THE IMPACT OF TEACHERS’ BELIEFS ON THEIR PRACTICE IN ACTIVITY STRUCTURING

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This article presents the findings of a case study designed to determine the relationship between language teachers’ beliefs about learner training and their practices in structuring classroom activity. The data in the study dealing with three university teachers was drawn from a beliefs questionnaire and an interview as well as eighteen audio-recorded lessons. Predictions about how teachers would structure activity in the light of their beliefs were made and related to their practices in their classrooms. The study shows that the teachers’ beliefs are not systematically reflected in their classroom practices and it explores why this is so.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last few years there has been a trend in ESL to empower the learner and make him or her less dependent on the teacher and, in the long run, more able to pursue self-instruction (for example, see Dickinson 1987). One way of moving towards this autonomy in the classroom starts by sharing with students aspects of the teaching that have traditionally belonged exclusively to the instructor (Chaiton 1990). The present paper is based on the hypothesis that some of this sharing will become apparent when the teacher structures activity in such a way that students become more aware of their own learning. “Structuring”, a term used by Fanselow (1987) and Richards and Lockhart (1994) among others, refers to all the segments of classroom talk that set the stage for subsequent activity or bring activity to a close. In the literature, we find a number of authors that comment on the scant information that is passed onto students during structuring. From the field of ESL, Hosenfeld (1976), Nunan (1996) and Prabhu (1992) have observed that teachers tend to share with students little of one or more of these: the curricular objectives, the methodological guidelines, and the management of learning. Similar comments are made by researchers from the context of primary education (Bennett and Dunne, 1992; Galton and Williamson, 1992). In spite of this evidence, there is quite a generalized belief that teachers should spend some time going through the processes students are expected to activate during an activity (for example, Block, 1996). This study was set up to gain an understanding of why there is this scarcity of structuring talk and to find out if this is related to the teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning.

2. THE OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of the study was to relate university EFL teachers’ beliefs about learner training and the procedural information they gave during instruction. The reason for focusing on the teachers’ beliefs on learner training was as follows: The school where the data was collected had recently introduced a learner training component in the syllabus of

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all courses, this being an invitation for teachers to be more explicit in the managing of their lessons. Focusing on procedural structuring (rather than topic, linguistic or psychological structuring) was motivated because it seemed that differences in teachers’ beliefs would be more pronounced. Three aspects of procedural structuring were analyzed: (1) the detail of information given on how to perform activities and the degree of explicitation of strategies to overcome potential problems, (2) the relationships drawn between activities, and (3) the degree of student involvement in decisions about what to do and how in class. The expectation was that the procedural information given by teachers in favor of including a learner training component in language instruction would be quantitatively and qualitatively different from that given by those teachers who thought learning training had no place in university language education.

3. METHODOLOGY

The attitude the teachers observed towards learner training was revealed by a closed-ended questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The questionnaire asked teachers about what they valued most in their students, about what functions they saw themselves as having in class and about the objectives they usually planned in their teaching. The interview, which was audio recorded, was more open-ended and teachers were left free to express their own line of thought as regards learner training and how they put their beliefs into practice. The questionnaires were completed towards the beginning of the school year whereas the interviews took place towards its end.

The information on how teachers structured classroom activity in their teaching was derived from field notes and audio records. The field notes were taken in the first half of the year and each class was visited from six to seven times. The audio records took place in the second part of the year and each class was recorded on six non-consecutive occasions. All these observational data amounted to eighty-six pages of field notes coming from twenty lessons, and three hundred and ten pages of the machine recorded documentation from a total of eighteen lessons. In order to process the data, an inductive approach was used where themes emerged from the analysis itself. The remainder of this paper is a qualitative account of the results.

4. THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The data come from three intermediate EFL classes at a language school at a major public university in Spain and they had an average of 17, 11, and 18 undergraduate students. The majority of these students were young adults (19-24 years old) pursuing a degree in physics, chemistry or economics.

Each of these three classes was taught by a different teacher, Bob, Mark and Sharon (pseudonyms), who were native speakers of English and had taught at least three years at the school. Bob, in his late twenties, obtained a Postgraduate Certificate in Education specializing in ESL. Mark, in his forties, had received no formal training in ESL besides in-service seminars. Sharon, in her mid-thirties, had obtained an RSA certificate while working at a private language school six years ago.

The data collected from Bob’s, Mark’s and Sharon’s classes was from an intermediate 120-hour course (four hours weekly). At that level, basic grammatical structures and communicative skills were consolidated and complex ones were introduced. All intermediate-level classes in the school were required to use the same textbook but there were few other restrictions.
5. LEARNER TRAINING: THE TEACHERS’ BELIEFS

Through the questionnaire and the interviews differences in the positions towards learner training among the three teachers were identified. Mark was the teacher who proved to be less fond of the dynamics of learner training taking place at the school. He said that some of it was obvious to him and that he was no more interested in this than he was in other aspects of ESL (interview pp. 4-5). When he was asked what the three things were that he most valued in learners, he said “come to class, do the homework and study after class” (interview p. 2), which shows his priorities were not very learner-centered.

Sharon and Bob had a stronger interest in learner training than Mark. When Sharon and Bob were asked about what they most valued in students their answers were more in line with the philosophy behind learner training:

**SHARON:**
- Using appropriate strategies
- Willingness to learn autonomously
- Awareness of why and how students learn English (questionnaire)

**BOB:**
- Being cooperative
- Awareness of why and how students learn English
- Holding appropriate beliefs for language learning (questionnaire)

However, during the interviews Bob proved to be more interested in learner training than Sharon did. He described this area as “a Pandora’s box” (interview, pp. 12-13) with more to it than he had first imagined. Besides, he was voluntarily involved in the production of material for learner training that the school had set up that year.

Sharon, on the other hand, said that five years ago she had only incorporated into her teaching what she liked about this area and admitted that she was not sure what the difference between cooperative learning and learner training was. She was less involved than Bob in the movement towards learner training that was taking place at the school, as she said: “The fact that there’s a dynamic at the school means that I could take more advantage of learner training than I am doing” (interview p. 23).

6. THE STRUCTURING OF ACTIVITY: THE TEACHERS’ PRACTICES

The following description is centered on three aspects of how the teachers gave or elicited procedural information. The first aspect is the detail and specificity with which teachers gave procedural information, with the expectation that teachers who were more in line with teacher training would give more frequent and detailed instructions. The second aspect focuses on the frequency with which teachers anticipated and drew connections with subsequent activities or learning objectives, with the hypothesis that teachers in favor of learner training would keep their students more informed about the lesson’s agenda. The third and last aspect examines the extent to which students were given a chance to have a say in the lesson’s agenda, the expectation being that a teacher who held learner-centered beliefs would leave some room for students to participate in this agenda.

6.1. SPECIFIC DIRECTIONS

Teachers sometimes gave specific accounts about the actions students were expected to take with a detail or specificity that was not usually found in directions which teachers
just gave the basic information about what needed to be done. The italicized lines in excerpt 1 are an example of a specific direction from Mark in an activity where students had to interview each other (see Appendix A for the conventions used in transcript). The teacher told them what they had to do if communication between the interviewer and interviewee broke down:

(1) *T* Now- you are now going to try and ask as many people as possible. (...) And also when you ask, remember don’t please don’t do this, don’t say: Do you like- and show them the questions. Read them. *If you don’t understand: Could you repeat that? What does X mean? et cetera et cetera.* OK. (Mark, 1/4 848)

Similarly, teachers sometimes explained a covert feature of the structure of the activity or of its evaluation (if it was an activity related to the final exam). These were sort of “tricks” that students would otherwise usually discover only after extended exposure to the activity in question. In excerpt 2 there is another instance of a specific description of an activity. Here the teacher shared with students two pieces of tacit knowledge about a reading activity consisting of crossing out extra words:

(2) *T* In these exercises the word is usually very obvious that it’s wrong. Secondly eh you don’t have two so close together. (Mark 11/5 276)

Other examples of specific directions or descriptions were references to the nature of mistakes, the importance of fluency over accuracy, the need for self-monitoring, and the use of context.

Table 1 shows the frequency of references to specific directions per teacher. If one considers the number of activities in the six audio-recorded lessons from each teacher, Bob included the highest proportion of references (1.2 per activity), while Mark and Sharon made an average of one such reference in every two activities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Number of audio recorded references</th>
<th>Number of audio recorded activities</th>
<th>Average number of references per activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bob</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharon</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What motivated these references is yet another relevant factor when it comes to seeing how much of a habit each teacher had in making these specific references, which has to do with whether activities primarily prepared for the final exam or not (see Table 2). Twelve out of the fifteen references by Mark were related to the exam. Bob’s mention of specific directions were more evenly distributed: six references related versus five unrelated to the exam. There were no references related to the exam by Sharon. So it seems that for Mark the pressure of the exam determined his being more specific in telling his students what was expected of them. On the other hand, Bob and, to a larger extent, Sharon included this type of comments irrespective of whether activities were related to the exam or not.

Table 2: Number of specific directions in activities related and unrelated to exam practice

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Related to exam</th>
<th>Unrelated to exam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bob</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharon</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In spite of these differences, there was a common feature in the talk of the three teachers, which was the brevity of their references to specific directions. There was only one intervention from Mark (11/5 activity 3) that stood out from the others in that he took thirty-eight turns and it lasted for seven minutes and forty seconds. The rest were usually a few propositions long (from one to five) and did not require the students’ verbal participation. In part, the shortness of the references was due to the fact that teachers usually told students what should be done without demonstrating it through examples.

To conclude, even though the number of references to specific directions made by the three teachers differed, the length of these interventions was relatively brief and little verbal participation from students was required.

6.2. PREVIEWS

Each time a teacher anticipated academic activity to the students is referred to in this section as a “preview”. Previews can anticipate academic activity within a lesson or across lessons and they are most likely to be communicated at the beginnings and ends of lessons but also in between activities.

An analysis of the previews (see Table 3) given by Bob, Mark and Sharon shows the three teachers provided very few of them within lessons and that Bob provided more previews across lessons than Mark and Sharon. However, the distinction in the use of previews between the three teachers does not come so much from this count, but rather from a qualitative analysis of each event and its context. First Bob's previews will be described. Later on those by Mark and Sharon will be dealt with together.

**TABLE 3: NUMBER OF PREVIEWS WITHIN AND ACROSS LESSONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Previews within lessons</th>
<th>Previews across lessons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bob</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharon</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bob used to end lessons with a preview by telling students what they would be doing the following class if it was somehow related to what they had done on that day. Most of the times this preview was embedded in homework assignments (excerpt 3), but not always (excerpt 4). In excerpt 3, the teacher gave students a language exercise before the lesson ended. In excerpt 4 a problem-solving activity was being concluded before the end of the lesson.

(3) T Right. So if you could do that exercise for tomorrow, I'd be a happy man because I'd like to look at that exercise tomorrow so that we can finish with gerunds and infinitives.
(Bob, 11/3 555)
(4) T: Now then, eh we’ll be doing some more of these situations next week and thinking again about where you can use some of the grammar that we’ve looked at when you’re speaking. OK. Right, so, we’ll stop there for today then. (.02) Good afternoon! and welcome to the show. (Bob, 26/3 596)

As regards previews within a lesson, Table 3 shows that Bob only gave one. But that is understandable considering that four out of the six lessons recorded were one-activity lessons, thus with no chance of previews within lessons. This is very different in the case of Mark and Sharon because they used to implement an average of 4 activities per lesson so the low number of previews within a lesson in their class is a more revealing figure.

Mark and Sharon also differentiated themselves from Bob in that most of their previews across and within lessons were given under unusual circumstances. One of the previews Mark gave within a lesson (4/12 046) was presented as such in the textbook, which makes one wonder if he would have given that preview had it not appeared in print. On another occasion the preview was given in talking about the little time there was left before the exam and that scarcity of time made the teacher plan ahead (also an unusual circumstance). Then there were three instances from Mark and Sharon of previews given as a result of a change of plans because something unexpected happened (another unusual circumstance). Once, an announcement about spending the remainder of the lesson on vocabulary was given only after Sharon found out that the video was not working. Mark’s announcement that students would have to write a composition about Marco Polo in two weeks was given when the teacher realized they were still not ready to write that composition for the following week as he had planned.

In short, students in Bob’s class had a sense of continuity due to the presence of previews across lessons. In contrast, in Sharon’s and Mark’s classes there was less explicitation of the continuity across lessons and on normal circumstances students moved from activity to activity with little awareness of the link between activities in a lesson.

6.3. CHANCES FOR STUDENT DECISION-MAKING

The analysis of the data showed that none of these three teachers systematically structured for students’ participation in the process of decision-making. Teachers presented activities as finished plans to be implemented. This happened in activities and homework assignments that were implemented as planned as well as in those that were decided on on the spot. Students in the three classes were not usually given the chance to choose what activities to do, or what grammar areas to focus on, and only occasionally were they free to choose what to read or talk about (especially in Sharon’s class). In the data, there were three occasions where one of the teachers seemed to be opening up for students to make a decision. However, a closer examination of these three cases shows that they may not be genuine invitations for decision-making on the part of the teachers or that they are limited invitations as regards to what students can decide upon.

In excerpt 5, Bob requested the students’ opinion about doing a listening. A student (S4) suggested a dictation, a suggestion that was accepted by Bob. However, the listening was still done when the teacher planned to. So S4’s suggestion did not persuade the teacher enough to drop the listening and do the dictation first.

(5) T: What I was thinking of doing today was ehm we’ll spend half the class looking at structural conversions again and then what about doing a listening? Because we haven’t done a listening, have we?
S4: And a dictation.
T: And a dictation as well. Wow! Well, no, we’ll do a dictation tomorrow, OK?

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S4 OK.
T And that will sort of prepare and have you ready for the dictation on Thursday yeah? ... and the listening, yeah? (Bob, 19/5 005)

In excerpt 6, Mark was trying to give some extra homework for students in the face of the proximity of the exam and he asked about the students’ availability. S5 must have interpreted the teacher’s question as an invitation for ideas on how to make the most of time. But his suggestion (see first arrow) was ignored by the teacher, who did not really respond to S5’s suggestion and turned to the following activity (see second arrow), thus leaving no space for further discussion.

(6) T If ... I give you ... exercises to do this weekend,= 
S5 This weekend or? 
S2 This weekend? 
T =will you do them? 
S5 Yes. 
(...)
S5 One one suggestion. Can you do the solutions of some and we can ... = 
S2-S5 =Però millor que ho= 
S5 =so that we can see 
S [Millor fer-lo ho X. 
S2 [Millor que ho facis i li dones amb ell. 
S5 Yes but ... 
T No. I prefer S5- for example it would be useful to do reading in pairs in the class. The problem is we haven’t got much time. So I prefer now for example to do a dictation ... Right? (Mark, 11/5 811)

These examples show that the few times when a teacher asked for the students’ opinions about what to do, the plans were already made by the teacher. They rather seemed to be seeking the students’ approval of the teacher’s plans.

7. RELATING CLASSROOM PRACTICES WITH BELIEFS

In the section of the teachers’ beliefs, Bob and Sharon were described as in favor of the thinking underlying learner training and as more learner-centered teachers than Mark, who was skeptical about learner training. After the analysis of these teachers’ procedural structuring, it can be observed that their beliefs do not forecast their classroom practice. This is because, on the one hand, some aspects of these three teachers’ structuring were very similar to each other in spite of their beliefs. Their specific directions were brief and there was little room left for student decision-making. On the other hand, only Bob, the teacher who was more involved with the area of learner training, provided some aspects of his structuring in a different manner from the other two teachers. He made more frequent references to specific directions and previews across lessons. Surprisingly, Sharon, who held beliefs that were similar to Bob’s, structured activity in a similar way to Mark, a teacher that had a different belief system from hers.

Two main reasons can be hypothesized as to why some aspects of Bob’s procedural structuring were not markedly different from Sharon’s and Mark’s. One possibility would be that Bob’s recent incorporation of learner training in his philosophy of teaching had not yet become evident in his practice. There is evidence from Richardson, Anders, Tidwell and Lloyd (1991, 579) that this happened in reading teachers: “A lack of relationship between beliefs and practices may indicate that the teacher is going through a change process. In the case of Susan, it appeared that changes in beliefs were preceding changes in
practices". Another reason may be that teachers gave these directions not so much out of an interest to make the process obvious and inform students so that they became less dependent on the teacher and more knowledgeable of themselves as learners, but rather to get the class going as quickly as possible. If their motivations were not these but others, then it would make sense that their beliefs do not always match their practices on structuring. Maybe teachers provided references to specific directions out of an interest to provide their students with the tools for a successful performance (something that would not have to do specifically with learner training). If this was the objective (not empowering the learner), it then makes more sense to find inconsistent difference between the ways Bob, Mark and Sharon dealt with specific directions. Similary, it is not clear whether the primary purpose of previews that were embedded in assignments for homework was to impress upon students the need to do such work (which does not have to do with learner training) or it was to inform them. Something similar could be argued as regards the teachers apparent invitations for students to participate in the managing of classroom activity. The analysis showed that these questions were not so much product of the teacher’s willingness to modify his or her agenda in hearing the students’ opinions but indications of a willingness to disguise the asymmetry of power in those classrooms, to avoid implementing activities or homework in a direct manner.

8. CONCLUSION

The differences in Bob’s, Mark’s and Sharon’s beliefs did not always have an observable effect when they provided procedural structuring because these three teachers sometimes introduced and brought activities and lessons to an end in very similar ways. This lack of relationship could be due to the fact that procedural structuring had as its main objective that of involving the student and allowing activity to get going as soon as possible, and not that of empowering the student, obviously a longer-term objective.

WORKS CITED


APPENDIX A

T Teacher
S1, S2, etc. Identified student
SS Several students
S1-S2 Students’ private talk
(...) Stretches of talk that have not been transcribed.
… One-second pause.
(0.5) A pause of more than one second.
I don’t- I can’t express — A self-editing marker
[ Overlapping or simultaneous talk.
= a) A turn continuing below, at the identical symbol.
b) No gap between two turns, when inserted at the end of one speaker’s turn and the beginning of the next speaker’s adjacent turn.

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**INDICE**