PEDAGOGICAL CONTENT KNOWLEDGE AND THE CLASSROOM TEACHING PRACTICES OF BASIC SCHOOL ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN THE ASSIN SOUTH DISTRICT

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Abstract

This study sought to examine the Pedagogical Content Knowledge and the classroom teaching practices of basic school English Language teachers in the Assin South district. It is a qualitative case study which used interview and observational tools to gather data for the study. A total of 10 basic school English Language teachers were purposively selected for the study. Data collected was analyzed through the thematic approach and was supported with the verbatim comments from the participants. Key findings from the study revealed among others that: teaching of the English Language is geared towards improving the oral aspects English Language and hence, teachers concentrate more on teaching the oral aspects of the language than the content. Again, teachers hold the belief that English Language teaching is a social practice and so the interactive classroom environment is the preferred tool most teachers adopted to teach English language in the basic schools in South Assin district. Among other recommendations, the study recommends that, stakeholders should work together towards streamlining the focus, methods/strategies and the theoretical basis that will help shape the focus of English Language teaching. It is also recommended that, teachers' beliefs about the subject should be shaped during pre-service and in-service training.

Keywords: *Pedagogical Content Knowledge, Classroom Teaching Practices, English Language Teachers*

Introduction

Personal, social and economic importance of English Language at the global level cannot be over emphasized. Globalization is generally turning our world into one massive community. Language choice, language loyalty or language shifts are all subject to multiple influences within this massive community. Bruthiaux (2003) defines global English as a set of related varieties with an infinite adaptation to each local setting. English is becoming more and more triumphant in demographic as well as in functional terms. McArthur (1999) describes English as 'omnivorous'; devouring all languages on its path and

gradually becoming a mass language. The more speakers a language attracts, the more it becomes diversified along regional lines. It is spoken around the world with different varieties existing and evolving across the globe. Africans are becoming contemptuous of their languages. This is because a good number of young people consider their languages as uneducated, primitive and non-prestigious. Young people especially in Africa in search of economic opportunities are leaving their villages into cities where they gradually speak less and less of their languages and more of English Language. These cosmopolitan cities provide them with an opportunity for instance, intermarry. It often turns out that these mixed couples have no common language apart from the language of wider communication like English. Most of the children of such mixed marriages grow up to speak the English Language as their first and only language.

Crystal (1997) has stated that English has repeatedly found itself in the right places at the right times. Khader & Mohammad (2010) hold the view that English as a global language can equally be used for communication with native-speakers and non-native-speakers in the worldwide, especially in the education section, where all university students need it for their studies in order to search information and obtain knowledge; therefore, a lot of the universities throughout the world need to include English language as one of their educational tool requirements.

The quality of schools of a country depends on the quality of teachers (Femin-Nemser 2001). Provision of good teachers is, thus, crucial for the quality of teaching in schools. Studies examining teacher quality confirms the logical conclusion that poor quality of students' learning correlates strongly with poor quality of teachers' teaching and that effective student learning and achievement is hampered by weaknesses in teachers' beliefs and classroom practices (Akyeampong, Pryor & Ampiah 2006). According to Ministry of Education (2002), the situation is no different in the Ghanaian context. In fact, it appears there is a mismatch between the kind of education provided by the Teacher Education Institutions and what teachers actually practise in the classroom. The Ministry of Education, Science and Sports (2008) states that the dismal performance of basic school students in a subject such as English Language in the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) clearly mirrors the kind of education provided by the Colleges of Education and other Tertiary Educational Institutions in Ghana. Pupil's performance in English Language in the Basic Education Certificate Examination remains abysmal. Colleges of Education and other Tertiary Institutions in Ghana are responsible for training and equipping

potential teachers with among other things, the modern pedagogical knowledge, subject-matter knowledge and curriculum knowledge. Several questions arise from this situation. Could it be how English Language teachers teach English Language? What beliefs do they have about English Language teaching? How do these Knowledge and Beliefs influence their Classroom Teaching Practices? Answers to these and more remains unknown: it is as a result of these questions that this research is imperative to (1). To find out the beliefs (philosophical orientation(s) Assin South basic school English Language teachers possess about English Language teaching and (2). explore the specific classroom teaching practices Assin South basic school English Language teachers employ in their classrooms.

Methodology

The specific qualitative design for the investigation is Case Study which explores the English language teachers' beliefs and their Classroom Teaching Practices. Case Study according to Creswell (2007) is an empirical inquiry which involves an in-depth exploration of a phenomenon in its real-life context through an extensive data collection. Case Study was chosen because it is in agreement with the interpretive paradigm regarding knowledge construction and hence helps to achieve the purpose of the study in the Assin South district. Also, Kincheoloe (1991) asserts that the experiences (data) collected in qualitative studies are shaped in their context and will be impossible to be understood if removed from that context.

All English Language educators in the central region constituted the targeted population for the study. Statistics from the District Educational Directorate shows that there are (84) public Kindergarten schools, seventy (70) public Primary schools and sixty-three (63) public Junior High Schools in the district. There is an average of four (4) English Language teachers in each primary school and one each in both Kindergarten and Junior High Schools. Hence, the accessible population for this Case Study is four hundred and twenty-seven (427) Basic School English Language teachers in the Assin South District at the time of the study. According to Creswell (2005: 54), selecting a large number of interviewees (participants) "results in superficial perspectives…the overall ability of a researcher to provide an in-depth picture diminishes with the addition of each new individual or site".

With this assertion in mind, ten (10) English Language teachers from different levels of basic schools, that is five (5) primary and five (5) Junior High School (JHS) from the ten (10) circuits were sampled for the study.

In view of the focus of the study, purposive and criterion techniques were employed in selecting the participants. The criterion sampling technique was used to set a criterion for participation. In this situation, Basic school teachers who teach English Language and with qualifications not lower than Diploma in Education were placed within the criterion. Subsequently, cases (teachers) that met the criterion were conveniently handpicked (identified) one after the other till the saturation rate of 10 was met. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) cited in Kusi (2012) justify the use of this technique that purposive sampling enables researchers to handpick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgment and typicality. The Basic school English Language educators were purposively sampled because the intent was to explore the beliefs and Classroom Teaching Practices of the English Language educators using a semi-structured interview and observation guide. Again, Patton (1990:182) explains, "purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned". For this reason, one particular phenomenon, in this case English Language educators (a bounded system), was selected as the unit of analysis (Merriam, 2009).

The schools are identified as A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I and J whiles the English Language educators are identified as ET1, ET2, ET3, ET4, ET5, ET6, ET7, ET8, ET9 and ET10 (i.e. pseudonym names for English Language Teachers who participated in the study).

Results and Discussions

In analysing the beliefs that basic school English Language teachers possess about the teaching of the English language, it was revealed that the beliefs that English language teachers hold shape their way of practices and serves as a guide to their thought and behaviours in the classroom. Some of the sub-themes that emerged from investigating beliefs of English Language teachers are: language teaching as social practice and what supports the teaching of English language.

Language Teaching as Social Practice

Teachers consider the teaching of English as a social practice where there is an interaction between the teacher and the students. To them, the English Language class should be interactive for pupils to communicate freely in an atmosphere devoid of threat of punishment. Pupils must be active communicators in the classroom because the essence of teaching English

Language is geared towards the improvement of pupils' communication aspect. Teachers supported their claim with the following responses:

> *"English Language teaching is a cooperative work. It brings socialization" (ET4).*

> *"The teaching of English Language in basic schools must be interactive because our aim is that pupils can communicate. This teaching style encourages pupils to talk" (ET2).*

> *"English Language teaching shouldn't be lecture method. Encourage the children to communicate as time goes on, they will realize their mistakes and correct them themselves. I also advise them to read" (ET3).*

One more teacher was emphatic:

> *"The teaching of English Language in basic schools must be interactive" (ET5).*

Other teachers hold the view that:

> *"The classroom should be social. The reason is that, when you interact with them they are able to express themselves and this improves the way they understand the subject" (ET6).*
> *"The teacher should interact with the pupils because if they are not able to make the class interactive through discussion, the children won't talk and will not understand" (ET7).*

The responses given above indicate that English Language teachers consider English Language teaching as a social activity. They hold the belief that, English Language teaching is a process of guiding and facilitating students for an active communication. This belief is not in disagreement with what language experts such as (Gee 1990/1996/2007) have said about language teaching that … People learn a given way of reading or writing by participating in (or, at least, coming to understand) the distinctive social and cultural practices of different social and cultural groups and that when these groups (in this case teachers) teach or apprentice people to read and write in certain ways, they never stop there. They teach them to act, interact, talk, know, believe, and value in certain ways as well, ways that "go with" how they write and read (Gee, ibid).

This confirms that Language teaching is instead a complex social practice where a teacher's beliefs, perceptions and assumptions about teaching and teacher efficacy affect the way he/she understands and organizes instruction.

Uztosum (2013) has also highlighted a number of studies, which claim that teachers' practices are determined by their beliefs and that teachers' beliefs can be categorized in a number of areas. The beliefs of the teachers also agree with Vygotsky's idea of social learning which underpins an aspect of this study. Vygotsky (1978) proposes that children interact with others in social contexts and these interactions are critical to shaping the learning, thinking and behaviour of the child. Vygotsky's idea supported the theory that the child's thinking develops through social interaction mediated by language, and that words provided the labels for the concepts that would be developed cognitively (Vygotsky, 1986).

Within this social learning theory, a very important component is the idea that less experienced individuals relies on more experienced individuals, also known as More Knowledgeable Others or Significant Others to facilitate their growth and development. Vygotsky calls it Scaffolding. Based on this, researchers and reflective practitioners feel that the strategies that will best accomplish enhanced learning are those that support learning within the child's Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). It is therefore argued (Gibbon, 2002) that it is only when scaffolding is needed and adopted that learning actually takes place because it is only then that work is taking place within the child's Zone of Proximal Development.

The next sub-theme that developed from the broad theme was centred on teachers' beliefs about what support English Language teaching. Based on the teachers' beliefs about language teaching (i.e. as a social practice), they were of the view that Teaching and Learning Materials also support the teaching and learning of the English Language. They claim that teaching with instructional materials best support the teaching of the English Language by allowing students to interact with the teacher and also among themselves (i.e. by way of asking questions and manipulating the materials) which end up building the communication aspects of the students. They indicated again that appropriate and proper usage of Teaching and Learning Materials facilitate pupils understanding of basic concepts about the English Language. The following are the comments by seven out of the ten teachers on what support the teaching of English Language.

"So many things support the teaching of English. The tables, books, pupils etc. I hardly go to class with materials from outside the classroom" (ET3).

"The paintings and Teaching and Learning Materials in the classroom" (ET5).
"The availability of the materials and the proper usage of other Teaching and Learning Materials. Sometimes too, the materials may be available but teachers may not use them properly" (ET6).

Others have these to say:
"To me, the discussion method and the use of Teacher Learner Materials support the teaching of English Language because our main aim is to help pupils to read and write good English so as we discuss, we are assisting them to improve" (ET7).

"Lack or inadequate Teaching and Learning Materials and other text books make pre-reading difficult. Workshops and Seminars for teachers are crucial. Motivating teachers by giving awards is also important in teaching English Language. English Language teachers should not be overloaded by adding any other subjects" (ET8).
"Teaching Learning Materials including audio ones" (ET10).

The responses above show that appropriate Teaching and Learning Materials enhance the teaching of English Language. Teachers are able to involve their students in English Language lessons by way of asking and responding to questions about the use of Teaching and Learning Materials. This social environment which characterizes the language class agrees with Vygotsky's (1986) scaffolding concept of teaching and learning which is embedded in the Communicative Approaches also known as the Social Learning Theories. This was confirmed by one of the respondent.
"Using Teaching Learning Materials for example, word bank where you have variety of words on cardboard in a box, you show to pupils for them to

> *pronounce'' with this we have to use it appropriately so*
> *that the child can read well. It is not only by showing but*
> *how effective we use it. (ET9).*

The response above indicates that the availability of Teaching and Learning Material is not a guarantee of effective teaching. But what matters is the teacher's ability to use the materials appropriately. This opinion form part of pedagogical understanding and it is in agreement with Shulman's (1986) claim that the definition of pedagogical knowledge is any theory or belief about teaching and the process of learning that a teacher possesses that influences that teacher's teaching. This process according to Hudson (2007) includes the ability to plan, prepare and use materials properly.

Instructional Practices of English Language teachers in the classroom
In an attempt to establish the link or otherwise between beliefs and practice, the study sought to explore the specific instructional practices English teachers use in their classrooms. The sub-themes identified are Child-Centred methods/strategies of teaching and the reasons for employing these methods/strategies.

Child-Centred Methods/Strategies
The respondents submitted during the interviewing process that they employ the various Learner-Centred methods/strategies in teaching English Language. By this, they only act as facilitators in the language teaching process. Ruddell (2006) states that teachers should create a context-rich, interactive, supportive classroom environment for language exploration and use; teachers can also help children develop social language skills that facilitate language interactions both in and out of school; teachers need to help children build positive self-concepts by providing frequent academic and social opportunities for interactive meaning-based language use. In respect of this, the teachers provided the following responses to the kind of instructional practices (methods/strategies) they employ in their class:

> *"Question and answer, completion, quiz, and*
> *demonstration. But question and answer is my favourite*
> *because it helps to link up with the learner. It helps in*
> *getting the attention of the learner more. I used the quiz*
> *type in reading comprehension exercise. With that one*
> *they see themselves as competitors and are able to give off*
> *their best'' (ET1)*

"I blend the methods. Discussion is helping. Discussion is my favourite and sometimes role playing because it is language and we need to interact" (ET2).

"All child-centred approach and role play. Role play because children feel involved in the lesson" (ET3).

"Think-pair-share. That is you let the children think and share ideas among themselves and finally sharing their ideas with the entire class. With this, no one is wrong. It gives the children opportunity to interact" (ET4).

"I use the interactive and gestures in the phonological aspect. I does that when doing reading with the pupils" (ET5).

"I employ almost all the strategies. Both child and teacher centred methods of teaching" (ET6).

"I employ the discussion method and in some instances, the lecture method. Storytelling is my favourite. With storytelling, the child has a plot in the head so it is up to the child to change the plot from L1 to L2 and that becomes very simple for the child" (ET7).

"Discussion, role play, storytelling and other pupils'-centred approaches" (ET8).

"I normally use the child-centred method and brainstorming. But my favourite is the role play because of the way they act in the story and also how they get involve in the lesson" (ET9).

Indication from the teachers' responses above show that they are aware of the various strategies however, they employ the Child-Centred methods/strategies of teaching (also known as communicative) approach to language teaching). Here, there is a shift from the traditional teaching process where the teacher transfers knowledge to the learner. This approach to language teaching provides

opportunity for learners to become active participants in the teaching process as they interact among themselves in the classroom. This is very important especially in the English Language class where social interaction is believed to be the best approach. Their responses affirm Ruddell (2006) instructional principles that, teachers should create a context-rich, interactive, supportive classroom environment for language exploration and use; teachers can also help children develop social language skills that facilitate language interactions both in and out of school; teachers need to help children build positive self-concepts by providing frequent academic and social opportunities for interactive meaning-based language use. These well-crafted principles demonstrate that students' language acquisition is greatly enhanced through active participation in meaning construction with their peers, teachers and other individuals (Significant others) in their school and community (Ruddell, ibid). It is also in line with Vygotsky's (1986/1987) concepts of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and Scaffolding grounded within the social learning theories where the teacher scaffolds the learning of the child within his or her ZPD.

The essence of Scaffolding the child within his/her Zone of Proximal Development in language teaching is that, the child's proficiency in language would best be enhanced when the teacher scaffolds the learner within his or her area of potential learning in language activities such as reading aloud. Thus, in English Language class teachers should assist the learners to communicate using the English Language even as they make mistake because the learner will later become more and more aware of the rules regarding the language where the teacher's responsibility for guiding the learner reduces thereby allowing the learner to assume more responsibility for the learning activity.

One language teacher has this to say:

> *"My belief is that, we should encourage and guide the pupils to speak the English language. For me, I sometimes encourage my pupils to speak Pidgin English and as they speak, they will later identify the rules regarding the language and they will be able to correct their mistakes themselves"* (ET7).

Rogoff's (1990) idea of guided participation which elaborates on the Vygotsky's idea of ZPD and Scaffolding is also an attestation to the responses the teachers gave.

In assigning reasons for the choice of the Child-Centred methods/strategies, the teachers indicated the following:

"It is because of the topic and the Relevant Previous Knowledge of the pupils that is why I use the Child-Centred methods" (ET1)

"Because of the focus of the language. So you need to build up the interest. So activities should focus on building the interest" (ET2).

"It depends on the level and the aspect of the language you want to teach" (ET3).

"Teaching shouldn't be teacher-centred. So I use cooperative methods. For instance, I invite the children to come to the board and write something and it makes them happy" (ET4).

The rest also indicated that:

"The pupils' responses always motivate me to choose the learner-centred methods" (ET5).

"Because I want all pupils to be involved. I don't want to do the talking alone that is why I use the Child-Centred methods in my English Language class" (ET9).

"I use both pupil and teacher-centred methods because they help me to know their Relevant Previous Knowledge" (ET10).

Clearly, majority of the responses from the respondents show that the teachers employ the Child-Centred methods/strategies in their Language class basically to develop the communicative aspects of the learners. What this means is that, the other aspects such as literature is not given prior consideration in terms of methods/strategies for instruction. The reasons teachers gave for the choice of their instructional methods/strategies does not cater for other aspects of the subject.

Although teachers can list almost all the Child-Centred methods/strategies, it can be confirmed based on the observation made in the study that what they practice is different from what they claim they do.

Other observations made from the study was that the common method teachers mention they employ in their class is the lecture method which is in sharp contrast to their own belief about language teaching (i.e. as a social practice). This observation conforms to Bell's (2008) belief that observation is useful in determining what people actually do or how they actually behave in their context. It also confirms the findings that, teachers do not carry out their occupations in the light and formation of the principles taught to them during the training programmes at universities and other tertiary institutions (Almarza, 1996). The few teachers who tried to use the Child-Centred methods/strategies mostly do that just to know the Relevant Previous Knowledge of the pupils. This attests to Khale's (1999) findings that many teachers complete Colleges of Education with blurred ideas, concepts and principles in their specific subject disciplines as well as pedagogical issues.

In a situation like this, research examining teacher quality confirms the logical conclusion that poor quality of students' learning correlates strongly with poor quality of teachers' teaching. Therefore, effective student learning and achievement is hampered by weaknesses in teachers' classroom practices which includes appropriate usage of teaching methods/strategies (Akyeampong, Pryor & Ampiah 2006).

Conclusions and Recommendations
The study was intended to examine the English Language Teachers' beliefs and their Classroom Teaching Practices in the Assin South District. It sought to find out the Pedagogical Content Knowledge of English Language teachers, their beliefs about English Language teaching, the specific classroom teaching practices they employ in their class and how their Pedagogical Content Knowledge and beliefs influence their classroom teaching practices.

The conclusion that can be drawn for this study is that teachers hold the belief that English Language teaching is a Social Practice which is best taught and learnt using Learner-Centred methods/strategies so that learners can communicate among themselves and with the teacher as well. Again, teachers believe that Teaching and Learning Materials support the teaching of English Language since it gives the learners the opportunity to manipulate the materials and interact with their friends and teachers.

Also, English Language teaching in basic schools in the Assin South district focuses on developing the communicative aspects of the learner such as listening and speaking. Teachers without Specialisation are not able to teach the subject effectively due to the Technicalities and the various Aspects the subject has. Again, English Language is best taught and learnt in an Interactive Classroom Environment where the Learner-Centred strategies/methods are employed. Teaching and Learning Materials also support the teaching and learning of English Language. However, there exists no Link between teachers' Belief about appropriate Instructional Strategies/Methods and the actual Classroom Instructional Practices.

Recommendations
The following recommendations are made based on the findings of the study:
Teachers Beliefs about Instructional Strategies/Methods should be shaped for proper linkage through adequate orientation.

Teachers should be encouraged to employ Child-Centred Strategies/Methods that allow for classroom interaction.

Teachers should also carry out self-reflection exercise on their Instructional Practices regularly in order to make the necessary adjustments based on their experiences in English Language teaching.

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