Discrepancies between L2 Teacher and L2 Learner Beliefs

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Abstract

This state of the art article overviews the literature on discrepancies between foreign language teacher and learner beliefs. In the first section, the author draws the reader's attention to the significance of discrepancies between the L2 teacher and L2 learner perceptions and provides a synopsis of both practical-anecdotal and empirical evidence on the possible consequences of such discrepancies. In the second part of this paper, drawing upon relevant literature, the author suggests some ways of overcoming discrepancies between teachers and learners' understandings concerning foreign language practices.

Keywords: mismatches, L2 teacher and learner beliefs, perceptions, discrepancies, foreign language learning

1. Introduction

Empirical studies conducted in educational psychology provide us with wealth of evidence demonstrating existence of discrepancies between teacher and learner perspectives, and how these discrepancies impact learning-teaching environments negatively (e.g., Entwistle, 1987, 2003; Entwistle, McCune, & Hounsel, 2002; Milner, 2005; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). It is often pointed out that when the teacher beliefs are not in agreement with the experiences and beliefs of their learners this gap causes discrepancies between teachers' teaching and students' learning agendas, which inevitably influences student learning negatively. The foreign and second language (henceforth L2) teaching literature provides us with abundant anecdotal, experiential and empirical evidence on the existence of differences between learner and teacher beliefs (Note 1) (e.g., Brown, 2009; Jean & Simard, 2011; Kumaravadivelu, 1991; Ruescha, Bown, & Deweya, 2012).

2. Why Do Discrepancies Occur? Why Are They Important?

Nunan (1986) drew our attention to diverse studies conducted on L2 teacher and L2 learner perceptions that demonstrated existence of clear differences between teacher and learner perspectives. Nunan (1995) asserted that in some cases L2 learners tend to follow their own learning agendas rather than those of their teachers and teachers on the other hand implement their pedagogical schemes without being aware of their students' expectations. In general such discrepancies are postulated to be the result of differences linked to cultural concerns, prior experiences, perceptions of language teaching/learning, expectations of L2 teaching/learning, and learning style preferences between teachers' and learners. Kumaravadivelu's study (1991) identified ten potential sources of mismatches between teacher intention and learner interpretation: cognitive, communicative, linguistic, pedagogic, strategic, cultural, evaluative, procedural, instructional, and attitudinal.

Kumaravadivelu (1991) asserted that recent trends in language teaching have a significant degree of flexibility (e.g., communicative and humanistic approaches to language teaching, and task-based teaching). He explained that these new trends mainly emphasize communicative language learning, and within this framework, classroom activities are presented as a set of general learning objectives and problem-solving tasks, and not a clearly defined list of linguistic objectives. He put forth that this flexibility in the L2 pedagogy depends highly on learner and teacher perceptions and interpretations of classroom aims and events. He affirmed that this vagueness in pedagogical procedures increases the potential for misunderstanding and miscommunication in the language classroom. In the same vein, Ellis (2003) maintained that, contrary to the earlier (i.e. traditional) L2 teaching/learning methods, which viewed language as a set of linguistic systems and operated through linguistic syllabi (i.e. usually grammatical structures), recent language pedagogy does not attempt to specify what the learners will learn but, but emphasizes how learning should take place. According to Nunan (1995), major causes

for such discrepancies are the differences between pedagogical agendas of the teacher and the learner arising from individual perceptions concerning 'how learning should take place'.

Kumaravadivelu (1991) stressed the influence of prior teacher and learner experiences on learner and teacher perceptions and interpretations. He maintained that such prior experiences as a member of a particular community and society might result in completely distinct interpretations of what constitutes language teaching and language learning, and about what teacher-learner classroom roles should be. Kumaravadivelu (1991) maintained that in case of cultural differences both the teacher and the learner need to go through the process of restructuring their role relationships. Therefore, he suggested looking into factors contributing to the discrepancies between the teacher intention and the learner interpretation when implementing L2 language tasks. Like Kumaravadivelu (1991), Nunan (1986) also stressed the influence of prior learning experiences and societal factors on the learners' perceptions of their language experiences.

The empirical studies which investigated differences between L2 teachers and L2 learners' perspectives in teaching and learning used mostly Horwitz's BALLI (Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory) to detect possible discrepancies in L2 classrooms (e.g., Peacock, 1998). Several other empirical studies used research methodologies such as ethnography, observations, interviews, and blend of various research methodologies. These studies attempted to discover and understand possible differences between teacher and learner perspectives in language classrooms (e.g., Bloom, 2007; Brown, 2009; Canagarajah, 1993; Ferris, Brown, Liu, Eugenia, & Stine, 2011; Jean & Simard, 2011; Hawkey, 2006; Kumaravadivelu, 1991; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Peacock, 1998, 2001; Ruescha et al., 2012). Some other empirical studies investigated discrepancies between L2 learner and L2 teacher beliefs by focusing on some common L2 issues such as: error correction (e.g., Schulz, 1996); grammar teaching (e.g., Jean & Simard, 2011); teacher and student role expectations (e.g., McCargar, 1993); use of L1 in L2 classrooms (e.g., Levine, 2003); learner and teacher perceptions of language activities (e.g., Hawkey, 2006); teacher and learner beliefs about oral language instruction (e.g., Cohen & Fass, 2001) and corrective feedback (e.g., Schulz, 2001).

All of these above-mentioned scholars stressed the notable influence of teacher and learner beliefs on language learning outcomes. Schulz (2001) asserted that inconsistencies in student and teacher belief systems could be harmful to learning. Several empirical second language learning/foreign language learning (SLL/FLL) studies provided evidence to support this view (e.g., Bloom, 2007; Canagarajah, 1993; Cohen & Fass, 2001; Hawkey, 2006; Horwitz, 1987, 1988, 1999; Peacock, 1998, 2001 and so forth). Horwitz (1988) argued that learners have preconceptions of language learning and these preconceptions might lead learners to have negative and incorrect expectations about how foreign languages are learned. These incorrect beliefs may have other effects. Students may feel frustrated when they see that their beliefs and expectations are not concordant with the classroom methods used. In cases when learner expectations and conceptions of foreign language learning differ from teacher conceptions and expectations, learning outcomes are postulated to be further affected. Horwitz suggested that the gap between teacher and learner beliefs might affect learners' confidence in their teachers and their willingness to participate in the L2. McCargar (1993) claimed that unsatisfied learners might abandon a class and choose another one that best meets their perceived needs, goals and expectations.

Several empirical studies confirmed Horwitz's (1988) and McCagar's (1993) conclusions by demonstrating that gaps between teacher and learner beliefs and their approaches to learning and teaching may result in learner dissatisfaction and resistance (e.g., unwillingness to participate in classroom activities) (e.g., Bloom, 2007; Canagarajah, 1993; Hawkey, 2006; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Peacock, 1998, 2001).

For instance, Peacock's (1998, 2001) studies found that the gaps between teacher and learner beliefs reduced learner confidence and satisfaction; and caused learner reluctance to participate in communicative activities; and consequently resulted in negative learning outcomes. Similarly, Canagarajah's (1993) research, which investigated learner resistance, clearly demonstrated that language learners could be unsatisfied with the teaching methods used in their language classroom and might react to it by showing resistance to participate in the language activities. Canagarajah (1993) identified a link between resistance and product/result-oriented learning. He explained that the participant students in his research expressed displeasure and dissatisfaction with the communicative approach used in their English as a foreign language (henceforth EFL) classes, and wanted explicit grammatical instruction that they could study and memorize as content. Canagarajah noted that the students often disregarded learner-centered and activity-oriented classes but attended classes that dealt with the grammar points overtly. He also explained that the students were reluctant to participate in the role-play or other interactive activities. He explained that the learners showed resistance to engaging in learner-centered learning activities and tried to draw classroom interaction towards a teacher-centered form.

Hawkey (2006) investigated a group of English language teachers' and learners' perceptions of communicative language learning/teaching in their classes. Although the data indicated that both the teachers and the learners had an overall agreement on merits of communicative teaching and learning, the findings of the study suggested notable differences between the perceptions of learners and teachers on the importance of grammar and pair work in their classes. Hawkey regarded these differences as potential problem areas to focus on, and he, therefore, suggested that teachers be provided with support in these areas.

Bloom's teacher-research project (2007), which was based on communicative language teaching (the course for this project was designed by using task and project based teaching models), investigated thirteen adult language learners' reactions towards non-traditional language classroom. She collected data via anecdotal records (to document these anecdotal records she videotaped each class), informal interviews, and informal and formal student feedback. Her research findings suggested that the conflict between teacher and learner expectations created tensions in the classroom. Bloom's study revealed that the tensions were mainly related to the following four themes: 'Student versus teacher-centered learning', 'self-efficacy versus laissez faire work attitude', 'communication versus accuracy', and 'process versus product orientation'. She observed that the students had tensions during student-centered activities. She stated that these tensions developed because the course did not meet the learners' expectations; that is, they preferred a more teacher-centered approach. During student-centered activities, the students questioned the teacher's role and 'control' of the classroom. She explained that some students appeared to be confused during self-directed learning time. Bloom stated that although some students took the responsibility of their own learning, some others had 'a laissez faire attitude'. Bloom asserted that the aim of the course was authentic communication rather than working on the ability to produce perfect language and the assignments and the activities encouraged the learners to focus on the process rather than the product.

Jing (2006) investigated how and why learner resistance occurred in a metacognition-training (MT) (Note 2) project. The aim of the MT project was to improve learner reflection and autonomy. His paper addressed two research questions:

1. In what ways were the students resistant to the teacher's goals and expectations in a metacognition-training (MT) project?

2. What were the possible explanations for this resistance?

His findings indicated existence of learner resistance because of a discrepancy between the teacher's goals and expectations and those of the learners. Jing also discovered that institutional pressures and societal expectations were the influencing and controlling factors that have notable impact on the learner expectations. He explained that these institutional and societal pressures and expectations led both the learners and teachers to employ product–oriented approaches in learning/teaching and the learners to learn for examinations. Jing explained that because of the product-oriented approach MT project failed to succeed.

Cohen and Fass (2001) investigated a group of EFL teachers and learners' beliefs concerning communicative oral language tasks. The findings indicated that there was disagreement between student and teacher beliefs regarding the amount of student teacher talk in the classroom that in the end resulted in failure in attaining communicative learning objectives. Mantle-Bromely (1995) investigated a group of learners' beliefs about foreign language learning (She used Horwitz's BALLI) and discovered that these learners' beliefs differed greatly from present-day teacher beliefs. She therefore, stressed that teachers need to have a clear understanding of their students' beliefs and help them construct realistic and informed beliefs about foreign language learning.

Discrepancies between teachers' general teaching styles (which are directly linked to teachers' beliefs and conceptions of teaching) and learners' preferred learning styles have also been proved to be influencing learning outcomes negatively (see Peacock, 2001). Peacock noted that a discrepancy between teaching and learning styles might cause serious learning failure, frustration and demotivation. He suggested that EFL teachers should teach by using various strategies in order to accommodate different learning styles.

3. How Can Discrepancies Be Overcome?

The knowledge on potential sources of discrepancies between teacher and learner beliefs would help teachers sensitize themselves to different interpretations of language teaching-learning activities and facilitate desired learning outcomes in the classroom. Although the L2 literature provides us with notable number of empirical studies that sought to understand why and how discrepancies occur, there is very little empirical work to suggest what teachers could do to overcome these discrepancies. Regarding the issue, educationalists suggest that both teachers and learners' opinions be consulted and their beliefs be explored. They also recommend that in order to

mediate L2 learners' dysfunctional beliefs learner training should become part of language instruction and L2 teachers should receive help on the issue.

Nunan 1986 stated that the duty of language teachers is not only to teach the language but also to train the learners on how to become a good language learner. He claimed that learners' need to be convinced about the merits of communicative language activities (e.g., role-playing, problem-solving etc.). He suggested that learners should be sensitized to the requirements of communicative language learning through explanation, discussion and demonstration. In his view, in order for curriculum innovations to be effective, educators (e.g., teachers, curriculum designers etc.) should approach the learners and their perceptions of the language learning process with sensitivity and should be willing to consult learners' beliefs and negotiate.

Teachers in EFL classrooms are required to respond to their students' needs and understand their students' perceptions of their learning styles, learning assets and learning goals (see Gabillon, 2005, 2007). Richards and Rodgers (2001) suggested that this may be done informally (one-to-one sessions with students) or through administering needs assessment instrument. They proposed that on the basis of such needs assessment, teachers should plan their language instruction to respond to the learners' needs. Schulz (2001) called for a need for teachers to explore their students' perceptions on language learning related issues and make efforts to deal with potential conflicts between student beliefs and teaching practices. Similarly, Benson and Lor (1999) proposed to take into consideration learners' conceptions of, beliefs about, and approaches to language learning. Based on their research with a group of language learners (1999), they found that the learners' conceptions of language learning were influential in shaping the learners' beliefs, and subsequently the approaches they adopted to learning and the learning strategies they used. Benson and Lor (1999) suggested that exploring learners' conceptions of learning is important because it helps to classify learner beliefs. They maintained that language teachers need not only know what beliefs learners hold about learning but they also need to know whether these beliefs are 'functional' or 'dysfunctional' in order to be able to influence learners' attitudes and language learning behaviors. Benson and Lor suggested that in order to modify language learning beliefs, the learner must also modify the underlying conceptions of these beliefs.

Today in some institutions where innovation in foreign language teaching is introduced, counseling (Note 3), or/and learner training programs (e.g., metacognitive training; language learning strategy training etc.) are integrated in language learning curricula to minimize discrepancies between learner vs. teacher perspectives. Such programs aim to: a) train learners' on how to become a good language learner (e.g., self-directed, autonomous etc.); b) mediate learners' dysfunctional beliefs and help them to appropriate these in a more functional way (see Jing, 2006). The Council of Europe has published various studies proposing different approaches for mediating language learners' beliefs to minimize the gap between teaching and learning in EFL (see Byram & Planet, 2000; Fenner, 2001; Zarate Gohard-Radenkovic, Lussier, & Pens, 2004).

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to give an overview of the literature on discrepancies between foreign language teacher and learner beliefs and provided a synopsis of both practical-anecdotal and empirical evidence on the possible consequences of such discrepancies. Drawing upon relevant literature, I have proposed some ways of overcoming discrepancies between teachers vs. learner perspectives.

While there has been a significant progress in the area of learner/teacher belief research, there is still paucity in research findings as regards types of intervention techniques to employ for minimizing discrepancies between teacher and learner perspectives. Today, it is widely recommended that teachers have a more active role in their classroom practices and question their teaching in relation to their students' beliefs about learning. Many EFL specialists encourage teachers to take part in classroom research to gather information on their students' needs and to help them minimize discrepancies between their teaching and their students' learning. It is recommended that teachers use instruments to identify their students' needs and classroom activity preferences, and develop self-awareness in their students to encourage changes in their behaviors (Savignon, 2002).

However, many EFL teachers are not equipped with classroom research techniques and even fewer EFL teachers have knowledge on how to conduct research in the area of teacher/learner beliefs. Therefore, there is a need for teacher education programs that highlight possible consequences of discrepancies between teacher and learner beliefs and equip teachers with necessary knowledge on how to deal with this issue. In addition, further research is required to discover different types of effective intervention techniques that could help bridge the gap between teacher and learner perspectives.

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Notes

Note 1. Here I use the term 'beliefs' as a general term to encompass various labels such as learner/teacher intentions, interpretations, perceptions, preconceptions, perspectives, preferred approaches, styles, agendas and attitudes. Although these terms are all separate entities, they are postulated to be belief-related and are guided by their underlying beliefs (see Gabillon, 2005).

Note 2. Metacognition-training (MT) is reflection on learning processes and learning to learn. Such reflection is postulated to improve self-direction and learner autonomy in learning (Jing, 2006).

Note 3. CRAPEL (Centre de Recherches et D'Applications Pédagogiques En Langues) Université Nancy 2 has been using counseling services as part of their self-directed language learning program.