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An Exploratory Study of the Interplay between Teachers’ Beliefs, Instructional Practices & Professional Development

Naashia Mohamed

ABSTRACT

Previous research has revealed the influential role of teachers’ beliefs in determining their professional behaviour. Teachers’ beliefs affect not only their teaching, but also filter new input, suggesting significant implications for the implementation of educational innovations and teacher development.

This study explores the interconnections between teachers’ beliefs, their instructional practices and professional development, examining the extent to which the introduction of an innovative teaching approach impacts teachers’ beliefs and behaviour. It focuses particularly on grammar instruction in the context of English teaching in secondary schools of the Maldives.

Combining descriptive ethnography with a quasi-experimental design, the study was implemented in two phases. Phase One, based on questionnaire data from 197 teachers from 51 schools, explored teachers’ beliefs and their self reported practices. Findings indicated that teachers placed great emphasis on grammar and that they were unfamiliar with inductive approaches to grammar instruction. In Phase Two, inductive grammar teaching methods were introduced to 14 teachers from two schools, in a 12 week professional development programme.

Drawing largely on data from observations and interviews, the results from this phase showed that although teachers were observed to generally follow their pedagogic beliefs, several points of difference between their beliefs and practices existed. While the professional development may have increased their understanding of inductive approaches to grammar instruction at the level of awareness, only limited changes to beliefs and practices were observed. Changing instructional practice appeared to be a difficult task with only two teachers uptaking the innovation. Some subsidiary changes were however observed in the practices of several other teachers. Various impediments constrained change efforts, including teachers’ lack of openness to change, their low professional motivation and the lack of a supportive school culture. Contextual factors such as large classes and difficult working conditions also negatively affected the change process. Findings indicate that development activities which provided regular one-on-one support for the teachers were more likely to lead
to uptake than those involving mainly workshops. The individual nature of the uptake process, its lack of uniformity and the challenges faced by the teachers are discussed, as are the implications for the provision of professional development.
Dedication

To my children, Malaa & Abil,
who fill my life with immeasurable joy and inspire me to be a better person.
“Change has a considerable psychological impact on the human mind. To the fearful it is threatening because it means that things may get worse. To the hopeful it is encouraging because things may get better. To the confident it is inspiring because the challenge exists to make things better.”

- King Whitney Jr.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EDC  Educational Development Centre
EFL  English as a Foreign Language
ELT  English Language Teaching
ESL  English as a Second Language
GCE  General Certificate of Education
HoD  Head of Department
KAL  Knowledge about Language
L2   Second/Foreign Language
MoE  Ministry of Education
PPP  Presentation Practice Production
TESOL Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages