

Primary teachers' beliefs about teaching English to young learners

Las creencias de los profesores de primaria sobre la enseñanza del inglés

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Abstract

While there is a growing belief that English should be taught from an early age in order to achieve better results, little is known about the practices and attitudes of primary school English teachers in Spain. Therefore, a qualitative study based on interviews with 22 primary school teachers of English was carried out in order to investigate teachers' beliefs about teaching methodology, the use of group work and the use of the mother tongue. It was found that all the teachers believe in following a communicative approach which focuses mainly on speaking and listening and in which the explicit teaching of grammar plays a minor role. Most of the teachers also claimed to use only the target language in class and to make frequent use of group and pair work. One of the aspects which seems to have influenced these teachers' attitudes is their own negative experience as language learners in traditional, grammar-based classrooms.

Key words:

Teachers' beliefs, attitudes, EFL, primary education.

Resumen

Aunque se considera a menudo que el inglés debería enseñarse a partir de edades tempranas para mejorar los resultados, se sabe poco sobre las prácticas y actitudes de los profesores de inglés de primaria en España. Por eso, se elaboró un estudio cualitativo basado en entrevistas con 22 profesores de inglés de primaria con el fin de investigar las creencias de estos profesores sobre la metodología, el uso del trabajo en grupo y el uso de la primera lengua. Se observó que todos los profesores creen en el uso de un método comunicativo enfocado en las habilidades orales y de escucha, en lo cual la enseñanza explícita de la gramática es de menor importancia. La mayoría de los profesores también dicen que usan solo la lengua meta en clase y que hacen un uso frecuente del trabajo en grupos. Uno de los aspectos que parece haber influido en las actitudes de estos profesores es su propia experiencia negativa como alumnos en las aulas tradicionales, enfocadas en la gramática.

Palabras clave:

Creencias de profesores, actitudes, inglés como lengua extranjera, educación primaria.

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1. Introduction

In the last 15 years, the Spanish education system has placed an increasing emphasis on the teaching of English. Although national legislation only requires a foreign language to be taught from the age of 8 onwards, most of Spain's autonomous communities have established programmes by which all children begin learning English at the age of 6, or even 3 (Eurydice, 2017). Moreover, both in subsidised and public schools, the number of hours of English has been increased and the teaching of other subjects through English (CLIL) is gaining popularity.

However, as stated by Rixon (2015), lowering the age at which English is taught and increasing the number of hours is not enough to guarantee success. Rixon (2015) stresses the important role of the teacher to provide the right conditions for language learning, especially in contexts where there is limited contact with English outside school, as is the case in Spain. It cannot be denied that teachers play a central role in deciding what happens in the classroom and therefore it is important to take their attitudes and beliefs into account, since beliefs have been found to influence classroom practice (Borg, 2003; Buehl & Beck, 2015).

While there is a considerable amount of research focusing on teachers' beliefs in CLIL contexts (e.g. Durán-Martínez & Beltrán-LLavador, 2016; Fernandez & Halbach, 2011; Fernandez, Pena, García & Halbach, 2005; Mendez García, 2014), less has been done when it comes to English as a foreign language (EFL), especially at the primary level. Given the importance of this level of education and the growing emphasis placed on teaching English from an early age, the present paper reports on primary teachers' views about teaching English to young learners in Spain. More specifically, it focuses on a group of EFL teachers working in subsidized and public schools in Navarra, in the north of Spain.

2. Literature review

As the present study focuses on primary EFL teachers' beliefs, the first part of the literature review deals with the concept of beliefs and the importance of conducting research on this topic. Secondly, previous studies on primary EFL teachers' beliefs in different countries are discussed. Finally, a link is made with the present study, which analyses what Spanish primary teachers think about issues such as methodology, pair work and language use.

2.1. Teachers' beliefs

Teachers' beliefs, or teacher cognition, is a term used to refer to the complex system of beliefs, knowledge and attitudes which teachers possess and which potentially influence their classroom practice (Borg, 2003). However, the relationship between beliefs and practices is a complex one, as beliefs can influence practices, but practices can also influence beliefs (Buehl & Beck, 2015). Whether or not beliefs are translated into classroom practice depends on contextual factors such as school policies and curriculum mandates, but also on internal factors such as teachers' knowledge and self-awareness (Borg, 2003; Buehl & Beck, 2015). It has also been shown that beliefs about planned aspects of teaching tend to correspond better to teaching practice than beliefs about unplanned aspects such as error correction (Basturkmen, 2012). Teachers' attitudes have been found to be shaped by a combination of factors, such as practical experience, but also the teachers' own experience as language learners (Borg, 2003). The study of teachers' beliefs can help researchers gain insight in the decisions teachers take in the classroom and it is also vital that teacher training programmes take teacher cognition into account.

Studies on foreign language teachers' beliefs have addressed issues such as beliefs about teaching and learning foreign languages (Maikland, 2001; Mitchell, 2005), methodology (Sugiyama, 2003) and grammar teaching (Burgess & Etherington, 2002; Schulz, 1996, 2001). Several studies on teacher cognition have made use of surveys, typically consisting of a number of statements with which participants need to express their (dis)agreement on a Likert-scale. While such survey studies have their value, they need to be supplemented with other forms of enquiry, such as open-ended interviews and classroom observations, if researchers want to get a deeper insight into teachers' beliefs and the underlying factors which influence these (Kagan, 1990).

2.2. Primary EFL teachers' beliefs

As mentioned earlier, research on the belief systems of primary EFL teachers is limited. A few studies which have focused on this educational level involve both pre-service and in-service teachers and have dealt with general teaching methodology as well as with more specific aspects of teaching and learning foreign languages.

Kocaman and Cansiz (2012) and Liao (2007) administered a survey about teaching primary children English to in-service and pre-service teachers in Turkey and Taiwan, respectively. It was found that the primary teachers in both contexts expressed similar ideas about the importance of communicative language teaching, the need to prioritise listening

and speaking skills and the positive effect of using activities such as games, songs and role play. Other topics which have been covered are for instance primary teachers' beliefs about using technology (Li & Ni, 2011) or about classroom management (Lopes & Santos, 2013).

In Spain, Barrios (2014) carried out a survey study on pre-service primary teachers' beliefs about language learning. She found, amongst other things, that the majority of her respondents believes children learn languages more easily than older learners. However, to the best of our knowledge there are no studies which look at the beliefs of in-service EFL teachers at the primary level in Spain.

Since there is little information about primary teachers' attitudes to teaching EFL in Spain, the present study explores the beliefs of 22 teachers by means of open-ended interviews, on topics such as teaching methodology, group work and the use of the target language. These topics were chosen because the Spanish curricula, in line with the Common European Framework of Languages (CEFR), prescribe a communicative approach to teaching English. The primary curriculum of Navarra (2014), for instance, refers directly to the CEFR, stating that the focus of EFL classes should be on the four skills and communicative tasks should be used. By asking primary teachers what they think is the best way to teach English to children, we can verify to what extent they are in agreement with various aspects of communicative language teaching.

2.3. Aspects of communicative language teaching

The main idea behind communicative language teaching (CLT) is that foreign languages are best learned through the communication of meaning in interaction, rather than the study of isolated grammar structures (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). This means that communicative classrooms are often characterized by interactive activities between students and the teacher, or between pairs of students (Cook, 1991). Hence, the present study asks teachers how they feel about using pair work in the primary classroom.

The definition of CLT also implies that the target language should not simply be an object of study, but a tool for communication. This idea has sometimes led to target language only policies, in which the students' mother tongue (L1) is banned from the classroom, so as to assure input in the L2 is maximised (Cameron, 2001). While the L1 is not always explicitly forbidden, its potential role in foreign language learning tends to be neglected in communicative methodologies (Cook, 1991). In practice, however, primary teachers have been found to use the students' L1 to varying degrees, for instance to give instructions, to check understanding or for discipline purposes (Cameron, 2001). Research suggests that

teachers should not feel guilty about this L1 use, since the L1 can support the learning of the L2 (Alegría de la Colina & García Mayo, 2009; Cameron, 2001; Cook, 2001). Teachers' attitudes to the use of the L1/L2 were also investigated in the present study.

2.3. Research questions

This study is guided by a main research question, which is divided into 4 sub-questions.

Main research question: What are the beliefs of a group of primary teachers in Navarra about teaching English to young learners?

Sub-question 1: What do these primary teachers' believe to be the best method for teaching English?

Sub-question 2: What are these primary teachers' beliefs about using group and pair work in EFL classes?

Sub-question 3: What are these primary teachers' beliefs about using the L1 in EFL classes?

Sub-question 4: How does their experience as language learners influence these primary teachers' beliefs about teaching English?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The data for this study were collected as part of a larger project on the washback effects of the Cambridge English: Young Learners exams (Breeze & Roothoof, 2014). The participants were 22 teachers working in 10 semi-private schools and 3 state schools in Navarra, in the north of Spain. They were contacted through the researcher's professional network and volunteered to take part. As table 1 shows, the participants were both native and non-native teachers of English, with teaching experience ranging from a few months to 30 years. The teachers' names are pseudonyms.

Table 1: Background information teachers

Teacher	School Semi-private (SP)/Public (P)	Sex	Age	L1	Teaching experience	Degrees
Ann	SP	F	32	English	8 years	BA, MA
Marie	SP	F	57	Spanish/French	29 years	Magisterio
Maria	SP	F	38	Spanish/English	19 years	Magisterio
Jose	SP	M	22	Spanish	A few months	Magisterio
Antonio	SP	M	40	Spanish/Basque	20 years	Magisterio
Rodrigo	SP	M	26	Spanish	4 years	Licenciatura and Magisterio
Jesús	SP	M	47	Spanish	20 years	Licenciatura and Magisterio
Irantzu	SP	M	30	Spanish	7 years	Magisterio
Elena	SP	F	46	Spanish	16 years	Magisterio
Rocío	SP	F	29	Spanish	9 years	Magisterio and Kindergarten
Cristina	SP	F	28	Spanish	6 years	Magisterio
Rosy	SP	F	48	English	20 years	BA, Magisterio
Jack	SP	M	52	English	27 years	BA, Magisterio
Marta	SP	F	36	Spanish	10 years	Licenciatura and Magisterio
Asier	SP	M	35	Spanish/Basque	12 years	Licenciatura and Magisterio
Pilar	SP	F	46	Spanish	9 years	Magisterio
Eva	SP	F	40	Spanish	15 years	Licenciatura and Magisterio

Jorge	SP	M	30	Spanish	7 years	Magisterio
Helen	SP	F	52	English	30 years	BA, PGCE, Magisterio
Chloe	P	F	41	English	17 years	BA, Magisterio
Ignacio	P	M	36	Spanish	7 years	Licenciatura and magisterio
Fernando	P	M	42	Spanish	19 years	Licenciatura and Magisterio

2.2. Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through open-ended interviews with each of the participants. The interview consisted of 3 main parts: 1) questions about the teachers' background, 2) questions regarding the teachers' beliefs about teaching English to young learners, 3) questions concerning the washback effects of the Cambridge English: Young Learners exams. For the purpose of the present study, we will focus on part 2 of the interview. Some of the questions the teachers were asked were:

- What do you think is the most effective method to teach English to young learners?
- What kind of classroom activities do you think are best for improving your students' level of English?
- How often do you use pair or group work in class?
- How often do you use English in class with your students?
- How did you learn English? Do you think it was a good method?

The interview schedule was piloted with three primary school teachers and since it did not pose any difficulties it was then applied to the remaining teachers. The three pilot teachers' answers were included into the analysis. Interviews lasted between 20 and 40 minutes and were digitally recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were then analysed following the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This means the researcher read through the interviews several times, identifying important themes and comparing these with each other.

4. Results

The following section addresses the main research question on primary teachers' beliefs about teaching English to young learners, by discussing the four sub-questions, related to teaching methods, use of group work, use of the L1 and teachers' experience as language learners. First, the main themes emerging from the interviews are presented. In section 5, these themes are then discussed in light of previous research.

4.1. Effective methodology and classroom activities

All of the interviewed teachers seem to favour a methodology which focuses on input and interaction in the target language. They use terms such as "immersion" and "exposure" and refer to making English "meaningful" and "real", as the following quotes show.

I think... as I have been working in programmes of language immersion, I think that's the best method because they don't only learn grammar or vocabulary. They learn that they can use the language to communicate and to live. (Jose)

To expose them to as much English as possible and make it as real as possible. (Maria)

I think, if it's something meaningful to them, if it's something that they can associate with... (...) more like real-life situations (...) Because I think that's the most important thing at this stage, that they can understand and speak. (Chloe)

Their beliefs echo the principles of communicative language teaching, as they focus on meaningful communication and active participation. An important emphasis is also placed on speaking and listening, while reading and writing are seen as less important by most teachers.

For me [speaking] is the most important [skill]. Because now for example you are writing, but this conversation can be recorded and you can write it later. And we are preparing children for the future. Do you imagine a meeting, English, in a company, they have to decide something and instead of speaking they are writing all the ideas. It's nonsense. (Jesús)

Attitudes to grammar vary, but most teachers (19 out of 22) do not believe in teaching grammar explicitly or devoting a lot of time to grammar teaching.

I think that it's speaking. With this age you can't teach them grammar so it's playing games and speaking with them. (Rodrigo)

This book focuses a lot on grammar, which I think is boring for them, so I do the exercises of grammar but I do want them to speak. (Irantzu)

I do work on grammar, but not in the way they have to do exercises, more orally, and repetition. At the beginning of each class you ask them a few questions with the grammar you want to work with, with the idea to get it as they did it with the mother tongue. (Jorge)

Popular classroom activities with the teachers in the present study are in line with their beliefs in an active, communicative methodology. They claim they tend to use games, stories and songs. A few teachers also mention the importance of using new technologies, such as the interactive whiteboard. Although all the teachers use text books in their classes, several of them talk about using project based learning alongside of the text book.

Well, they enjoy very much doing interactive exercises, games, everything that has to do with fun. (Pilar)

Mainly that, drama, music, looking for real-life situations for them to practice their English, storytelling works really well, it's very motivating. (Chloe)

I think that the ideal is sort of project work, task-based learning where they're doing tasks and they're having to... the language is just coming out because they want to achieve a result (Jack).

I don't like books but we do need them sometimes. (Irantzu)

4.2. Beliefs about group and pair work

Most teachers believe in the benefits of group and pair work, but at the same time some of them admit to mainly using a whole class approach. Especially teachers working in the lower grades of primary school have difficulties using pair and group work, since they feel the children are too young to be able to successfully work in groups.

We try to mix them a lot, yes. 'cause there's some that's whole class activities but others we do pair work and others we do group work, especially with the projects we do a lot of group work. (Chloe)

I think that they are not used to work in pairs. Not that age. (Antonio)

Only one teacher explicitly states he does not think pair and group work are effective and that it is better to teach the children as a whole class.

When you sit them in pairs, usually one does it and the other... So I prefer working alone or in group, all together. (Ignacio)

4.3. The use of the first language (L1) in the EFL classroom

Almost all the teachers believe they should always use the target language in their English classes. Some of them also state they prohibit the use of the L1 by their students.

Always, I never translate a word in speaking. I sometimes write something in Spanish on the whiteboard, or I usually "how do you say in Spanish?" or whatever, and when a student says, "can you repeat?" because I think in that way they will realize that English always is the best option. (Jose)

Yep. And we try to, all teachers, and outside the class too, when we're in the corridor, in the break time because it's theoretically 50 and 50 so we try all the time to use English. (Chloe)

I never talk in Spanish and they know that they should use English always. (Jorge)

Others admit that it can be difficult to make their students use English, but they would like them to use English as much as possible.

(Do the boys speak to you in English or not?) Yes. (Always, or a mixture?) Yes, mixed, sometimes they can't and they feel frustrated. (And do they talk to the other students in English?) No, it's impossible. So at the beginning of the year I give them medals. But even with that I couldn't because they don't try. (Rodrigo)

Of course, if they have to ask questions or find information-gap activities like that, yes, they do it in English. In pairs, when they do in pairs because it's very specific what they have to do. But when they were working on their project they were using Spanish. (Fernando)

Only a few teachers mention sometimes using the L1, for instance for grammar explanations or for discipline issues. However, for some of them it seems this is something they are not very proud of, since they believe they should only use English.

If it's a grammar point and they're not getting it, I will clarify it for them in Spanish (Rosy)

To be honest, when I get angry, I have to speak Spanish. (Rodrigo)

4.4. Teachers' own learning experience

The majority of the teachers express negative attitudes to their own language learning experience at school. The focus of their foreign language classes tended to be on grammar and vocabulary, formal text book exercises and there was very little opportunity for using the language. Some teachers also mention their English teachers did not tend to use the target language.

So, I remember every year more or less learning the same things. And we didn't speak at all in class, everything was with a notebook and a lot of grammar, a lot of comprehension and readings and everything. (Eva)

Through the textbook, just through the textbook. No speaking, a lot of grammar. Usual Spanish way of teaching a language. (Maria)

Their beliefs about how English should be taught thus seem to be in stark contrast with how they themselves were taught at school. Only one teacher expresses more positive views to the grammar-translation method he was taught by, as he says that the results of it were not that bad.

I think then it was basically known as the grammar translation method, which was the most traditional one. (...) Well as a matter of fact it worked and therefore I often think back to that and think that if the attitude is there, then it can work for certain people. (Jack)

5. Discussion

The results of this study on EFL primary teachers' attitudes to teaching young learners in Spain appear to be in line with previous studies by Kocaman and Cansiz (2012) in Turkey and Liao (2007) in Taiwan, even though cultural differences potentially influence beliefs (e.g. Schulz, 2001). Similar to the Turkish and Taiwanese teachers mentioned before, all of our teachers seem to believe in the benefits of communicative language teaching. They stress the importance of input and interaction in the target language and give preference to working on speaking and listening skills over writing and reading. This may be because they are working with young learners, for whom spoken language is often thought to be more important than written language. This is also stated by Cameron (2001, p. 18):

Rather than oral skills being simply one aspect of learning language, the spoken form in the young learner classroom acts as the prime source and site of language learning.

When it comes to grammar, most of the teachers seem to disagree with explicit rule teaching, but on the other hand some of them mention that text books continue to focus on grammar and more traditional gap fill exercises. These teachers thus have to find a balance between their beliefs about focusing on communication and the constraints of the text book.

Given the teachers' focus on using the language for communication and not just studying it as an object, it is perhaps not surprising that most of them adhere to a target language only policy, banning the use of the mother tongue as much as possible. However, this position can be difficult to maintain and some teachers therefore seem to feel guilty when they resort to Spanish. Such a feeling of guilt at the use of the mother tongue in foreign language classes has also been noted by Mitchell (1988). Only a few of the teachers believe it can be necessary to make occasional use of the students' mother tongue, to give extra support and explanations. Nonetheless, several authors highlight the positive role the learners' mother tongue can play in order to scaffold foreign language learning (Alegría de la Colina & García Mayo, 2009; Butzkamm, 2003; Cameron, 2001; Cook, 2001).

Communicative language methodology is closely linked to the use of pair and group work, to ensure maximum opportunities for learners to interact in the classroom. Research has also shown that interaction in pairs and small groups can facilitate learning a foreign language, even at low levels of proficiency and with young learners (Oliver, 1998; Oliver, Philp & Mackey, 2008). It is therefore interesting to see that almost all the teachers in this study state they use pair and group work in their classes and believe that it is useful,

even though they also mention limitations and problems, such as lack of maturity and the increased use of the mother tongue during such activities.

Finally, as predicted by Borg (2003), their previous experience as foreign language learners appears to have influenced all of the teachers, by convincing them of the lack of effectiveness of the more traditional, grammar translation-based methods they were taught by.

5. Conclusions

The interviews with the 22 primary school teachers in this study revealed that all of them believe young learners of English benefit from a communicative approach, which invites participation and exposes children to large amounts of input in the target language. The classroom activities they claim to use involve games, songs, drama and project work and most of them state that they use pair and group work at least some of the time. Despite the potential benefits of using the learners' first language in foreign language classrooms, these teachers do not seem to believe it is advisable to resort to the mother tongue. In order to ascertain to which extent the teachers' attitudes correspond to their practice, it would have been interesting to include classroom observations into the study. Even though the teachers in our sample differed greatly in terms of experience and background (native versus non-native teachers, semi-private versus private school teachers), their beliefs turned out to be surprisingly similar. However, the present sample does not really allow us to compare different groups of teachers and future research might be able to investigate the potential influence of these factors on teachers' beliefs, by including a larger number of teachers and carefully selecting teachers with different characteristics. Despite this study's limitations, we believe it provides us with a number of useful insights into the attitudes and practices of a group of primary English teachers in Navarra, Spain.

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