e.g., Mohamed, 2014; Urmston, 2003; Peacock, 2001; Woods, 1996; MacDonald, Badger & White, 2001) have demonstrated that teacher education courses seem to have little or no impact. Peacock (2001), for instance, found that many student teachers, even after three years in a highly respected degree program in university, still believed that learning a second language meant learning a lot of grammatical rules and vocabulary.

Thus, as Mohamed (2014) & Ellis (2012) assert, the contribution of second language acquisition (SLA) research to English language teaching and to teacher education remains dispute. While, as stated previously, one of the intentions of SLA research is to improve language pedagogy, and most SLA researchers have at some time been language teachers, teacher education programs in general and SLA courses on teacher education programs in particular are often said to be either excessively theoretical or not ‘relevant’ to what goes on in the classroom (Mohamed, 2014; Ellis, 2012; Lightbown, 1985). According to Nunan (1991), in a recent review of 50 examples of SLA research, it emerged that only 15 were actually carried out in authentic language classrooms. As such, it is not surprising that Krashen & Terrell (1983) have concluded that theory is “rejected by most language teachers” (p. 201). The acceptance or rejection of information presented in teacher education classes is also influenced by pre-existing beliefs, despite empirical evidence that overrides individual beliefs (Mohamed, 2014).

2. Literature review:

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is one of the required core courses in most of Master’s programs of applied linguistics for teachers of English as a Second Language. Often, this is also one of the essential classes where MA students are introduced to the dominant acquisition theories of L2. During this course, it is anticipated that student teachers’ beliefs will change in light of the empirical research presented in those classes.

Some studies on the beliefs of pre-service teachers in SLA courses (e.g., Kamiya & Loewen, 2014; Borg, 2011; Busch, 2010; Angelova, 2005; MacDonald, Badger & White, 2001) have shown that the SLA course had some impact on students’ beliefs about language teaching and learning. However, some studies show that these applied linguistics programs in English-speaking countries have failed to accommodate foreign students perceived needs (Liu, 1999; England & Roberts, 1989) including, in particular, their demand for more appropriate L2 acquisition theories for their FL context (England & Roberts,
1989; Liu, 1999). For example, in Liu’s (1999) study of non-native speakers in an MA TESOL program, only 34% (20) considered the acquisition theories and teaching methodologies they had learned to be useful. Liu states, "the dominant acquisition theories and teaching methodologies currently taught in North America, Britain, Australia (NABA) are based on data gathered from either immigrants or international students studying in NABA. According to this researcher, “many L2 acquisition theories and teaching methodologies, without major adaptation, may be impractical or ineffective in non-NABA countries because of significant socioeconomic and cultural differences” (p. 200). In other words, to what extent can acquisition theories hold true in non-NABA countries, such as in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts? How do non-native EFL teachers make sense of SLA while they are taking the course in non-English speaking country? What does the knowledge of SLA mean to non-native EFL teachers after they graduate and start to teach in their native and monolingual countries?

3. **Objective of the study:**

Several gaps exist in response to the above questions. While quantitative studies have attempted to understand non-native speakers’ (NNSs’) opinions of L2 acquisition theories in English-speaking countries, few studies have been conducted to understand NNSs’ processes of learning and understanding SLA, (e.g., Liu, 1998). Moreover, as Peacock (2001) asserts, there is a lack of studies which examine the relevancy of SLA theories to NNSs in their non-English speaking countries. Additional studies using different populations of applied linguistic students are needed.

This study was designed and conducted to help bridge the gaps. The purpose of this case study was to document a NNS student teachers’ process of developing an understanding of SLA from a course in the academy of graduate studies in Libya, and their subsequent teaching practices upon obtaining the degree. As MacDonald et al. (2001) concluded in their study of pre- and post-course beliefs in two SLA courses, cultural and linguistic background exerts a more powerful influence over beliefs than evidence from empirical research. Beliefs also differ depending upon the politics of language policy in the population being studied. With the changing demographics of language teacher training programs to include more non-native speakers of English from a range of countries, research is needed to determine whether an infusion of beliefs consciousness-raising into such programs would have an effect.

In Libya, there is still a paucity in literature on language learning beliefs and change in teachers’ beliefs over time, particularly studies involving pre-service teachers who are being trained to teach English at university level. It is imperative that language learners’ beliefs be documented so that efforts can be
made to bring about awareness and changes in beliefs while they are still undergoing training to be English teachers. Insights into pre-service teachers’ language learning beliefs would prove useful to teacher educators in incorporating appropriate instruction on language learning during English lessons. Thus, the present study aimed to fill a gap in local research on language learning beliefs.

4. Participants:
The participants in this study were 20 postgraduate students in the field of Applied linguistics. They were all native speakers of Arabic, teaching English as a major subject. All of them had Bachelor of Arts (BA) degrees from English Language Teaching departments in Libyan universities and had at least 2 years of experience as full time English teachers in public and private secondary schools. The participants of this study, 14 female and 6 male, were randomly assigned by the researcher. The researcher carried out the research procedures described in the study. As the researcher of this study and the instructor of the course (i.e., second language acquisition research), he was in close contact with these participants. All of the participants were in their late twenties and early thirties and in advanced stages of graduate studies in applied linguistics. The second language acquisition research course is one of the core requirement for the MA program in the academy. By the time of the study, all participants had taken introductory linguistics course and had some familiarity with basic linguistics.

5. Context of the course:
An SLA course was required in this MA Applied linguistics program. Students had to have taken a class in linguistics prior to this course. Each week, students were assigned a topic (e.g., The Critical period hypothesis; a logical problem in language acquisition) along with topical articles, ranging from 2 to 3 each week. Additionally, students were required to submit two research papers, each no longer than 5 pages, reporting on a second language topic, and a final 10-12 page paper at the end of the semester. A final examination was held at the last class meeting.

The researcher taught all the sections of the course, which was designed to provide an introduction to SLA theory and research (not teaching methodology). One of the objectives stated in the course syllabus was ‘to examine various beliefs (including your own) about SLA and respond to common misconceptions about second language learning’.
6. Instrument:
The instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire consisted of 12 statements containing key beliefs relating to English language learning and it was based on the questionnaire designed by Lightbown and Spada (2013). This instrument has been used by many researchers (e.g., MacDonald, Badger & White, 2001) to assess learner beliefs in relation to second or foreign language learning. It is believed that this questionnaire is a valid and suitable tool for research on language learning beliefs in the Libyan context. The questionnaire is used to determine what beliefs (about second language learning and teaching) these graduate students held at the beginning of the SLA course, whether those beliefs had changed by the end of the course and, if so, what contributed to the change.

7. Procedure:
Two tools were used to collect data for this study: a questionnaire and interviews. The questionnaire was administered on the pre-service teachers by the researcher at the beginning and end of the semester in which the SLA course was taught. The participants were informed that they were involved in a study to investigate their beliefs about learning English. They were told that there were no right or wrong answers. What was important was that they answered according to their beliefs about learning English. When asked whether they had any difficulty in understanding any of the statements in the questionnaire, all of them said they had no problems in doing so. Most of the pre-service teachers completed the inventory in 30 minutes and all the instruments were collected back for analysis. By the end of the semester fourteen weeks later, the same instrument was administered again on the same group of students.

The other principle date for this research was interviews with each student which was conducted during the semester in which the SLA course was taken. A guide of open-ended questions was used in the interview with each student, with the intention of recording these students beliefs before and after the course. In addition, because the researcher was the instructor of the course, individual email dialogues were established and discussion also continued informally over a one-semester period; filed notes were kept of these conversations as well.

8. Findings and discussion:
Despite the resilient nature of beliefs, there were significantly different responses between the two administrations of the questionnaire in this study, suggesting that many student responses and the beliefs associated with these responses may be susceptible to change over this three-month period. The addition of the qualitative data (i.e., semi-structured interviews) to the study revealed a wealth of information on the depth of knowledge associated with
those changes as a result of the SLA course. In the interviews, participants provided reasons for changes (or lack thereof) contexts for their answers.

The present study suggests that graduate students in this academy start out their MA program with several common preconceptions about language learning and teaching. Support for some of these notions, such as the primacy of vocabulary and grammar study in language learning or the importance of correct pronunciation can be accounted for on the basis of their previous experiences as language learners. Taking into consideration that participants of this study were a very homogeneous group of students, with respect both to their nationality as well as to their language education background, we can safely assume that such beliefs actually reflect teaching practices they had experienced as learners of English as a foreign language. Commonly, teachers of English in Libya tend to place a heavy emphasis on the instruction of the formal aspects of the language; this is considered to be a necessity, rather than a conscious choice, since most EFL teaching in Libya is exam and certificate-oriented. Libyan education system gives priority to certified knowledge of foreign languages from a very young age and thus promotes intensive teaching and exam-oriented approaches to language learning and teaching. Language teachers usually follow prescribed syllabi and adopt a traditional grammar based methodology. The vast majority of our students have been educated through this system and as a result, their beliefs about language learning and teaching, when they enter university, are expected to be heavily influenced by the particular learning experiences.

One finding of this study indicates that, comparing with other courses in the MA program, the SLA research and theory course was one area through which these participants have developed conceptual knowledge about language learning and teaching. It, in fact, did have an impact on some of the beliefs, assumptions and knowledge of these student teachers. These students, who took the course, did register significant changes in their attitudes towards certain issues in language learning. Thus it would seem that, despite the explicit aversion expressed by these participants towards the theoretical approach of the course, which beyond the scope of this paper, the course did have some measurable effect. They appeared to have started out with common sense beliefs about language learning which were perhaps closest to a behaviorist model of language learning. It is possible that these reflected didactic classroom practices that they had experienced during their periods of language learning in their Libyan foreign language classrooms. The kind of beliefs that these students seemed to be moving towards would seem to fit in with a broadly “Krashenite” view, which sees language learning as a largely unconscious process, or with a
broadly cognitive perspective, which emphasizes the potential for conscious language learning (Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

There was a clear and direct impact of training in SLA on the participants involved. The SLA course had some measurable effect on their beliefs which seemed to be closest to a behaviorist model of language learning when they first entered the course. As evident in some of these graduate students' quotes, when they began the course they didn’t hold positive attitudes toward communicative activities in the language classroom. In other words, the SLA course has helped them realize communication is vital in foreign language learning. They started to have a different stance on several key issues in language learning and teaching such as fluency and accuracy, competence and performance, error treatment, role of feedback, use of group work and recognize the significant role of age and motivation in language learning. For example, after the course, the majority of these subjects agreed that making mistakes is a natural part of language learning, that different people learn languages in different ways and that language learning takes a long time.

9. Conclusion:

The aim of this study was to investigate EFL graduate students’ beliefs about language learning on taking an SLA course in the academy of graduate studies in Libya. The findings of this study do not support the view such a course has a limited effect on student teachers’ beliefs; while few of those beliefs remain stable throughout the semester, the majority of them develop gradually, and in several cases, significant changes in beliefs are observed between the start and the end of the course. The evidence presented in this article suggests that SLA courses are not homogeneous and that there are important differences both between and within courses which may explain the seeming lack of impact described in earlier studies. Too little cognizance has been taken of the characteristics of individual courses and even course components. We know very little about what actually happens in teacher training courses; in particular, there is limited information about both the program of study and the content of those courses. There is no way to know whether the changes are temporary, or will remain over time as the teachers continue in their careers, or how changes in beliefs at this early stage of teachers’ careers eventually become integrated into teaching practice. Perhaps pre-service teachers need to revisit their beliefs in all of their professional courses since beliefs appear to be so resistant to change. However, further research is needed into the relation and impact of specific courses on the development of their teaching practice and behavior in actual EFL classrooms.

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at Canada International Conference on Education (CICE). University of Toronto. Toronto, Canada. (24-26 July. 2014).
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References


