

TEACHING ENGLISH AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL IN INDIA: TEACHERS' NARRATIVE

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Abstract: This study uses narrative inquiry as method of research to examine the lived-experiences of three tertiary level teachers who facilitate the learning of the international language English among the under- graduates' in India. The paper reflects through the ELT teachers' stories of classroom teaching in India negotiate the explicit and implicit teaching complexities. From a narrative inquiry perspective, it aims to illuminate the complexity of teachers' conflicting instruction approaches in the work place setting. The teachers' every effort to strike a balance between the liberal and traditional pedagogies that seem to coexist in the course of their teaching context. The findings show that the ELT teachers' views and beliefs are vibrant and bear the crux of the conflicting ELT approaches that need to be perceived before any effective of the ELT practices are applied.

Keywords: Teacher, beliefs, students, narrative inquiry, English language, tertiary level.

INTRODUCTION

The field of teacher education and teacher cognition has recently seen an increasing interest in investigating teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning. The recognition of teacher beliefs has steered the outlook of teachers' planning, decision-making and classroom behaviour in many learning spaces. Since beliefs cannot be directly observed or measured, researchers in this field have sought various effective data collection methods to elicit teachers' beliefs. The philosophy about teaching and actually being able to teach are two strands of alignment which can be explored in order to formulate and provide an academically affective educational approach in India where in a culturally heterogeneous learning environment prevails. This paper, which is a part of a larger narrative study, aims to offer insights into the narrative approach of qualitative inquiry that can be used for uncovering teachers' views prolifically.

The sensitivity of requiring an effective English teaching approach to succeed permeates throughout the education system in India. It also effects teachers' who teach English, who they teach, what they teach, when they teach, where they teach, and why they teach in a critical manner. Most of the related researches have focused their study with structured interviews and questionnaires, whereas a few have investigated the teachers' beliefs and practises exclusively from their in-depth point of view.

The objective of this inquiry was to understand, interpret and critically interrogate the multifaceted and flexible constraints of the English language classroom scenario in India. The data reported in this paper is part of a larger doctoral study which

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was twenty months long and which investigated three non-native ELT teachers' beliefs' and views about teaching and learning English as a second language at the tertiary level. The teacher narrative interviews, classroom teaching observations, post-lesson reflection, diaries, and lesson plans were the data used for this study. The learning sought to comprehend what is on the minds of the ELT teachers as regards the ELT theories, planning, action and execution. Since English retains more or less the same status as a second language across different institutions and universities in India, what is true of a selected sample should be representative of the whole population though the study cannot be generalized. The three participants' for the probe are English teachers at the under graduate colleges in South India. The investigation is confined, ideally, to the undergraduate classes. Within a narrative inquiry methodology a three-dimensional understanding of the ELT approaches in the ESL classrooms in India was examined. This narrative inquiry reflected on the teachers' beliefs and experiences based in their narrative interviews and classroom teaching observations of qualitative research methodology.

THE NARRATIVE INQUIRY APPROACH

The teacher beliefs and views are closely linked to the teachers' strategies for coping with the classroom challenges and realization. The teacher narratives study seeks to gather vital inputs of what and why teachers believe and follow in their profession sphere. An evolving line of research on language teacher identity in the past couple of years focuses on language teachers' experience in educational reforms (Clarke, 2009; Tsui, 2007). The teacher reflections lead to the evolved interpretations of classroom challenges and conflicts through their narratives. Calderhead (1996) sustains that teachers are found to hold their significant beliefs in five main areas—beliefs about learners and learning, teaching, subjects or curriculum, learning to teach, and about the self and the nature of teaching—and he says that these five areas are interconnected.

With the help of narratives the complexity of the English teachers' beliefs about the practice of classroom teaching, and the context of social, cultural, political, and historical structures that shape the microstructures of the language classroom can be addressed. Silberstein (2008, p. 300) notes, “teacher education involves making conscious the often unconscious theorizing that drives pedagogical decisions.”

The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. “Narrative inquiry is stories lived and told,” according to Clandinin and Connelly (2000). The study tells the story of individuals unfolding in a chronology of their experiences, set within their personal, social, and historical context, and including the important themes in those lived experiences. Narrative inquiry is a research method which provides a means to explore teachers' reflections about their concerns, roles and performance (Clandinin and Connelly, et. al., 2007). In delving into the thoughts,

beliefs, and knowledge of language teachers the investigator tried to explore the English classroom from the teachers' perspective.

The purpose of the narrative interview is to explore the views, experiences, beliefs and/or motivations of individuals on specific matters. The interview method avoids pre-structuring of the interview. It uses everyday communication, namely story-telling and listening, to reach the objective. The narration schema substitutes the question-answer schema that defines most interview situations. The qualitative study using narratives does not include an explicit theory and endorses the underlying presupposition that the perspective of the interviewee is best revealed in stories where the informant is using his or her own spontaneous language in the narration of events. The active role of the interviewee particularly distinguishes the narrative interview from other qualitative data gathering methods. The narrative interview is conducted over four phases: it starts with the initiation, moves through the narration and the questioning phase, and ends with the concluding talk phase (Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2000).

Phillion and He, (2001) explored the contributions and potential of narrative inquiry in English language teaching. Two stories of experience are presented and used as a touchstone throughout their narrative inquiry. Patrick James Kiernan (2006) in his thesis *'Deconstructing narrative identity in English language teaching: An analysis of teacher interviews in Japanese and English'* has explored the narrative interview as a research tool and methodically applied narrative analysis using interviews for qualitative investigations. Connelly and Clandinin (1986) in their early research study found narrative inquiry research an effective way to deepen the understanding of classroom teaching practice.

THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The objective of the study was to explore and analyse the views, beliefs, and feelings of the English language teachers in the ELT context at the tertiary level in South India.

The study, attempts to answer; (1) The ELT teachers' beliefs and views of teaching at the tertiary level; (2) The approaches adapted by the ELT teachers' at the tertiary level in India.

METHODOLOGY

Narrative interview data of three participating English teachers of three colleges in South India was actively used for the study. Narrative is both a method and product (Olson & Craig, 2009; Ritchie & Wilson, 2000) based on stories that are linked across temporal and spatial dimensions. The interviews focused on the participants' views of teaching, language learning and teaching methods, and students. Secondary data sources came from classroom observations of the participants' classroom

instruction. Data analysis was continuous; the beliefs of each participant were first identified and analysed. It was vital to recognise why the teachers follow certain practices, what they actually do and what is the impact of it in their classroom teaching practice. The limited classroom observations helped gain some insight into the teaching practices undertaken by the teachers. The observations further lead to refined enquiries for gaining clarity in the analysis.

The following are key deliberations in choosing participants: (1) all participants teach at the tertiary level English language dealing with the under graduate learners (2) Have a minimum of three years' experience in teaching English, (3) Verbal fluency and expressiveness (Van der Mescht. 2004), (4) Comfort with the interview process, (5) Willingness to commit to the time required, (6) Willing to talk about their teaching experience quite openly, (7) Willing to allow the researcher to observe their classes.

The study understood teacher belief as teacher's personal perception about teaching English. The teaching learning process revolves around their own particular beliefs about English and English language teaching at the tertiary level.

THE DATA AND DISCUSSION

The present study used the purposeful random sampling approach was used in identifying three participants to fulfil the key deliberations. To maintain anonymity for the ethical and professional reasons the participants' in the study are indicated by pseudonyms profile 1-P1, profile2 -P2 and profile3-P3. The participants' teaching experience ranged from three to thirty five years.

Profile 1(P1) is a highly experienced English teacher at the tertiary level who readily agreed to share her teaching reflections for this study. A popular teacher **P1** has thirty five years of college teaching experience and is well respected by her students and colleagues. **P1** comes from a background of English medium education. English language is also a social language for her. She consciously took up teaching of English with an aspiration to be of some help to the young learners', in an urban college. The urban state university college where she serves has the majority of the students coming in from the neighbouring rural region for the under graduation programs.

She believes that has managed to make some inroads with regard to the contradictory curriculum the structured materials provided, and the assessment layout. **P1** noted that she initiates student interaction when she is teaching literary pieces from the text prescribed by the university. She makes use of the classroom environment to develop the language skills proactively using strategies such as projecting images, asking students to act, pair work and guiding group discussions. She recalls, "*In my first attempts to use such activities, I really had difficulty in controlling the class, because there used to be much noise. Though, over a period*

and practise, I have learnt to set up the rubrics in order to keep things under control. I do lively classes now... which calls for closed doors and windows". She has also figured out the need to draw the students' attention to the language usage and not just the ideas that are enthusiastically generated during the course of group discussions and pair works. The proper construction of sentences when speaking or writing is keenly adhered to by **P1**. Though she believes in making her students to repeat new words for definite pronunciations, she is not sure this facilitates learning new words correctly and successfully in the large classroom context. The time aspect is another hindrance which hampers adequate practice exercises to enhance language nuances she notes. She figures out that simple and correct sentence constructions need to be focussed in the class as the other language features could be developed in the social or work context of the graduates later.

She sadly notes that the university course system continues to hinder the learning of communication skills. Nevertheless she has slowly learnt to improvise upon her teaching approach. She disclosed that, "I have realized the importance of linking language learning to daily life and implanting language knowledge with students' personal life experience. The mismatch between the prevalent formal laid out by the system and the lack of English communicative utilities in our social contexts impedes the teacher's efforts. The syllabus is designed with an assumption that all the learners have minimum required level of English language aptitude however in reality there is a vast gap between expected levels of proficiency and achieved level of efficiency. She expounded on this, "*Most students come to us without having sufficient background in English language. That's why we have to start with the very basic English language structures. Then there are students who wait to be spoon-fed by the teacher. About 50 per cent of them don't have the drive to develop the English language skills.*" **P1** is unhappy that they do not have sufficient time to monitor the students through the communicative activities or expound unfamiliar cultural issues related to the western culture. She sums up, "*It was still very much teacher-centered, textbook-driven, exam-oriented teaching, but I have at least worked at engaging my students in active listening improvements.*" The glaring element that the ELT approach is bound by the textbook-driven and exam-oriented teaching is reflected in her perspective.

Profile 2 is another participating teacher who has around two decades of English teaching experience at the under graduate level. He is an enthusiastic teacher who did not have English medium education. He believes he can relate to the rural students English learning difficulties as he had the similar educational background. **Profile 2** strives to supplement English language essentials associated to the students' career goals with passion and experimentation.

P2 put forth his empathies related to ELT succinctly. The varied social, economic and cultural backgrounds of the students who pursue higher studies he outlines, makes it impossible to adopt any single method to improve their

language skills. The recurring element of students inadequate fundamentals of English language and not keen on taking the initiative to develop communicative skills is also reflected in the narratives of P2. He is grimly aware of the wide gap among the students, which thwarts any college level English teacher adopting a uniform teaching method. P2 revealed that he lingered more with his teaching of the English fundamentals in the beginning of the academic year, which he adopted to make things easier for his rural and weaker learners. He explicated, *"I have a scheme at the beginning of every year, and I start by testing their grammar and vocabulary level. Then I impart the essential basics, which unfortunately the vast majority of students do not follow correctly. Grammar is a component of my focus for I believe it is central to developing language correctness."* She is in favour of Wilkins suggestion *"...while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed"*. (Wilkins, 1972, pp. 111-112)

Profile 2 senses satisfaction from the students' active participation in the language activities which he initiates. Their response is encouraging he states, *"The response of the students is very good after I altered my approach to teaching. They all participate in the group discussion. They enjoy discussing with their classmates. I did not realize until then that the element of interaction is so important in the English class ... I think both students and I enjoy the class tremendously now."*

P2 made plain that his philosophy on teaching saying. *"The more students are exposed to the language, the better it is for them. Exposure is one of the key terms in ELT. I believe in the merits of speaking English all the time."* The prescribed texts are followed by most teachers using the lecture mode of explaining followed with dictation of notes which leaves the learner as passive listener. The learners have to be motivated to change their language learning outlook according to this participating teacher. He prepared them for the speaking task by telling them to write down what they were going to say before they started the activity. He explained. *"I focus on speaking in the group activities. One should have the exposure for that will lead automatically to learning."* Although he believes that speaking is an important skill to be acquired, to provide all of them the necessary opportunity to speak in the class is not entirely conceivable. The classroom furniture's are not movable and there is very little space to move around which makes the language activities ineffective as many passive and disinterested students' remain inactive. P2 believes that language skills can be developed in smaller groups effectively.

He also added, *"I like to involve culture, real life and students' experiences... for me classes should be interesting and fun for the students and even of myself... in that way they can learn in a relaxed and fun way"*. P2 tries involving his learners by providing them with frequent opportunities for independent (student-centred) learning in class, usually in small groups or pairs. He does his best to involve students in thinking about learning and encourages them to take on some of the responsibility. In vocabulary learning he uses the exercise of fixing the contextual meaning of the

words/expressions selected from the lessons. He is how ever compelled to extensive textual explanations with inputs in the local language since all that the students expect that from the English teacher according to him. This remains a crucial issue for the teachers in the English language class. Even after a minimum seven years of learning English at primary level of education the learners demand and understand the second language learning with the translation approach rampantly followed in the Indian ELT setup.

Profile 3 is the young teacher who has walked into the teaching profession influenced by his teachers. **P3** who is into college level teaching for the last three years is open to the fact that he is still learning English language every day and firmly believes that he has to go a long way in becoming a good English teacher. He ruminates that when he stepped into this profession he was aware of the fact that teaching English to students at the under graduation level was not going to be an easy task, especially in an urban college.

He is forthright in wanting to develop his abilities to enhance his teaching, *“Taking a risk with your ideas is the only way you learn something. I have been asked to tag along with direct method of teaching English language as many a times students expect me to use English as well as the local language during class hours.”* Though the prescribed texts do not allow him to continually engage students in pair work, he *does not want to* avoid applying many open-ended communicative activities. He is aware of the constraints and puts in that, *“I must explain the texts especially the poems in detail and it takes time and even in that case I wonder how they understand it. There is no teaching preparation workshops or courses rendered to us. I have to go by my teachers’ methods and try some approaches inspired by my reading.”*

Profile 3 expressed that, *“It is hard to explain idioms or some expression without exposure to the culture different from our own.”* He opened up to a crucial issue when he voiced that some students got agitated when he refused to provide a line by line explanation and demanded that he do so. This practice of explaining and lecturing about the text is so rampant in our classrooms he accepted, and that the teachers even feel the need to paraphrase some very obvious sentences. They do it mostly with the purpose of making the text accessible to students from the examination point of view. He wisely summed, *“Students’ don’t like to do things on their own. They ‘expect’ to cover everything in class and most of them indeed struggle with tasks asked to be carried out in small groups, let alone homework assignments ... assigned by the teacher to be carried out by individual students! It’s the learning culture the students here are used to.”* It is the student motivation factor to own their learning process that has to be triggered in order to successfully facilitate language skills at the tertiary level. He listed out the activities he follows in driving the students to take some initiative and ownership to develop their vocabulary and presentation skills. The young teacher added that, *“Sometimes I find*

it stressful to be experimental in the class. I try to teach only in English in spite of the fact that many of my students' are unhappy about it." The assessment system pushes the learners' to memorization rather than making the effort to developing language skills. The teacher is conscious of this and needs to supplement them with theoretical explanations leaving little room for cognitive skills of languages to be developed.

Profile 3 admits, "*Many of my students do show interest in the alternative method. But I don't get much opportunity to do the "communicative classes". We just teach the text and most of the time students are passive listeners. Though I have a set of plans to execute, I don't get much encouragement to go ahead with it."*

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION

The aim of the classroom observation was to understand how the teachers conduct their classes to develop the L2 skills. In collecting the classroom data there searcher would be able to analyse the facts and compare it with the one obtained with the narrative interview. As a non-participant observer, the researcher was present in a few classes, only to observe and did not participate nor interact with the insiders (Baker, 2006). This allows the researcher to have sufficient time and space to record data (Robson, 2002). Field notes were later added to the narrative interview data.

The ELT classrooms observed at the colleges under study were very crowded with more than seventy students in general and teacher-fronted classroom infrastructure. This clearly hindered the teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction. It was not easy for students to move around in the congested rooms for the activities that needed pair work and group work. The observations revealed that the teachers, generally talked and asked questions. They not only chose what to do study or deliberate, there was even the evidence of some restriction to what was to be responded. They perpetually controlled almost all details and is obviously a teacher dominant mode. The factor that the teachers often controlled both content and procedure was obvious. Most of the exercises and activities in the observations were on grammar and vocabulary, which were again organised activities. It was witnessed that during the reading activities, teachers tended to correct the pronunciation of words. Teachers followed the textbook materials meticulously and also brought together some additional material from different sources to enhance the understanding. The discussions and related examples of vocabulary involved additional authentic descriptions and materials. The listening and speaking activities were also directed by the teacher to a great extent though students were propelled to take the initiatives. The teachers' planned the activities largely based on the prescribed grammar syllabus and vocabulary items that are given in the lesson. The teachers answered the students' queries and checked their presentations sensibly. The participating teachers, **Profile 1** and **Profile 3** spent quite

a lot of their time on the accuracy-based activities doing grammar and vocabulary exercise intensively. **Profile 2** though was not very particular in correcting the errors immediately. He listed out a few errors in general and clarified at a later time. The three participating teachers tended to give emphasis to reading and a number of practice activities were adapted to develop writing skills but they had limited time for speaking activities and it was understandable in the large numbered classes. They were stuck to the prescribed books most of the time. Many of the students were found to be passive and seemed disinterested in participating in the learning procedure. The passive students were however observed to be eager when the term 'exams' was used by the teacher to draw attention. To draw the students' enthusiasm to take part in the activities seemed an uphill task for the teachers. The undergraduates in the observation setting were found to be centrally motivated to serve the purpose of scoring marks in the university exams which is largely based on memorization and has very little components to assess the language skills.

THE ANALYSIS

In order to study the teachers' beliefs about teaching English in India at the tertiary level two data collection means were adopted: One was to listen to their reflections on their beliefs by means of narrative interviews and another was to observe their classroom practice. The study juxtaposed the interview data related to their beliefs with the classroom observation data. In order to find recurring patterns the descriptive information data about classrooms, teaching conditions and resources the participants' views and experiences in the form of extensive narratives was studied repeatedly.

The study demonstrates that the adaptation of teaching beliefs expressed by the teachers' was not consistent with their practices and attitudes in the practical scenario are. Instructional practices from the perspective of the prevalent university education guidelines dominates what the teachers bring to the classroom. The explicit state university dictums plays an all important role in the practical classroom context of the English language teaching and learning that are mostly teacher centric and content based. As teachers' operate within the context of instructive policies and their structural binding's the contradictions are evident between teachers changing beliefs and observation of their classroom practices.

The Indian education system largely believes in transmitting information to students which is teacher oriented or lecturer bound is reflected in the study. The classroom set-up and rigid assessment pattern reflects the students' fixation for structured teacher-centric instruction. The large number of students in a class makes it difficult to respond to individual students' needs. The adaptation of teaching practices to suit the individualities of the class is also major issue for the ELT teacher in India.

It is the teacher beliefs about instruction to a great extent that are represented in their personal strategies and experience of teaching English language skills. The changing trend of classroom teaching aids is also apparent among the ELT teachers' approach who strive to bring in student centric activities to support learning in a small way. While the student motivation issue largely pervades the English classroom state of affairs the teachers' lack support to initiate recognised ELT approaches' constructively. The educational bodies should be critically bear in mind the teachers' experience and beliefs in formulating policies and reforms.

CONCLUSION

The complexity of developing English language skills following the traditional approach and prevailing structured classroom environment is reflected in the study. The classroom strength is another serious impediment for the language teachers who are unable to involve every learner in the learning procedure. The assessment doctrine grounded in memorization formats drives the learners' outlook of education. This makes the teachers work challenging. The ELT teacher is expected to develop the language skills of the learners' which is sadly limited to a few activities that segregates the language skills into either reading or writing skills. The speaking skill is found lacking profoundly among the graduates in India and very little effort is made to enhance this core language skill.

The ELT teaching experience has a significant correlation to the ELT classroom teaching practices. The study reflected that the more experienced and passionate teachers' develop their own strategies for some active classroom instruction and they are also adaptive to the poorer levels of their learners'. The teachers are to some extent in line with the contemporary educational application of Vygotsky's theory of "reciprocal teaching", used to improve students' ability to learn from the text. The reciprocal teaching method advocates teachers and students to collaborate in learning and practicing four key skills: summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting. The teacher's role in the process is thus reduced over time meting out a contemporary student centric learning approach. However the lack of proper facilitation in terms of training and relative classroom attributes fail to ensure the effective implementation of this collaborative learning process. The inexperienced young teacher invariably goes through the phase of coping with the everyday challenges of the job with less operational strategies. It can be realised that at the tertiary level in India the ELT teachers' are not provided operative training to impart the communicative language skills. They determine their teaching with self-adaptive and localized approaches. The teaching approach therein walks the tight rope amidst the exam oriented syllabus and low the student's interest. The student motivation to learn the English language skills and the lack of teacher training to facilitate the second language learning remain the central impediments of ELT at the tertiary level of education in India.

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