



Teacher beliefs about listening in a foreign language



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Language teachers believe in the importance of teaching learners how to listen.
- Their stated practice by contrast shows little evidence of teaching how to listen.
- Contextual factors may lead to this focus on product over process.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 September 2013

Received in revised form

6 January 2014

Accepted 27 January 2014

Keywords:

Teacher beliefs

Language teaching

Second language listening

ABSTRACT

This study investigated, through a questionnaire, the stated beliefs and stated practices of 115 foreign language teachers in England regarding listening pedagogy: whether such beliefs and practices reflect the literature on listening, whether beliefs and stated practices converged, and what factors might underpin them. Responses indicated a mismatch between teachers' stated belief in the importance of teaching learners how to listen more effectively, and the lack of evidence in their stated practice of such teaching, with a focus instead on task completion. Findings are discussed against the accountability agenda of the study's context, and its implications for teacher development highlighted.

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1. Introduction

The field of language teacher cognition – what Borg and Burns (2008) define as “the study of what teachers know, think, and believe and how these relate to what teachers do” (p. 457) – is a growing one, as is indicated by the size of the bibliography on the subject maintained by Simon Borg at the University of Leeds (Borg, 2013). The term ‘cognition’ thus seems to embrace knowledge, beliefs and conceptualisations, and indeed these four terms are often used interchangeably in the literature (e.g. Gao & Ma, 2011). For that reason, we also use the term ‘belief’ and ‘cognition’ in this article interchangeably. Understanding teacher beliefs is important because such beliefs are held to exert a strong influence on how teachers behave in the classroom and vice versa (Meijer, Verloop, & Beijaard, 1999). In the area of second language listening, however, there is a marked lack of research into teacher cognition, a gap that the present study seeks to fill.

While there is some debate regarding how beliefs should be defined and operationalised, and how they might differ from

knowledge, Barcelos (2003) outlines three approaches adopted by researchers to explore beliefs in second language research (although she does so mainly in relation to student belief studies): the “normative” approach, where the focus is on exploring, often without reference to actual practice and through quantitative approaches such as questionnaires, “preconceived notions, myths, or misconceptions” (Barcelos, 2003, p. 11); the “metacognitive” approach, wherein beliefs are viewed as what learners (and by extension, teachers) think and can express about the process of learning and teaching and which tend to be explored through self-report methods; and third, the “contextual” approach, in which teachers' beliefs are held to be influenced more by external factors, to be “explored and interpreted within their context-specific life experiences” (Gao & Ma, 2011, p. 329). Arguably, however, there is some benefit from combining these approaches to gain a fuller understanding of how teachers' beliefs relate to, or differ from, what the research literature suggests about the listening process and about how the skill might be most effectively developed, alongside insights into how such beliefs relate to classroom practice, and in turn the extent to which both beliefs and practice might be influenced by the instructional context in which teachers are working.

This combined approach towards the fullest possible picture is especially relevant for a study on beliefs about listening for a

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number of reasons. First, the paucity of previous studies in this area. Our review of the literature on language teaching cognition did not uncover a single study examining teacher beliefs about listening. The nearest we found was a study conducted by Bekleyen (2009), on anxiety about listening among students training to be language teachers, i.e. the participants were themselves engaged in listening tasks as learners rather than as teachers. While this study has implications for teaching listening, the student teachers, anxious and lacking confidence in their own listening ability, reported dealing with these issues by simply practising more. Hence one might assume that as teachers they may adopt a 'more practice' approach with their own learners rather than seeking other ways to develop listening skills. The study does not, however, give any more insights into participants' beliefs about listening as teachers. Similarly, other researchers consider such beliefs tangentially. For example, our previous work indicated that teachers find listening difficult to teach, but does so within the context of a study focussing on learners (e.g. Graham, Santos, & Vanderplank, 2011). Likewise, this previous work and our own observations suggest that teachers adopt what Field (2008) has called the "comprehension approach" (p. 26) where listening is mainly a test of comprehension, improvement is seen to occur simply through more practice, activities are delivered rather than teaching skills, and where the emphasis is on learners obtaining information and the "correct answer" from passages, i.e. on the "product" of listening rather than on the insights learners' answers might provide into the "process" of listening they adopt (Field, 2008, p. 81). This approach may exist in a range of countries and contexts. A very recent study by Siegel (2013) in Japan among university language teachers found a predominance of comprehension-based activities. Goh (2010) likewise argues that "listening instruction in many language courses tends to focus almost exclusively on understanding the content of spoken texts, with little time given to teaching about the process of listening and how to listen" (p. 180). Yet the extent to which teachers follow this comprehension approach is far from clear; the same is true for understanding their rationale for following this approach, if they do. In short, little systematically gathered evidence exists regarding how teachers approach listening instruction and how they believe listening should be taught.

The importance of exploring teacher beliefs about listening also relates to what has been the starting point for our previous research into listening: the complex and challenging nature of listening in a second language. This may be particularly the case for unidirectional listening, that is, where the listener has no opportunity to interrupt the speaker, ask for clarification or repetition, such as listening to a radio broadcast. These challenges are also reflected in the fact that, in England at least, the context of the present study, learners find listening one of the most difficult skills in which to make progress within Modern Foreign Language (MFL) study (Graham, 2006). Our previous work within that context also found that even at fairly advanced stages of language learning learners have poorly developed listening strategies (Graham & Macaro, 2008; Graham, Santos, et al., 2011; Graham, Santos, & Vanderplank, 2008) which rarely improve without explicit listening strategy instruction. Official inspections of MFL by OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education, 2011) draw attention to shortcomings in the teaching and learning of listening (as well as in other skill areas), highlighting a lack of use of authentic listening materials, an overreliance on textbook materials, and an under-development of language learning strategies (the latter across all skills). How such teaching approaches are related to teacher beliefs about listening and to contextual features seems worthy of exploration, particularly as a foreground to any attempts to develop listening pedagogy.

This last argument also underpins the decision to seek insights into how teacher beliefs converge with or diverge from the

research literature. These two areas are usually termed 'practical' on the one hand (i.e. teacher beliefs or knowledge) and 'formal' (i.e. based on reading and on research) on the other. For example, in their study of teachers' beliefs about an integrative approach to grammar teaching, Borg and Burns (2008) compare the "formal theory" of research found in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) literature with the "practical theory" (p. 479) of the teachers they studied. 'Practical theory' they define as "teachers' conceptualizations of integration" (p. 458), evidence for which they sought through a questionnaire that probed teachers' beliefs and stated practices in grammar teaching, how they reported teaching grammar in an integrative manner, and how they judged the effectiveness of their approach. Finding almost no reference to formal theories of grammar in the questionnaire data they obtained from 176 English language teachers, in spite of the latter's high level of qualifications and the wealth of SLA literature on grammar acquisition, the authors note the "atheoretical nature" (p. 479) of teachers' justifications for their grammar practice, arguing that it "raises questions about the reliability of their judgements about its effectiveness" (p. 479). While the purpose of the current investigation was not to pass judgement on teachers' beliefs and stated practices in listening, evidence of divergence between teachers' 'practical theory' (how they believe listening should be taught) and 'formal theory' may offer insights into some of the difficulties surrounding learners' listening development outlined above. More importantly, however, an understanding of such divergences seems to be a vital precursor to any changes that one might hope to introduce into teachers' practice. As Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver, and Thwaite (2001) contend, "innovation in classroom practice (...) has to be accommodated within the teacher's own framework of teaching principles" (pp. 471–472).

Other relevant studies of whether and how issues from the research literature find resonance in the principles and practices followed by teachers include one conducted by Andon and Eckert (2009). This explored teachers' beliefs about task-based language teaching (TBLT) and the ways in which "published accounts [of TBLT] are reflected in teachers' pedagogic principles" (p. 286) within English Language Teaching (ELT). They found that their four case-study teachers were aware of central themes from the TBLT literature and that although their knowledge of this literature was limited to having read a small number of authors' work, some of its principles were reflected in their teaching and discussions of their practice. In reading, Kuzborska (2011) conducted a study of eight teachers at university level in Lithuania, exploring their reading instructional beliefs and practices, as well as how these reflected current research literature on reading. She reports relatively little overlap between teachers' beliefs and practices on the one hand and the issues raised in the research literature on the other, and that her participants saw reading as "a decoding process with a reader decoding words and sentences in a linear fashion merely to obtain 'correct' answers" (p. 116). This may correspond to the "comprehension approach" that Field (2008, p. 26) sees as dominating the teaching of listening.

Both of these studies determined in advance which areas of formal knowledge it might be most relevant to explore within the context of TBLT and reading respectively. We followed the same approach in the present study, selecting those recent research findings which seemed to have the most direct relevance for instructed high school foreign language learning, i.e. the context in which we were working. These findings outline some of the principles that are likely to contribute to the development of effective listening skills in learners, and may be summarised thus: that effective listening strategies do not necessarily develop on their own (Graham, Santos, et al., 2008, 2011) but are

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