

## Exploring Beliefs of L2 Teachers at the Higher Secondary Level in Bangladesh

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### Abstract

This study has investigated the beliefs of higher secondary level English language teachers and the impact of these beliefs on their classroom practices. The study aimed to examine what beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions L2 teachers at the higher secondary school level in Bangladesh have about L2 teaching and learning. Qualitative research methods were used to collect and analyse data. The findings revealed a regular pattern of consistency between teachers' beliefs and practices. Finally, the study concludes with an argument to develop teacher education programmes that will engage with teachers' inherent belief systems by incorporating reflective practices in the programme methodology.

**Keywords:** Beliefs, Cognition, Classroom practices, Reflection, Teacher development

## Introduction

In recent years, the role of teachers is considered to be very definitive for any improvement in the field of education. The more the value placed on education for the development of human resources, social unity, and justice in today's technology-based global economies the higher is the significance being given to teachers responsible for that education. Proposals presented for a viable educational policy are dependent on teachers' perception of them in their pedagogic practice, as well as their ability to comprehend and implement them. Furthermore, due to population growth, there is a strong demand for qualified professionals to staff classrooms not only at present but also well into the future. Thus, it is reasonable to place the highest priority on appropriate educational planning which will create opportunities for effective and sustainable teacher development.

Beliefs is an important aspect of teacher cognition, which involves teachers' decisions, course planning, classroom practices, previous language learning experiences, education, training, and assumptions along with beliefs (Borg, 2003). Currently, it is considered essential to understanding teachers' beliefs and their preferred teaching processes in order to understand the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Interest in research on teachers' beliefs in the field of second language (L2) learning has become more significant due to the recent global concern for the teaching and learning of an L2, specifically English (Abrar-ul-Hassan & Nassaji, 2021; Borg, 2011; Harumi, 2002; Sung, 2013). Understanding what teachers believe, think, and do in their classrooms has become important for successful teacher education programmes.

Research in the field of L2 teaching shows that teachers' cognitions inform their classroom practices (Breen, 1991; Foss & Kleinsasser, 1996; Gatlinton, 1999; Richards, 1996). Teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes about teaching and learning are partly an outcome of their own learning experiences (AlvearSepúlveda & MejjiasMorales, 2019; Almarza, 1996; Bailey et al., 1996; Borg, 2003; Breen, 1991; Johnson, 1994; Levin & He, 2008). People hold beliefs which impact and are manifested through their behaviour and interactions. Similarly, in the case of teachers, a strong relationship has been observed between beliefs and their planning, decisions, and practices (Pajares, 1992).

## L2 Teaching in Bangladesh

English is the only foreign language studied in the curriculum and is a compulsory component of the syllabus at all levels of schooling in Bangladesh. In the 1990s, policymakers introduced the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) programme. As part of this programme, the government introduced major changes in the English curriculum, textbooks, and teacher training programmes (Chowdhury & Le Ha, 2008). Particularly, the '*English for Today*' (EFT) textbook series were introduced throughout the school curriculum with specific emphasis on the learning of grammar through context, functional use of language, and the practice of the four skills. However, these changes were introduced in education before adequately preparing teachers for it. Subsequent teacher training programmes introduced by the Government and some private organisations to familiarize teachers with the newly introduced CLT curriculum, have not shown any desirable results. "This emphasis on an uncontrolled educational expansion without a corresponding provision for trained teachers, teaching and learning facilities and other supporting infrastructure, has created an environment which is vulnerable to all sorts of problems" (Rahman, 2009, p. 131). The Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) results presented in Table 1 are proof of the ineffectiveness of all these reforms. The data presented in Table 1 shows that the majority of students fail their HSC exams due to failure in English.

**Table 1 Percentage of Failure in HSC Examinations in Dhaka Board**

Year	No of HSC Examinees	% of Failed Examinees	% of Examinees failed in English
2017	337494	30.26 %	23.34 %
2016	340682	26.47 %	13.50 %
2015	276778	31.84 %	20.90 %
2014	300554	15.46 %	7.41 %
2013	265551	25.96 %	17.70 %

Such evidence reveals the low competence level of students and this is a frequent complaint of educators (Khan, 2010). Early policies marginalised English in the national curriculum creating various problems for English teaching and learning (Hamid, 2015). While this creates challenges for students at all levels, the effects are more prominent at the higher secondary level. The importance of the HSC exams is higher than the SSC exams because it determines the course of future study and is the gateway to tertiary education (Khan, 2010). However, there is a wide gap between the proficiency of students at the HSC level and the proficiency required for entrance into the tertiary study (Rahman, Kabir & Afroze, 2006). For example, in 2014 only two students passed the entrance exam for admission into the English Department of Dhaka University (Correspondent, D.U., 2014, September 25).

### Teachers' Beliefs and L2 Practices

In educational research the distinction between knowledge and beliefs is blurred. Research conducted on teachers' knowledge shows that the terms 'knowledge' and 'beliefs' have often been used synonymously (Clandinin & Connelly 1987; Elbaz 1981; Kagan, 1990). Researchers studying the practices of language teachers have concluded that teachers are strongly influenced by their prior learning experiences (Almarza, 1996; Bailey et al., 1996; Breen, 1991; Johnson, 1994; Numrich, 1996; Woods, 1996). Teachers enter the teaching profession with an "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975). In the classrooms, teachers bring in experiences from their past learning, teaching, and other lived experiences. Gattabon (1999) asserts that the pattern of pedagogical knowledge and thoughts are acquired by teachers through teacher education programmes and also the strong influence of their teachers. Training brings changes in the practices of teachers but some researchers argue that these are just behavioural aspects of change rather than cognitive change (Borg, 2006; Freeman, 1992).

In particular, the influences of prior learning experiences have been pervasive in teacher practices related to grammar instruction and error correction in classroom settings (Burgess & Etherington, 2002; Carter, 1990; Golombek, 1998; Schulz, 1996, 2001). Although teachers' beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction have been widely examined in different educational settings in different countries, it has not been well researched in the context of HSC level education in Bangladesh. Another aspect that is less well researched in the context of HSC level education in Bangladesh is the use of L1 for L2 learning. Popular and predominant language teaching methodologies and approaches recognize the facilitative role of the L1 for L2 teaching and learning (Cook, 2001). The technique of 'translanguaging' is a relatively recent concept in the field of L2 research. Researchers advocating translanguaging claim it to be a resourceful tool for bilingual and multilingual learners as it can provide the scaffolding that students need and can benefit them if used as a norm of classroom activities. (Daniel, Jiménez, Pray, & Pacheco, 2017; Oliver, Wigglesworth, Angelo, & Steele, 2021; Rowe, 2018).

Teacher beliefs and classroom practice are symbiotic in nature (Foss & Kleinsasser, 1996). Research findings reveal that even though teachers are receptive and positive about the CLT method, their practices did not show much use of this method. Rahman (2009) assessed college teachers' perceptions about the

CLT approach and the EFT textbook introduced at the HSC level in Bangladesh. She found that teachers' understanding of the CLT approach was mixed and that teachers "pedagogic decisions appeared to be influenced by their beliefs regarding second language teaching, their classroom situations and the world around them" (Rahman, 2009; p. 144). Hence, teachers might express beliefs that can contradict their classroom behavior and the reasons for this discrepancy can be understood when teachers make their beliefs explicit through reflective practices, narrative writings, peer review, and discussions.

This research was carried out to gain a deeper understanding of how teachers' beliefs impact their classroom practices at the HSC level in colleges in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. The research questions that guided the study are:

- (i) What are the beliefs of HSC level English language teachers about English language teaching?
- (ii) How do teacher beliefs affect English teaching practices at the HSC level?

### **Research Methodology and Data Analysis**

This study followed a qualitative research methodology. Ten participants teaching at the HSC level were chosen from seven colleges in different parts of Dhaka city. Since the study was qualitative in nature only ten participants were chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of their beliefs. The principles of confidentiality and anonymity were adhered to throughout the research process (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Data collection took place through class observations and interviews. Four classes of each of the ten participant teachers, i.e., in total forty classes were observed, class proceedings were audio-recorded, and field notes were taken. Classes at different institutions were of different duration with the average class time being 45 minutes. Class observations provided insight into the events, which were recorded both through audio-recorder and written notes. Besides the initial introductory session, each participant was interviewed twice. The first interview was conducted after two class observations, while the second interview was conducted after the final class observation. Instances of teaching were replayed during both the interviews for an in-depth discussion on teachers' beliefs, especially issues regarding the use of L1 for L2 teaching, explicit grammar instruction, and methods of error correction. Instances from classroom activities were pointed out for clarification and understanding of beliefs during the interviews. The step-wise interview process provided the opportunity to gain an understanding of teachers' actions in class in light of their stated beliefs. Each interview lasted forty-five to sixty minutes.

During data analysis, themes were identified from the transcribed data. Codes were assigned to themes as they emerged during data analysis. Participant teachers were identified as T1 to T10 in the analysis. Content analysis was used to analyse the class observation notes in light of interview data to make sense of a volume of qualitative material and to identify core consistencies and meanings (Patton, 2002).

### **Discussion of the Findings**

The focus of the study was to facilitate a deeper understanding of teachers' beliefs and their significance to the teaching-learning situation at the HSC level. In total, four themes and corresponding sub-themes emerged that highlighted integral parts of teachers' beliefs and practices. The sub-themes which have been extracted from the main themes are collated and presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Teachers' beliefs categorised under different themes and sub-themes**

Themes	Sub-themes
Teaching methodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Exam-oriented teaching</li> <li>● Prior learning experiences</li> <li>● Error correction</li> <li>● Use of L1 and translation</li> <li>● Literature oriented teaching</li> </ul>
Effectiveness of the HSC syllabus and the EFT textbook	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Difficulty level</li> <li>● Time constraint</li> </ul>
Belief in self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Influence on students</li> </ul>
Effectiveness of teacher training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Role of mediation</li> </ul>

### *Teaching Methodology*

The first theme discussed is the teaching methodology that teachers employed. Classroom observations revealed that teaching was fully exam-oriented. Teachers primarily focused on solving question papers of HSC exams from previous years with an emphasis on vocabulary and grammar instruction. They believed it was their moral responsibility to complete the syllabus and prepare their students for examinations (Golombek, 1998). As one teacher explained, *'Our target is to pass the exam. Teaching is always exam-based and grade-based. We don't think of teaching them the English language. Only 3-5% of the students are actually learning English. The rest feel that that it is useless once they have taken the exam'* (T10). In the context of Bangladeshi culture, more importance is given to test scores than language proficiency. So "Most teachers are forced to teach to the examination rather than to student needs and objectives" (Rahman, 2015, p. 96).

There was no discrepancy between teachers' professed beliefs and their practices. In comparing field notes with interview transcripts, it was clear that teachers' previous experience played a major role in their practice. T7 explained this by saying, *'my teacher's system was to teach using a grammar-based method.... he has taught us grammar well and that is why at present I enjoy teaching grammar'*. Another participant, T8 asserted that *'English teaching is mainly about teaching grammar and finishing the EFT book'*. Grammar was taught by the teachers in their classes as it is prescribed in the syllabus. Thus, the negative backwash effect occurs resulting in students learning only items that appear in the exams such as vocabulary and grammar.

Error correction was a sub-theme that emerged from teachers' classroom practices. Teachers' attitude towards error correction was not very strict or formal. Whenever there were errors in students' answers to questions, it was observed that teachers did not reprimand or correct students very harshly. Their statements revealed that they were aware of the affective factors involved in error correction. Especially in classroom situations, negative experiences of error correction might hamper students' language learning (Golombek, 1998; Schulz, 2001). As T1 explained, *'If we do not rectify them they will not learn. Whenever I teach them grammar I stop them and correct them if they make errors. Though correcting*

*frequently in front of the rest of the students, it degrades the confidence of the students*'. In some classes, teachers provided corrective feedback in the form of repetition and recasts (Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

In the forty class observations undertaken, teachers used Bangla most of the time with occasional use of English. Participants professed they had to use Bangla because students would not understand them if they used English all the time and classes would become boring. T4 stated that *'All the students once went to the principal's room and said they would not attend my class because "all the time he speaks English. It's our problem we will fail the exams. He doesn't make things clear in Bangla."* Linguists concerned with educational issues advocate translanguaging as an effective language learning tool (Cook, 2001; Daniel et al., 2017; Rowe, 2018). Teachers of the present research study believed that the use of L1 in their classes was essential for the students' comprehension. Their foremost concern was the cognitive abilities and affective aspects of their students.

Literature-oriented teaching was a prominent theme that emerged from classroom practices. Teachers taught the literary texts very passionately and with a lot of enthusiasm. In one instance, as a teacher (T10) was teaching W. B. Yeats' poem *'Lake Isle of Innisfere'*, he read out the poem very emotionally and dramatically bringing in references from Wordsworth and his own experiences of living in his village. It is necessary to mention here that eight of the participants had a B.A. and M.A. degree in English literature, and only two had an M.A. in ELT. Their own experience of studying English was studying it through literature and they enjoyed teaching the literary texts. While teaching literary texts, teachers acted out the parts of the characters, e.g. of the lady and the writer from "The Luncheon" very enthusiastically and recited poetry ardently in class. These classes were more interactive than the classes in which grammar was taught.

Preferred classroom practices of teaching vocabulary, grammar, literature, using L1, and translation is indicative of teachers' prior learning experiences. Besides the strong influence of prior learning experiences on teachers' beliefs, several other underlying features contributed to the formation of teachers' beliefs. These additional features include an orientation to examinations and the syllabus, the prevalent teaching practice in the country, lack of infrastructural facilities, a non-conducive classroom environment for teaching, and a strong sense of self-worth.

### *Effectiveness of the HSC Syllabus and the EFT Textbook*

Teachers' opinion about the HSC syllabus and the EFT textbook was not very positive, except for the fact that the literary texts made it more enjoyable for both teachers and students. The participants complained that some of the lessons in the text were too difficult to teach, the book was too lengthy and the lessons were unsuitable for HSC students. Time constraint was a major factor since they had to complete teaching the syllabus. Due to the pressure of exams, classroom practices showed that teachers were focused on teaching the syllabus. As one study participant elaborately explained, *"In the present syllabus, there is a mixture of grammar and textbook and the textbook lessons are not very student-friendly. I think that the curriculum system is faulty"* (T6).

The ultimate goal of teaching is to achieve good learning outcomes. Williams and Burden (1997) argued that if teachers teach just for students to pass exams, then this will have significant implications for their teaching methods. On the other hand, they will take a very different approach to teaching if they consider "learning a new language as a lifelong process with much broader social, cultural and educational implications" (p. 60).

### *Belief in Self*

Teachers' belief in self was a major theme that emerged from class observations and interview data. The interviewed teachers expressed a very high level of confidence in their proficiency in English and their

ability to teach well. They were all very confident about being able to teach well. One participant explained this by saying,

As an English teacher, I must say I am not boring to the students. I am very witty in the class; I am not nervous. I am very friendly and I don't feel any hesitation in teaching. As an English teacher, I feel well, I feel proud because I am giving my students knowledge of English so far as I can. (T5)

Teachers also felt that they had learned English very well and had gained a very high degree of command over the language. However, class observations revealed that some of the participants did not have the language proficiency level required of an English teacher. This problem could be solved by introducing a language learning component in all teacher education programmes (Rahman, 1999). Many participants reported that they found being an English teacher a very prestigious occupation saying that wherever they went they were shown a lot of respect. Although Azad, Bala, and Sarker (2014) have found that the socio-economic status of teachers from other parts of Bangladesh is low compared to other professions, the high self-esteem of participants of this study may be explained by the fact that they were all situated in the capital city and teaching at well-reputed institutions. Teachers reported that students also liked their English teachers more than the teachers of other subjects. They felt that as English teachers they could influence their students in desirable ways whether it was for learning or on other matters (Bandura, 1995; Ross, 1994). As one participant explained, *'I am a teacher and I can motivate my students and if any of my students follow me, I think it will be my success'* (T6). Teachers' self-worth and confidence became evident in statements like these.

### *Effectiveness of Teacher Training*

Participants reported that the teacher training programmes they had participated in were not very effective. The training they had received was on pedagogy, communicative language teaching, and general foundation courses. As one participant explained, *'A teacher must have training. Teacher training makes a teacher more experienced and proficient in teaching English'* (T5). Participants also felt that the training sessions would provide them with a platform where they could vent their grievances. Teachers understood that training was essential for professional development. One participant professed, *'I think the weakness is lack of training that is if I get more training I will be more effective as a teacher'* (T7). Hence, training and its outcome are powerful mediating factors that work to enhance learning and desirable behavioural change in teaching practices.

Keeping in perspective 'mediation' as being central for any learning to take place, effective teacher training programmes could be designed incorporating features of engaging with teachers' in-built belief systems through adopting and encouraging reflective techniques among the teaching community. The habit of reflective practice needs to be inculcated into teachers through teacher education programmes so that they become aware of the positive outcomes of these practices. Teacher education programmes could also take into account the aspect of teachers' sense of self-worth and promote this sense of professional development.

### *Implications for Teacher Education*

The pedagogical implications drawn from the study are manifold. In Bangladesh there are only 6 Higher Secondary Teacher Training Institutes (HSTTI) for subject-based training of college teachers which is not enough to cater to the number of college teachers in Bangladesh. Programmes offered in these institutes need to recognise the existence of teachers' prior beliefs, make them aware of the influence of these beliefs on teaching techniques. Self-evaluation is also a key factor in teacher development. Teachers have to be aware that their actions and interactions with the learners, construct their learners' knowledge and view of the world.

Teacher developers can introduce interactive tools (e.g. probing a school situation, problem-solving) in their programmes. Teachers can be encouraged to talk about their beliefs, experiences, and practices with their peers and their tutors. This promotes an environment that helps teachers overcome their inhibitions and gradually encourages a discourse of open exchange, discussion, and reflective practices. Teacher education programs must create awareness among trainee-teachers to understand the dynamics of how they think and act while they develop as teachers. The success of programs based on current educational knowledge and principles will remain minimal unless teachers' beliefs and contexts are taken into consideration.

## Conclusion

The status of English in Bangladesh has changed from a language marginalized through nationalist sentiments in the seventies and early eighties to a language perceived as immensely important for economic development and mobility in the context of globalization. This has led to the English language being prominently featured in the national education policy and in the curriculum with a number of reforms being introduced from time to time. Despite this, even after twelve years of mandatory English education with an extra year at the undergraduate level, the outcomes are disheartening. There is ample documentation regarding the inadequate level of English language proficiency of the school-leaving population. Several complex socio-economic and political factors and a range of other issues have contributed to this situation and the way forward remains full of challenges.

Of the number of factors essential for satisfactory outcomes of educational input, the teacher has been identified as being at the core of learning and teaching as it is the teacher who interprets and implements the curriculum. In matters of English language education too, the teacher plays a pivotal role. With the rise of the significance of English in the present world, the effective teaching and learning of this language have become imperative. It can be argued that formal teacher education programs should elicit teachers' ingrained beliefs, engage with them, and use them as a foundation for developing a teaching philosophy based on a combination of content and applied knowledge.

It is advocated that recognition and acceptance of teachers' beliefs and their significance in the English language classroom need to be utilised in teacher development programmes to promote a better teaching and learning environment not only at the higher secondary level but across all stages of education in the country.

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The author declares that there is no conflict of interests.

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## Ethics Statement

I, hereby, state that I have conducted the research and prepared the manuscript following the protocol of research and publications ethics. I am solely responsible if any deviation or mistake (in content and language) is identified in the manuscript.

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