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USING INTERVIEWS
TO STUDY TEACHER COGNITION

The study of teacher beliefs in the field of language teaching has attracted much interest from researchers in the last 30 years. It is important to examine teacher beliefs because they are believed to play a crucial role in motivating teachers' actual classroom practices. However, the review of the literature seems to suggest that research methods that scholars employ to study teacher beliefs play a key role in the development of our understanding of the said construct. This methodological paper critically assesses some of those methods, discusses the value of in-depth interviews to teacher cognition research, and offers specific interview types that can be useful in the investigation of teacher beliefs specifically concerning the teaching of speaking in EFL contexts. The paper argues that teachers' cognitive worlds be examined as embedded in their practices with the help of interviews. This is in line with a recent proposition in the field to designate situated professional practice as the entry point to investigations of teacher beliefs. The study results have implications for researchers in the field of teacher cognition.

Key words: teacher cognition, teacher beliefs, teaching speaking, qualitative research, research methods, interviews.

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Педагогтердің когнитивті әлемін зерттеу мақсатында
сұхбат әдісін пайдалану

Мұғалімдердің ұғымдарын зерттеу мұғалімдердің когнитивті әлемін зерттеу саласына кіреді. Мұғалімдердің когнитивті әлемі – бұл мұғалімдердің педагогикалық шешімдерінің негізінде жатқан жасырын психикалық процестердің барлық аспектілерін қамтитын тұжырымдама. Мұғалімдердің когнитивті әлемін зерттеу зерттеушілер үшін қиындық тудырады. Бұның бір себебі құбылысқа сай зерттеу әдістерінің қолданылмауы. Тіл оқыту саласындағы мұғалімдердің ұғымдарын зерттеу соңғы 30 жылда зерттеушілердің үлкен қызығушылығын тудырды. Мұғалімдердің ұғымдарын зерттеу аса маңызды, өйткені олар сыныптағы іс-тәжірибеге тікелей әсер етеді деп есептелінеді. Алайда бұл саладағы әдебиетке шолу жасасақ, шет тілін оқытатын мұғалімдердің ұғымдары туралы түсінігімізді дамытуда ғалымдардың қолданатын зерттеу әдістері шешуші рөл атқаратындығын байқаймыз. Мақалада, сол әдістердің кейбіреулері сыни талданады, сондай-ақ мұғалімдердің когнитивтік әлемін зерттеудегі терең сұхбат әдісінің маңыздылығы талқыланады және ағылшын тілі шет тілі ретінде оқытылатын контексттерде, сөйлеуге үйретуге қатысты мұғалімдердің ұғымдарын зерттеу үшін қолайлы болатын сұхбат әдісінің нақты түрлері ұсынылады. Сапалық әдістерінің бірі болып табылатын сұхбат, мұғалімдердің когнитивті әлемін терең және объективті түрде зерттеуге, когнитивті құбылыстар туралы егжей-тегжейлі және жан-жақты ақпараттарды жинауға, олардың нақты педагогикалық жағдайға сай ерекшеліктерін түсінуге мүмкіндік береді.

Түйін сөздер: мұғалімдердің когнитивтік әлемі, мұғалімдердің ұғымдары, сөйлеуді үйрету, сапалық зерттеу жобасы, зерттеу әдістері, сұхбат әдісі.

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Использование интервью
для изучения когнитивного измерения учителей

Изучение убеждений учителей входит в более широкую область исследований когнитивного измерения учителей. Когнитивное измерение учителей – это концепция, которая охватывает все аспекты скрытых ментальных процессов, лежащих в основе педагогических решений учителей, ненаблюдаемое когнитивное измерение преподавания – то, что учителя знают, во что верят и о

чем думают. Изучение убеждений учителей оказалось серьезной проблемой для исследователей не только из-за различных концептуализации, но и из-за методов, которые были использованы для изучения и понимания этого феномена. Изучение систем убеждений учителей в области преподавания языка вызвало большой интерес у исследователей в последние 30 лет. Важно изучать убеждения учителей, поскольку считается, что они играют ключевую роль по отношению к реальной практике учителей в классах. Однако обзор литературы, по-видимому, позволяет предположить, что исследовательские методы, используемые учеными для изучения убеждений учителей, определяют наше понимание обсуждаемой темы. В данной статье критически оцениваются некоторые из этих исследовательских методов, обсуждается ценность интервью для исследования когнитивных измерений учителей и предлагаются конкретные типы интервью, которые могут быть полезны при исследовании убеждений учителей относительно преподавание устной речи. В статье утверждается, что когнитивные миры учителей нужно исследовать с помощью интервью как неотъемлемую часть их практики. Это соответствует предложением в данной области обозначить профессиональную практику учителей в качестве отправной точки для исследования их систем убеждений. Результаты исследования имеют значение для исследователей в области изучения когнитивного измерения педагогов.

Ключевые слова: когнитивное измерение учителей, убеждения учителей, преподавание устной речи, качественные исследования, методы исследования, интервью.

Introduction

The investigation into "teacher beliefs" within the field of applied linguistics has garnered significant attention from scholars over the past three decades. This area of inquiry falls under the broader scope of teacher cognition research as outlined by D. Woods (1996). Teacher cognition is a comprehensive construct that covers all "covert mental processes", as defined by J. Calderhead (1987: 184). These processes, in their turn, inform instructors' in-class pedagogical decisions. Teacher cognition constitutes the "unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching – what teachers know, believe, and think" (Borg S., 2003: 81). The exploration of teacher beliefs has gained prominence with the recognition that teaching is an intellectual activity in which educators actively engage and utilize their networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs when making instructional choices (Borg S., 2003).

Studying and understanding teachers' belief systems is important as they are widely recognized to have a significant impact on teachers' instructional practices in the classroom. It is important to study teacher beliefs because they are believed to play an important role in relation to teachers' actual classroom practices. It is suggested that beliefs and practices exist in "symbiotic relationships" in that they constantly interact influencing and informing one another (Borg S., 2003: 441). M. Pajares (1992: 307), for instance, reports that "few would argue that the beliefs teachers hold influence their perceptions and judgments, which, in turn, affect their behavior in the classroom". Some have claimed that beliefs motivate instructional practices in the classroom (Burns A., 1992) while others have put forward the idea that beliefs shape the instructional practices of the teachers (Johnson K., 1992). It has also been proposed that beliefs guide teachers' thinking and action (Borg M., 2001) and thus, subsequently, have a significant effect on teachers' pedagogical decisions (Johnson K.E., 1994). Thus, it appears to be essential that researchers study teacher beliefs regarding classroom practices to obtain quality and reliable data. However, the review of the literature seems to suggest that research methods that scholars employ to study teacher beliefs may shape our understanding of the construct under discussion. That is to say, the way define teacher beliefs may be informed by the methods that we use to study them. This paper critically assesses some of those methods, discusses the value of in-depth interviews to teacher cognition research, and offers specific interview types that can be useful in the investigation of teacher beliefs, particularly about the teaching of L2 oral skills in EFL contexts.

Literature review

Studying teacher beliefs has been a significant challenge for researchers due to the complexity of the topic and the selection of inadequate research methods. A specific example is a study conducted by A.D. Cohen and L. Fass (2001) in which they employed questionnaires as their primary method to explore teachers' and students' beliefs within an English as a Foreign Language program at a Colombian University. The study focused on three areas: classroom instruction, materials used for oral instruction, and strategies for assessing oral competence. However, this methodology had limitations in terms of accurately capturing

participants' true beliefs because the questionnaire was used as the main method to investigate beliefs. One way to address this limitation is by incorporating additional research tools such as interviews or observations that can provide more in-depth insights into teachers' belief systems about teaching practices. These methods allow researchers to delve deeper into underlying thoughts, motivations, values, and assumptions held by teachers regarding instructional approaches. Simon Borg (2006) criticizes questionnaires for their limited capacity in capturing the full range of beliefs that respondents may have or wish to express. In his analysis, Borg argues that researchers often construct questionnaires based on their own assumptions and therefore fail to address all relevant aspects of teachers' beliefs. For instance, A.D. Cohen and L. Fass's (2001: 49) questionnaire primarily focused on four specific topics related to classroom dynamics: the ideal percentage of class time for teacher talk, student talk, characteristics of successful oral production by students, and types of oral activities suitable for English language learning. It is important to acknowledge that while questionnaires can provide valuable insights into teachers' belief networks within a limited framework, studying with more depth would involve employing other research methods as well. Qualitative approaches such as interviews or observations allow researchers to delve deeper into teachers' thought processes and explore additional dimensions beyond what can be captured through predefined questionnaire items.

In recent years, there have been several notable studies examining teacher cognitions related to speaking skills in language education. Some of these investigations include the work of S. Baleghizadeh and N.M.N. Shahri (2014), A. Dincer and S. Yesilyurt (2013), and S. J. Webster (2015). For instance, A. Dincer and S. Yesilyurt's (2013) study focused on exploring the beliefs held by student teachers in Turkey regarding the importance they attributed to teaching L2 speaking as a language skill, as well as their self-evaluations of their own proficiency in second language speaking. To assess these beliefs, an initial step involved using a Likert-scale questionnaire adapted from Noels et al.'s (2000) work which consisted of 31 statements relating to motivational factors such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, or amotivation towards teaching L2 speaking skills. Based on participants' responses to this questionnaire, they were categorized into groups according to their underlying motivations. However, it is important to note that this methodology had limitations concerning its ability not only to explore

specific beliefs about teaching but also learning-related attitudes among student teachers within Turkish schools for L2 Speaking instruction.

In another study conducted by S. Baleghizadeh and N.M.N. Shahri (2014), the focus was placed on understanding the conceptions of speaking instruction held by in-service EFL teachers in Iran. The study involved interviews with 10 teachers, where they shared their personal experiences as language learners, their beliefs about how students should learn to speak a second language, and their own practices when it comes to teaching speaking skills. However, one limitation of this study is that they heavily relied on pre-observation interview data as the sole representation of participants' cognitions. These conversations mainly focused on stated practices rather than observed ones. As a result, there may have been a failure in capturing "practically-oriented cognitions which inform teachers' actual instructional practices" (Borg S., 2006: 280).

The final case to be discussed in this review is the study done by S.J. Webster (2015). The author delves deep into understanding the thought processes and beliefs of practicing teachers when it comes to teaching speaking skills in language education. This particular investigation stands as one of the most comprehensive examinations to date, drawing on both observational data and interviews with early career ESOL teachers in the United Kingdom. The focus of this longitudinal study was centered around these educators' practical knowledge base concerning speaking skills within an academic year. Webster's research aimed not only to identify any shared attributes or disparities among four practitioners but also sought potential areas for knowledge growth over time. By analyzing these professionals' cognitions about teaching speaking, he provides important insights into their pedagogical decisions and instructional practices throughout their careers.

However, despite the extensive nature of the mentioned study, it stands as a rare case in the field of language teacher cognition. This area is lacking in-depth studies that delve into various aspects of teachers' thoughts and beliefs regarding speaking instruction using comprehensive methodological and conceptual approaches. In light of this gap, recent research has shown a positive shift toward utilizing in-depth interviews as a means to examine practically-oriented beliefs (Fives H. & Gill M.G., 2015). These interviews allow researchers to explore teachers' beliefs with direct references to classroom practices (Borg S., 2006). By employing

such methods, scholars have an opportunity to gain deeper insights into how teachers think about teaching speaking and its implications on instructional decisions..

Materials and methods

As part of my doctoral research project at the University of Bath in the UK, I conducted a study to investigate teachers' beliefs regarding teaching oral skills. To gain a comprehensive understanding of these beliefs and practices, I employed two different types of interviews: scenario-based interviews (SBI) and stimulated-recall interviews (SRI). These interview methods were complemented by classroom observations, allowing for thorough data collection. The utilization of interviews in this study holds particular significance as they are not commonly employed in language teacher cognition research. By employing these interview techniques, I was able to bridge an existing methodological gap within this field.

A. In order to gain a deeper understanding of teachers' beliefs, *scenario-based interviews* were conducted before classroom observations. These interviews allowed the researchers to inquire about the participants' stated beliefs regarding oral instruction within their specific teaching contexts. This strategy was adopted because it is acknowledged that abstract constructs such as beliefs can be challenging for teachers to discuss in extensive detail. Previous research has also indicated that directly asking teachers about their beliefs may not yield fruitful results, as many educators may not be fully aware of or have adequate language skills needed to express these underlying convictions. D.M. Kagan (1992: 66) highlights this issue by stating that "teachers are often unaware of their own beliefs, they do not always possess language with which to describe and label their beliefs, and they may be reluctant to espouse them publicly." Therefore, scenario-based interviews offer an alternative method for exploring teacher cognition by providing contextualized scenarios within which teachers can reflect upon and articulate their thoughts more effectively.

In order to facilitate the data elicitation during the interview process, the participant teachers were presented with a series of carefully constructed scenarios that depicted various instructional situations commonly found in classroom settings. These scenarios served as stimuli for teachers to reflect on and provide their insights regarding what they believed they should or would do in those specific situations. The intention behind this

approach was to uncover the teachers' conception of "desirable behavior" when it came to teaching practices (Basturkmen H. et al., 2004). Interestingly, besides commenting on the given scenarios, teachers were also encouraged to establish connections between these hypothetical situations and their own past experiences as both language learners and language instructors. This additional aspect allowed for a deeper exploration into how personal histories may shape an individual's pedagogical beliefs. To ensure consistency and enable meaningful comparisons among participants, all educators were exposed to identical scenarios during this research inquiry. By employing such uniformity in scenario selection, I was able to analyze variations within participants' stated beliefs concerning each situation that they encountered. It is worth noting that these scenarios stemmed from my own observations of English as a Foreign Language classrooms at state schools in Kazakhstan.

I will now present three teaching scenarios utilized in the scenario-based interviews as samples. It is important to note that during the interviews I have excluded the rationale sections from teachers' copies of the interview schedule to avoid leading participant answers and thus contaminating data. I decided to reproduce the rationale sections in this paper so that readers can understand the theoretical foundation of the scenarios and the purpose behind their inclusion in the interviews.

Scenario 1: As part of an activity aimed at enhancing students' speaking skills, you aim to facilitate a whole-class discussion in the classroom. To achieve this, you plan to engage the students by posing questions. However, you observe that the students tend to respond with short answers such as 'yes,' 'no,' or brief one-word replies. In light of this situation, how should you respond and why? Rationale: In this scenario, it is crucial to address the issue of students providing limited responses during the discussion. When students are encouraged to participate in a discussion by responding to questions, it is expected that they will offer more detailed and comprehensive answers, thus fostering meaningful exchanges of ideas. However, when students predominantly rely on short, one-word answers, they miss out on the opportunity to practice and develop their oral communication skills (Tang J., 2002). It is common for students to opt for concise responses as they may be apprehensive about making mistakes while speaking at length or may underestimate their abilities in verbal expression (Goh C.C. & Burns A., 2012). The purpose of this scenario is to uncover teachers' perspectives and beliefs regarding the

instruction of speaking turns, including both short and long turns, as well as the facilitation of whole-class discussions or alternative forms of discourse.

Scenario 2: When organizing students into groups for a classroom discussion, a student expresses their opinion that practicing L2 speaking skills is unnecessary because the university entrance exam does not assess students' communication skills. What would be your response to this student if you were their teacher? Rationale: This scenario aimed to elicit respondents' beliefs regarding the significance and priority of teaching oral communication skills in contrast to grammar, vocabulary, reading, and writing. Furthermore, I intended to discuss the potential influence of state exams on the instructional design of oral skills pedagogy within classrooms due to the absence of speaking assessments in state examinations.

Scenario 3: After a class, a student approaches you and demonstrates eagerness to improve their speaking abilities. The student appears highly motivated and determined to put in extra effort to achieve this goal. They ask for your guidance on what they should do. How would you respond to this student's inquiry, and why? Rationale: In this particular scenario, I had the opportunity to explore the approaches employed by teachers in enhancing students' oral proficiency. Furthermore, teachers expressed their perspectives regarding students who demonstrate preparedness for engaging in supplementary activities beyond formal classroom instruction.

B. After conducting classroom observations, *stimulated-recall interviews* were organized to further investigate the dynamics of teachers' belief networks. This interview type aimed to provide teachers with a platform to articulate their thought processes regarding specific instances of instruction during the observed classes. As a result, this method has proven invaluable in capturing and examining the cognitive processes that influence teachers' instructional decisions within the classroom. By employing stimulated-recall interviews as a data collection instrument, I gained access to valuable insights into teacher cognitions directly related to classroom practices. This approach effectively allowed for an exploration of the complex interplay between theoretical beliefs and practical implementation in pedagogy.

In conducting SRIs, audio recordings of the lessons were used as stimuli for participants' recall instead of using videotapes. While it is true that videotapes may have facilitated better recall due to their combination of vision and sound (Borg S.,

2006; Calderhead J., 1981), I made the deliberate decision not to video record the lessons. This choice was based on concerns regarding participant reactivity. Video recording has been identified as intrusive and is likely to generate a heightened level of awareness among individuals being observed (Borg S., 2006). Given that my aim was to capture naturally occurring English as a Foreign Language classes without any external influences, I wanted to avoid compromising authenticity by introducing video cameras into the classroom setting.

The audio stimuli served "as the basis of concrete discussions of what the teachers were doing, their interpretations of the events represented in the stimuli and of their reasons for the instructional decisions they were taking" (Borg S., 2006: 219). To elicit participants' perspectives on the instructional practices employed during oral instruction, I carefully chose specific excerpts from the recorded lessons and presented them as prompts for discussion. These concrete extracts served as focal points to encourage participants to identify their interpretations of what was occurring in those moments. Moreover, they were encouraged to reflect on whether or not the pedagogical approach being discussed aligned with their personal teaching preferences. Subsequently, participants were asked to articulate their rationales behind implementing these particular instructional techniques. This approach allowed for a detailed exploration of participants' thoughts and reasoning regarding their chosen strategies within the context of oral instruction. To adopt a different method, one could consider playing the entire recording and allowing the participants to have more agency in selecting which instructional episodes they wish to discuss (Clark C.M. & Peterson P.L., 1984). However, implementing this strategy would demand a larger time commitment from the participants. Given that each lesson typically spans 50 minutes, and it was customary for me to observe multiple classes of a single participant within the same day, allocating sufficient time for such an approach would prove improbable. To accommodate the participants' busy schedules and prevent potential participant fatigue, I decided to select specific portions from the lengthy 100-minute audiotape instead of replaying it in its entirety. This approach was undertaken to be considerate of the teachers' time constraints. By playing extracts that focused on speaking instruction and prompted open-ended commentary from the teachers, the unnecessary burden on their already congested schedules was minimized while still allowing for meaningful reflection.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge the ongoing methodological discourse surrounding stimulated-recall interviews. It has been argued that participants could merely be expressing "post-hoc rationalizations – i.e., explanations made up at the time of the interview rather than accounts of the thinking underpinning the events they are asked to reflect on" (Borg S., 2006: 211). (Borg S., 2006: 211). While it was challenging to ascertain with absolute certainty whether teachers were engaging in post-hoc rationalizations, I tried to mitigate this possibility through diligent consideration of specific factors.

Firstly, to establish a positive relationship with the participants, I introduced myself as an impartial researcher without any formal connections to the Ministry of Education or the school administration. This was crucial for me not to be perceived as an evaluator or inspector by the teachers. Additionally, I only selected participants who volunteered to take part in the study after our meetings and provided signed consent forms guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality. These precautionary steps were implemented specifically to cultivate mutual trust between myself and the research participants.

Secondly, to ensure participants' understanding of the SRI procedures and ease any potential apprehension, I provided a thorough explanation of the stimulated-recall technique including its purpose, procedure, and the responsibilities of those involved. This pre-interview clarity was essential to prevent any misinterpretation or uncertainty among teachers. It aimed at cultivating a sense of familiarity with the technique to alleviate any possible confusion or anxiety that may hinder their participation.

Thirdly, in order to enhance the quality of the stimuli used in this study, audio recordings of the lessons were utilized. However, to further enrich and improve these stimuli, essential information from field notes was also incorporated. Subsequently, a more comprehensive context was created around the stimuli. This contextualization proved crucial as it enabled teachers to effectively recall and reflect upon the specific events that occurred during instruction when discussing them later on (Skott J., 2015: 21).

In addition, according to the work of S.M. Gass and A. Mackey (2000), it is argued that reducing the time gap between specific instructional episodes being analyzed and conducting stimulated-recall interviews can lead to more reliable data. While it would be ideal for researchers to immediately conduct these interviews after each subsequent lesson, practical constraints may prevent this from always being possible in real-world contexts. Firstly, participants such as secondary school EFL teachers often have busy schedules, making it challenging to schedule an interview immediately following an observed lesson. In order to prioritize ethical considerations, I opted to accommodate the availability of the teachers rather than impose additional burdens on them by insisting on immediate post-lesson interviews. Additionally, since audio recordings were used as stimuli for stimulated-recall sessions in my study, conducting interviews right after each observed lesson or later during the same day was not feasible due to the required time for stimulus preparation processes. Nevertheless, there was never a gap longer than two days between each observed lesson and its corresponding follow-up interview.

By employing these meticulous procedures, I aimed to minimize the potential limitations and bias inherent in using stimulated recall interviews to study teacher cognition.

Results and discussion

The scenario-based interviews consisted of a set of eight carefully constructed scenarios that aimed to uncover the participants' explicitly stated beliefs regarding their approach to teaching speaking. Upon starting the interview, participants were presented with clear instructions at the beginning of each page, which stated: "Below are several potential situations that may arise in a classroom environment. For each situation, kindly articulate your thoughts on what actions you believe should be taken and provide a rationale behind your choices." Based on this guidance, teachers proceeded to analyze different teacher-student interactions inherent within each scenario and then expressed their intended course of action when faced with said situations. However, unless I specifically requested their input on how these situations apply to their personal experiences in the classroom with current or former students, the information they provided mainly focused on "ideal instructional practices" rather than addressing the realities of instruction (Borg S., 2006: 279). Consequently, I decided to modify the instructions as follows: 'Below are several possible scenarios that may arise in your teaching practice. Please carefully analyze each scenario and provide your professional judgment based on your own recent or past teaching experience.' Additionally, throughout the interview process and prior to discussing each scenario, it was important for me to consistently remind participants about these revised guidelines.

Conclusion

Conducting stimulated-recall sessions proved to be the most complex and demanding type of interview. Due to their busy schedule, the teachers encountered challenges in recalling particular classroom activities that had been predetermined. Furthermore, in contrast to the preceding interview methods employed, we expedited the arrangement of stimulated recall sessions after observing instructional episodes. The scheduling for these sessions had to be retrospectively devised based on our prior observations of the lessons. This presented an additional challenge as it required us to meticulously identify and accurately present stimuli for recall to the participating teacher while providing them with as much relevant detail as possible.

After conducting numerous stimulated-recall interviews, it became apparent to me that the transcripts of stimuli were not utilized during the recall sessions, despite being prepared for and given to participants. In a rather unexpected manner, the accounts of contextual elements encompassing particular classroom activities (derived from field notes) and audio recordings seemed to be sufficient for teachers to remember every detail of their classroom proceedings with great clarity. These findings suggest that when it comes to recalling past events in a teaching environment, relying solely on firsthand accounts supplemented with comprehensive context seems more effective than using written prompts such as stimulus transcripts. This observation underscores the potential limitations or redundancy associated with providing additional textual cues during memory retrieval exercises.

According to the emergent findings, it could be suggested that teachers' cognitive domains (including their belief systems) should be investigated as embedded in their classroom practices utilizing extensive interviews. This approach aligns with a recent recommendation within the field which advocates for exploring teacher beliefs through an examination of their situated professional practices.

Acknowledgment

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