

Teachers' Beliefs Versus Classroom Practice in ELT - Bridging the Cognitive-Behavioural Gap

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<https://doi.org/10.55041/ijst.v2i8.033>

Cite this Article: Jaju, C., G, C. & Samyuktha, M. (2026). Teachers' Beliefs Versus Classroom Practice in ELT - Bridging the Cognitive-Behavioural Gap. International Journal of Science, Strategic Management and Technology, 02(8), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.55041/ijst.v2i8.033>



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ABSTRACT

Research on second language teacher cognition has repeatedly shown that English language teachers do not always teach in ways that reflect their stated beliefs about language learning. This article examines the theoretical foundations of the belief–practice gap in English Language Teaching (ELT), reviews the contextual and institutional conditions that sustain it, and considers its implications for teacher education and professional development. Drawing on the teacher cognition literature, it argues that meaningful change depends not only on reshaping teachers' beliefs but also on improving the conditions that influence everyday classroom decisions.

Keywords: Teacher cognition; English Language Teaching (ELT); belief–practice gap; teacher beliefs; classroom practices; second language teaching; professional development; teacher education; contextual factors; institutional constraints.

1. Introduction

For much of the twentieth century, discussions of effective language teaching centred on instructional methods. The prevailing assumption was straightforward: improved teaching techniques would produce better learning outcomes. During the 1990s, this perspective began to change as applied linguists turned their attention to teachers themselves. Rather than viewing teachers as implementers of prescribed methods, researchers increasingly understood them as professionals whose beliefs, knowledge, experiences, and judgments shape classroom practice in complex ways. This shift established the field of teacher cognition, defined as the study of what teachers think, know, believe, and how those mental processes influence instructional decisions (Borg, 2003).

One of the most consistent findings in this body of research is that teachers' beliefs and classroom practices do not always correspond. A teacher may express strong support for communicative, learner-centred instruction during interviews or professional discussions, yet classroom observations may reveal lessons dominated by grammar explanation, controlled practice, and teacher-led interaction. Such inconsistencies are not unusual. They raise important questions about why teachers depart from their stated beliefs and what those differences reveal about the realities of classroom teaching.

2. Teacher Cognition as a Theoretical Framework

Research on teacher cognition developed from earlier studies of teacher thinking in general education before being applied to language teaching. Pajares (1992) argued that beliefs operate as interpretive frameworks through which teachers understand curriculum, learners, and instructional situations. These beliefs often exert greater influence on classroom behaviour than formal pedagogical knowledge because they are shaped by personal experience and reinforced over time.

Kagan (1992) further argued that teachers' beliefs are emotionally grounded, resistant to change, and frequently established long before formal teacher education begins. Many originate from teachers' own experiences as language learners, making them particularly influential when teachers confront unfamiliar or demanding classroom situations.

Building on this foundation, Borg (2003) proposed a comprehensive model of teacher cognition that includes beliefs, knowledge, assumptions, attitudes, and personal theories. These elements interact continuously with classroom experience, learner behaviour, and institutional conditions. Rather than viewing belief and practice as a simple cause-and-effect relationship, Borg described them as mutually influential. Classroom experiences reshape beliefs, while existing beliefs guide instructional choices, all within the constraints imposed by educational contexts.

3. Evidence of the Belief–Practice Gap

Research conducted across diverse educational settings has consistently documented differences between teachers' stated beliefs and their observed classroom practices. Johnson (1994) found that preservice ESL teachers who advocated communicative language teaching frequently relied on explicit grammar instruction once they entered the classroom. Their instructional choices reflected immediate classroom demands rather than the principles they had previously endorsed.

Similar findings emerged from Phipps and Borg's (2009) investigation of experienced ESL teachers. Participants often expressed learner-centred beliefs about grammar instruction, yet classroom observations revealed practices that emphasised explicit grammatical explanation and controlled exercises. Teachers did not attribute these differences to changing beliefs. Instead, they explained that practical classroom realities required instructional decisions that differed from their preferred approaches.

These studies suggest that the gap between belief and practice should not be interpreted as evidence of inadequate preparation or professional inconsistency. Teachers are often fully aware of the mismatch and can explain the contextual factors that shape their instructional decisions.

4. Why the Gap Persists: Contextual and Institutional Constraints

Several factors help explain why teachers' beliefs cannot always be translated directly into classroom practice.

Assessment systems often encourage teachers to prioritise examination performance over broader communicative goals. When high-stakes examinations reward grammatical accuracy and discrete language knowledge, teachers naturally devote greater attention to those areas, regardless of their broader pedagogical beliefs (Basturkmen, 2012).

Class size and limited resources present another challenge, particularly in many South Asian educational contexts. Interactive learning activities, collaborative tasks, and individualised feedback become increasingly difficult to implement as enrolment grows and instructional resources remain limited. Teachers who value learner-centred instruction may therefore adopt more teacher-directed methods simply because they are manageable under existing conditions.

Institutional culture also influences classroom practice. Richards and Lockhart (1994) observed that novice teachers frequently adapt to the established routines and expectations of their schools. This process, often described as the "washout effect," allows workplace norms to override ideas developed during teacher education programmes.

The demands of classroom teaching itself further contribute to the gap. Freeman (2002) argued that teaching requires continuous real-time decision-making. Faced with unexpected learner responses, time constraints, or classroom management issues, teachers frequently rely on established routines and accumulated experience rather than consciously applying theoretical principles.

5. Viewing the Gap as Professional Adaptation

Recent research encourages a more nuanced interpretation of the belief–practice gap. Rather than treating inconsistencies as evidence of ineffective teaching, scholars increasingly view them as signs of professional adaptation.

Nishino's (2012) study of Japanese secondary school English teachers illustrates this perspective. Teachers adjusted their instructional practices to accommodate examination requirements, institutional expectations, and classroom realities while continuing to value communicative language teaching. Their decisions reflected informed professional judgment rather than confusion or contradiction. From this perspective, differences between belief and practice demonstrate teachers' ability to respond intelligently to complex teaching environments.

6. Implications for Teacher Education

These findings carry important implications for teacher education. Programmes that focus exclusively on introducing new teaching methods or encouraging belief change are unlikely to produce lasting improvements if the working conditions that shape classroom practice remain unchanged.

Farrell (2015) argues that reflective practice provides a more productive approach. Structured reflection through peer observation, professional dialogue, mentoring, and reflective journals enables teachers to examine the reasoning behind their instructional decisions and evaluate how those decisions align with their professional goals. Reflection encourages teachers to adapt pedagogical principles thoughtfully instead of applying methods mechanically.

Borg (2006) similarly argues that effective professional development must acknowledge the institutional, curricular, and material realities that influence teaching. In rural and resource-constrained ELT contexts, teacher education should openly address the belief–practice gap. The objective is not to eliminate every difference between ideals and practice but to help teachers make informed, context-sensitive decisions while preserving the core principles of effective language teaching.

7. Conclusion

The relationship between teachers' beliefs and classroom practice cannot be understood as a simple matter of consistency or inconsistency. Classroom teaching requires teachers to reconcile deeply held professional beliefs with curriculum requirements, institutional expectations, available resources, learner needs, and the realities of everyday instruction. The resulting gap reflects this ongoing negotiation rather than a failure of professional commitment.

Teacher education is therefore most effective when it prepares teachers for that negotiation. By combining reflective practice with realistic attention to contextual constraints, professional development can support instructional decisions that remain faithful to sound pedagogical principles while responding effectively to the environments in which teachers actually work.

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