

# Exploring tensions between teachers' grammar teaching beliefs and practices

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## Abstract

This study examines tensions in the grammar teaching beliefs and practices of three practising teachers of English working in Turkey. The teachers were observed and interviewed over a period of 18 months; the observations provided insights into how they taught grammar, while the interviews explored the beliefs underpinning the teachers' classroom practices. Drawing on the distinction between core and peripheral beliefs, the analysis indicated that, while at one level teachers' practices in teaching grammar were at odds with specific beliefs about language learning, at another level, these same practices were consistent with a more generic set of beliefs about learning. The latter, it is hypothesized, constituted the teachers' core beliefs and it was these, rather than the more peripheral beliefs about language learning, that were most influential in shaping teachers' instructional decisions. It is argued that attention to the relative influence of core and peripheral beliefs on teachers' practices allows for more complex understandings of tensions in teachers' work. Claims are also made here for the benefits of grounding the study of tensions between stated beliefs and classroom behaviours in the qualitative analyses of teachers' actual classroom practices. Some implications of this study for language teacher education are also discussed. © 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

The study of teachers' beliefs has in the last 15 years emerged as a major area of enquiry in the field of language teaching. One strand of this work has focused on the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices; more specifically, there has been interest in the extent to which teachers' stated beliefs correspond with what they do in the classroom, and there is evidence that the two do not always coincide (e.g. Karavas-Doukas, 1996). Such differences have been viewed as an undesirable or negative phenomenon (and described using terms such as incongruence, mismatch, inconsistency, and discrepancy). In this article, we argue for a more positive perspective on such differences, which we conceptualise as 'tensions', i.e. "divergences among different forces or elements in the teacher's understanding of the school context, the subject matter, or the students" (Freeman, 1993, p. 488). More specifically, we examine divergences between what

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English language teachers say and do in teaching grammar, and, by exploring the reasons for these, also provide insight into deeper tensions among competing beliefs that teachers hold. The perspective on the study of tensions we advance here positions them as a valuable focus for both research and teacher development.

## 2. Beliefs and practices in language teaching

An extensive literature on teachers' beliefs exists, both in education generally (e.g. Calderhead, 1996; Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1996) and specifically in relation to language teaching (e.g. Borg, 2003, 2006; Freeman, 2002). This work has been widely reviewed and there is ample evidence that teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning:

- may be powerfully influenced (positively or negatively) by teachers' own experiences as learners and are well established by the time teachers go to university (Holt Reynolds, 1992; Lortie, 1975);
- act as a filter through which teachers interpret new information and experience (Pajares, 1992);
- may outweigh the effects of teacher education (Kagan, 1992; Richardson, 1996) in influencing what teachers do in the classroom;
- can exert a persistent long-term influence on teachers' instructional practices (Crawley and Salyer, 1995);
- are, at the same time, not always reflected in what teachers do in the classroom (Dobson and Dobson, 1983; Pearson, 1985; Tabachnick and Zeichner, 1986);
- interact bi-directionally with experience (i.e. beliefs influence practices and practices can also lead to changes in beliefs) (Richardson, 1996).

It is also evident that *language teachers'* beliefs about teaching and learning:

- have a powerful effect on teachers' pedagogical decisions (Johnson, 1994);
- strongly influence what and how teachers learn during language teacher education (Freeman and Richards, 1996);
- can be deep-rooted and resistant to change (Almarza, 1996; Pickering, 2005).

Here our specific interest is in the relationship between language teachers' beliefs – propositions about all aspects of their work which teachers hold to be true or false – and their instructional practices in the area of grammar teaching. Our approach to studying this relationship reflects the following assertions:

- (1) Teachers' beliefs exist as a system in which certain beliefs are core and others peripheral (Green, 1971; Pajares, 1992). Core beliefs are stable and exert a more powerful influence on behaviour than peripheral beliefs. The study of relationships – and in particular of differences, or tensions – between teachers' beliefs and practices can be enhanced through attention to the distinction between these belief sub-systems. Close attention to core and peripheral beliefs has not, however, been a feature of teacher cognition research, as Borg (2006) notes, and there is little evidence from research in either general education or language education as to what constitutes a core belief. In this sense this paper explores new ground.
- (2) Tensions between what teachers say and do are a reflection of their belief sub-systems, and of the different forces which influence their thinking and behaviour. Studying the underlying reasons behind such tensions can enable both researchers and teacher educators to better understand the process of teaching. Therefore it is our contention, as we have discussed elsewhere (Phipps and Borg, 2007), that it is valuable to view tensions in a positive light.
- (3) Contextual factors, such as a prescribed curriculum, time constraints, and high-stakes examinations, mediate the extent to which teachers can act in accordance with their beliefs. There is ample evidence of this mediation in language teaching; for example, Ng and Farrell (2003) found that teachers directly corrected students' errors because this approach was faster than eliciting these errors; they believed elicitation was valuable in theory but time-consuming and not practical in their context. Contextual factors need to be part of any analysis of the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices.
- (4) Research findings are the product of the manner in which data are elicited, and there is evidence that in the study of teachers' beliefs different elicital strategies may elicit different responses (see Borg, 2006

for a detailed discussion). For example, beliefs elicited through questionnaires may reflect teachers' theoretical or idealistic beliefs – beliefs about what *should* be – and may be informed by technical or propositional knowledge. In contrast, beliefs elicited through the discussion of actual classroom practices may be more rooted in reality – beliefs about what *is* – and reflect teachers' practical or experiential knowledge. We believe that a more realistic understanding of the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices can emerge when the analysis of what teachers do is the basis of eliciting and understanding their beliefs.

In this study, therefore, we attended to core and peripheral beliefs, examined the influence of language teachers' contexts on their work and elicited beliefs through the analysis of observed teaching; in doing so, we believe, we were able to investigate more deeply and in more realistic ways the relationship between language teachers' beliefs and practices. From now on, we use the term *teachers* to refer to language teachers.

### 3. Methodology

The data we discuss here come from a study into the relationship between teacher education, teacher beliefs and classroom practice related to grammar teaching.

Of the several questions in the larger study, here we address the following two:

- What is the relationship between teachers' grammar teaching beliefs and practices?
- What kinds of tensions does this relationship highlight?

#### 3.1. Participants

Participants were a volunteer sample of three experienced EFL teachers (Turkish, British and American, one male and two female) working at the preparatory school of a private English-medium university in Turkey. At the start of the study the three teachers had been working at the preparatory school for 2–6 months and were therefore relatively new employees, though their overall experience of ELT ranged from 3 to 7 years. The teachers taught classes of 15–25 young adults aged 19–23 at a range of levels from elementary to upper intermediate. These students were learning English to gain admission to their chosen undergraduate course at the same university. The resources used by the teachers consisted of commercial and in-house course books supplemented by the teachers' own materials. The institution set specific learning objectives for each level which were assessed by in-house tests and which teachers were required to teach towards. One set of objectives related specifically to the teaching of grammar, though teachers were not obliged to adopt any particular methodological strategies in addressing these.

#### 3.2. Data collection and analysis

This multiple-source qualitative study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003) explored a phenomenon in its natural setting and assumed an interpretive epistemology. Data was collected over a period of 18 months using interviews and observations.

Over this period, four one-hour interviews were conducted at four-month intervals with each participant, at times convenient to them, in order to explore their beliefs and developments in these. Semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996) were used in order to allow, within a planned framework of themes, for the exploration of issues as they arose. Mostly open questions were used to “allow the respondents opportunities to develop their responses in ways which the interviewer might not have foreseen” (Campbell et al., 2004, p. 99). Set questions were used to initiate responses, but follow-up questions depended on individual responses. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using *VoiceWalker* ([www.uscb.edu/resources](http://www.uscb.edu/resources)) and participants were sent a copy of the transcription afterwards and invited to confirm it as an accurate record of their views. Follow up questions were submitted to participants with the transcriptions to probe particular issues and statements which had emerged during the interview.

Participants were also observed three times at three-month intervals, each followed by a post-observation interview. Each non-participant, non-structured observation (Cohen et al., 2000) was of a 50-minute lesson at

times convenient to participants as part of their normal teaching which included some grammar work. Observations were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher who also took field notes to document events not captured by the recording. The option of video recording lessons was considered but was not adopted on the grounds that the teachers would have found this stressful; it may have also led to an increase in reactive (i.e. artificial) behaviours in both teachers and students.

A one-hour post-lesson interview was conducted after each observation in order to seek participants' views of the lesson, the activities they undertook and the rationale for in-class decisions. Each post-lesson interview took place a few days after the lesson so as to give participants time to reflect on the lesson, and the researcher time to prepare, but not too long afterwards that participants' ability to recall might be impaired. Guided questions were used to encourage stimulated recall and to explore participants' rationales for their instructional choices. In line with Lyle's (2003) suggestions for using stimulated recall, participants were encouraged to reflect on (not just to describe) their teaching; to facilitate this, and to give the interview a more concrete focus, the teachers were given a copy of the transcription of the observed lesson before the interview and encouraged to refer to it during the discussion.

Data were analysed by the researcher in an abductive and iterative manner (Dörnyei, 2007). Current literature on grammar teaching (for example Ellis, 2006) suggested initial categories for the analysis of teachers' practices, such as incidental/planned focus on form, presentation/practice, inductive/deductive teaching, correction of grammatical errors and use of grammatical terminology. Some of these categories were retained where salient in the data, while others were added as they emerged from the data, such as group-work for oral practice. Care was taken, however, as Silverman (2000) recommends, to avoid either imposing prior categories of analysis or prematurely forming such categories. A progressive focusing approach (Verschuren, 2003) was used whereby each stage of data analysis informed the subsequent stage of data collection, so that, for example, interview questions at each stage were devised after analysis of data collected at the previous stage. Through the analysis, segments of data were de-contextualised and then re-conceptualised into thematic groups using *Nvivo* ([www.qsr.com.au](http://www.qsr.com.au)). This enabled identification of tensions in the teachers' work – i.e. places where the beliefs expressed verbally by the teachers did not reflect what they did in the classroom.

The analysis of data consisted of three phases; pre-coding (transcription of data, writing of analytic memos, initial development of categories), coding (reduction of data, organising categories into a hierarchy of nodes in *Nvivo*, checking and refining categories), and theorising (a cyclical process of interpreting data, drawing conclusions, developing theoretical frameworks). Thus, over time tensions were categorised in terms of types and factors which influenced them.

## 4. Findings

The analysis of teachers' beliefs and practices in teaching grammar indicated that generally these were aligned. All three teachers tended to adopt a 'focus-on-forms' approach (Ellis, 2006), present and practise grammar, correct grammatical errors and use grammatical terminology. However, the data also highlighted a number of tensions between the teachers' stated beliefs and their practices, mainly related to inductive and contextualised presentation of grammar, meaningful practice and oral group-work. Some of these tensions were consistent, while others were specific to particular grammar points and lessons. Below we consider tensions related to three specific aspects of grammar teaching – presenting grammar, controlled grammar practice and group-work for grammar practice – drawing on data from all three participants in the study to illustrate these tensions and the reasons for them. We do not attempt to categorise tensions in any a priori manner here, but will comment on different forms these tensions can take in the subsequent discussion.

### 4.1. Presenting grammar

The first example of a tension we provide here relates to one teacher's approach to presenting grammar. Her observed approach was to provide formal explanations of grammatical forms and functions. For example, in the first observed lesson she wrote de-contextualised sentences containing simple past and past continuous

on the board and used these to establish the respective rules for these forms. When she talked about this practice in the post-lesson discussion, though, she explained that it was not something she was satisfied with:

I don't exploit grammar as much as I used to. Before I used to view grammar as a tool, 'we use second-conditional to talk about hypothetical things; we use it in this situation'. Now, unfortunately, it's more traditional grammar-teaching, 'this is the form, this is how we use it, learn it because there's going to be a test'. It's a real shame that. (T1: Post-observation 1)

A key difference in the 'before' and 'now' she juxtaposes here was the level of the students she taught; previously she had worked with lower level groups while at the time of the study she was teaching higher levels who, she felt, needed and expected a more expository approach to grammar. This approach did not, however, reflect her vision of effective grammar teaching, a tension she herself was aware of:

For me, the ideal scenario would be doing a communicative activity, having a conversation or role-play, then pulling out the language from that...and doing discovery. That would be my ideal, but I found it doesn't always work like that here. (T1: Interview 1)

This was not a tension this teacher was able to resolve in the course of this study; eight months into our work together, her grammar teaching practices with the higher level students remained expository and she reflected that "I do miss teaching lower levels...I'd probably spend more time at the board presenting grammar through a context" (T1: Interview 2). In this example, then, the tension in the teacher's work was between ideal and actual ways of teaching grammar; she approached grammar through exposition not because she felt this was ideal but because she felt it was what her higher level students expected.

The second example of a tension comes from the second teacher's use of context when presenting grammar. Early in the study he expressed a belief that "grammar should be presented in context rather than in isolation" (T2: Interview 1), but further discussion revealed a tension between his stated belief and his practices which he had not been previously aware of:

- T: I'd like to move away from rule-based presentations altogether.
- R: Is that what you tend to do at the moment?
- T: Rule-based presentations, yes...today, for example, I just went right to the grammar. . .I knew it'd grab students' attention after working on a reading for three hours...they were asking, 'why aren't we doing any grammar today?'...They didn't see the grammar work we were doing with the reading because it was in context...when we did a follow up in the last lesson, completely out of context, 'here's the rules, fill in the gaps', everybody paid attention then. (T2: Interview 2)

His perceptions of students' expectations here seemed to be overriding his beliefs about how best to teach grammar.

In one of the observations he used a rule-based presentation using isolated gapped sentences to revise articles and (un)countable nouns. The gapped sentence under discussion in the extract below was: 'My friend is \_\_\_ waiter. He works at \_\_\_ Italian restaurant'

- T: Where's the article?
- S1: My friend is *a* waiter. He works at *the* Italian restaurant.
- T: Why do we use 'a'?
- S2: First mention.
- T: What about waiter? Countable or uncountable?
- S3: Countable.
- T: And the Italian restaurant?
- S3: Countable. (T writes '1st mention' next to 'a'/'countable' next to 'the')
- T: Why 'the'?
- S4: We know the restaurant. (T2: Observation 2)

In our discussion afterwards the tension between his conflicting beliefs was again clear:

If you try to impose context-based, sometimes they don't see the benefit, as it's not what they're used to. So, breaking the habit is difficult. I think it needs to be context-based, but most students won't respond to finding it in context and discovering it on their own...the most important thing is how responsive and motivated they are. (T2: Post-observation 3)

Thus, his general belief in the need to motivate and engage learners outweighed his particular belief in context-based presentations. Although he believed in the value of context-based grammar work, he also believed (more strongly it seems) that students did not respond positively to it or even notice they were learning grammar.

#### 4.2. *Controlled grammar practice*

Further evidence of tensions comes from the second teacher's use of controlled grammar practice activities in class despite doubting their acquisitional value. Despite using these regularly, he explained that "I don't like the gap-fill exercises, I'm trying to move away from them, I don't think they're at all beneficial" (T2: Interview 2). In reflecting on this tension during an interview the teacher became aware that he seemed to be using grammar gap-fills as classroom management tools:

Controlled practice with worksheets just sort of calms them down...actually that's interesting...I never noticed that about my teaching, that that's why I was doing it...because maybe the students were getting on my nerves and maybe they were always talking and if they can do the worksheet they'll just sit there and do it. But, then I was able to see that that's what a lot of teachers do. I think that they've become classroom management tools because of that. (T2: Post-observation 2)

This is a clear example of how explicit discussion of teachers' stated beliefs and actual practices can stimulate in them an awareness of a tension in their work (which had hitherto been unconscious) and a deeper understanding of their own teaching. The teacher here realized that while he did not believe in the value for language learning of controlled practice, he did believe in its value in calming students down.

A similar (previously unconscious) tension was found in the first teacher's work. This tension was evident in our discussion after the first observed lesson in which she used a gap-fill exercise from a text book to practise past tenses. This was, she felt, "a very mechanical exercise", but she also believed that she used it as a classroom management tool to "keep students quiet when they get a bit unruly" (T1: Post-observation 1), and also because of students' expectations:

We spend a lot of class time doing these and using it more as a control-mechanism. 'OK, sit down and do it!'...I think students to a certain point do expect it, and they often say 'what's the point of buying this book if we don't do it in class'. So, I think it's more to do with classroom management, 'bring it to school students, look we're using it'. (T1: Post-observation 1)

These two examples show how contextual factors such as classroom management concerns and student expectations can cause tensions between teachers' beliefs and their practices. They also indicate once again how engaging teachers in talking and thinking about these tensions can raise their awareness of them.

#### 4.3. *Group-work for oral practice*

The following examples highlight the role of both contextual and personal factors in creating tensions between teachers' beliefs and the way they teach. Early in the study, the third teacher in the study expressed a belief that group-work for oral grammar practice is useful in that it maximizes learners' opportunity to use the target language; yet in the first observed lesson she used a whole-class dialogue to practise the target language in lockstep fashion rather than using a pair/group-work activity, as the following extract (from a 'freer practice' activity practising 'simple past') illustrates:

- T: Selin, where did you go?
- S1: Mersin.
- T: Who did you go with, Oytun?
- S2: I went with my parents.
- T: Where did you stay, Kerim?
- S3: I stayed in hotel.
- T: In a hotel. Was it nice?
- S3: Yes, it was cool.
- T: What did you eat, Kadir?
- S4: I ate... (inaudible)
- T: Did you do any housework?
- S5: No. (T3: Observation 1)

In the post-lesson discussion, her explanation for using a whole-class dialogue, rather than pair/group-work, to practise the target language was that group-work might cause classroom management problems, or make it difficult to monitor students' learning and give feedback on their errors:

Having them working in pairs or groups, asking each other, I wouldn't be able to monitor them...I'd be worried about being able to monitor...if they produce something incorrectly it could become fossilised...so I tend to be quite controlled. (T3: Post-observation 1)

This discussion helped raise her awareness of the tension between her beliefs and her practices. In subsequent lessons she consciously decided to experiment with group work, and she soon found that it actually gave her the time in the lesson to monitor students' learning, think and adjust the lesson as required. This gave her more flexibility in her teaching, and made her feel more, rather than less, in control as she had previously feared might be the case:

When monitoring I felt like I was in control. . . I was just watching, letting them work on their own, but if things went wrong or something unexpected happened, I intervened. I felt comfortable, I'm not worried about controlling them anymore, I've got rid of that. I have this flexibility now. (T3: Post-observation 2)

It would seem that a crucial factor in enabling her to change her own classroom practice was the awareness of the tension between her stated beliefs and actual practices that was created through the post-lesson discussion of her work. Subsequently trying out alternative practices and subsequently experiencing their benefits first-hand had a powerful influence on her decision to use more group-work in her grammar teaching.

The first teacher also avoided group-work in one of her observed grammar lessons, despite a stated belief that this is important for student learning. Her reasons for doing so again show the complexity of teachers' thinking:

My first lesson with this group was a lovely lesson. When it was teacher–student, the atmosphere was really nice and they wanted to participate, and they said 'oh, we like doing speaking'. And then when I put them in groups and had them speak, the whole dynamic and atmosphere of the class completely changed and I thought, 'well, it's nice to have a mixture of interactions', but if I really want to focus their attention, it's going to have to be teacher–student. (T1: Post-observation 2)

The teacher did believe that group work was in theory valuable but previous experience with this particular class had led her to believe that teacher–class interaction was more beneficial for them. This is a good example of how teachers' stated beliefs may reflect propositional knowledge (i.e. that group work promotes speaking) rather than the practical knowledge (i.e. about what learners respond well to) which actually influences their teaching.

## 5. Discussion

Prima facie, this study suggests that, in teaching grammar, the beliefs of the three teachers here were not always aligned with their practices, as illustrated by [Table 1](#). This table is a composite summary of the three aspects of grammar teaching examined here, the beliefs teachers expressed in relation to these aspects of

practice, their observed practices in each case, and the factors teachers referred to in accounting for the differences between their beliefs and practices. There were, therefore, several cases where teachers' professed beliefs about language learning were in strong contrast with practices observed in their lessons. Similar phenomena have been widely reported elsewhere (e.g. Farrell and Kun, 2008; Karavas-Doukas, 1996; Richards et al., 2001). In this study, factors which led teachers to teach in ways contrary to their stated beliefs were primarily student expectations and preferences, and classroom management concerns. Again, evidence of such factors and their influence on teachers' work has been noted in previous research (e.g. Andrews, 2003; Borg, 1999, 2001; Burns and Knox, 2005; Richards and Pennington, 1998).

The definition of tension we cited at the start of this paper is a generic one, covering any kind of divergence between what teachers do and believe. The above table, though, illustrates more specifically the different forms tensions can take. From a teacher's point of view these might be expressed as follows (with X and Y representing divergent positions):

- I believe in X but my students expect me to do Y.
- I believe in X but my students learn better through Y.
- I believe in X but the curriculum requires me to do Y.
- I believe in X but my learners are motivated by Y.

Such representations, while allowing for a more specific description of tensions, are however two-dimensional; in practice, though, it is often likely to be the case that teachers must make sense of several interacting and competing influences on their work. Thus, drawing on elements in Table 1, a teacher may not believe in the value of gap-filling grammar, but they may know that their students enjoy and expect that kind of work; they may also be aware that gap-filling is a feature of the tests students have to take; and finally the teacher may value gap-filling activities as a classroom management tool. In such cases, tensions are multi-dimensional – they are characterized by several competing forces. Understanding these forces allows us to make sense of what teachers do.

The discussion so far has focused on divergences between the beliefs and practices of the teachers in this study. However, and this is our key point here, the above analysis also indicates that while teachers' practices did often not reflect their stated beliefs about language learning, these practices *were* consistent with deeper, more general beliefs about learning. There is clear evidence here that teachers' practices reflected their beliefs that learning is enhanced when learners are engaged cognitively, when their expectations are met, and when order, control and flow of the lesson are maintained. These beliefs clearly exerted a more powerful influence on the teachers' work in teaching grammar than their beliefs about the limited value of expository grammar presentations, de-contextualized grammar work, mechanical grammar practice, gap-filling exercises and whole-class oral practice. Each of these language teaching practices featured in the work of the three teachers studied here, yet collectively the teachers articulated misgivings about the potential of such pedagogical strategies to promote language learning. In each case, though, the teachers justified their instructional choices with reference to deeper, more core, beliefs about learning generally. Another kind of tension which emerges here

Table 1  
Tensions in grammar teaching practices and beliefs.

| Aspect                       | Stated belief                                    | Observed practice                       | Explanation given  |
|------------------------------|--|---|--|
| Presenting grammar           | Grammar should be presented in context           | Expository grammar work                 | Student expectations Assessment  |
|                              | Learners learn better if they discover the rules | Sentence-level, rule-based presentation | Students' level/ responsiveness/ motivation                              |
| Controlled grammar practice  | Sentence-level practice is not beneficial        | Sentence-level gap-fill                 | Student expectations   |
|                              | Mechanical practice is not beneficial            | Mechanical practice                     | Classroom management   |
| Group-work for oral practice | Group-work is beneficial for oral practice       | Teacher-centred/ lockstep oral practice | Need to monitor errors<br>Classroom management<br>Student responsiveness |

then takes the form ‘I believe in X but I also believe in Y’, with practice being influenced to a greater extent by whichever of these beliefs is more strongly held.

These understandings of the relative influences of teachers’ generic and ELT-specific beliefs we feel is an important insight here, which takes us beyond restricted analyses of teachers’ beliefs and practices which argue, in a somewhat one-dimensional manner, that the relationship between these two phenomena is or is not consistent, and begins to examine belief systems and different levels of consistency in more complex ways. Although the systemic nature of beliefs has been long acknowledged, this issue has been not awarded much attention in ELT (Cabaroglu and Roberts, 2000 is perhaps one exception here) and, as Borg has noted,

further research is thus required for us to understand not just what language teachers have cognitions about, but how the different elements in teachers’ cognitive systems interact and which of these elements, for example, are core and which are peripheral. (Borg, 2006, p. 272)

This study indicates that a concern for such matters is a productive way of extending the agenda for teacher cognition research.

Additionally, it would seem that the beliefs which exerted most influence on teachers’ work were ones firmly grounded in experience; for example, students’ negative responses to contextualized grammar work or their more enthusiastic participation in whole-class spoken work were cited by teachers as experiences which had a formative effect on their current grammar teaching practices. Conversely, while they may have encountered theoretical support for notions such as discovery grammar learning, a belief in such ideas had not been firmly established through positive first-hand experience of their effectiveness. They thus remained unimplemented ideals. We can hypothesize here, therefore, that a characteristic of core beliefs is that they are experientially ingrained, while peripheral beliefs, though theoretically embraced, will not be held with the same level of conviction. Where core and peripheral beliefs can be implemented harmoniously, teachers’ practices will be characterized by fewer tensions; where, though, the actions implied by core and peripheral beliefs are at odds (as in the grammar teaching practices of the teachers in this study), peripheral beliefs will not necessarily be reflected in practice. These are claims which merit further scrutiny in continuing research of this kind.

The above insights must, of course, be interpreted with reference to the particular methodological and contextual features of this study; thus, they emerged from an analysis of the work in teaching grammar of three EFL teachers of different nationalities, working with monolingual learners in a private university-based context in Turkey. While these characteristics mean that, substantively, the practices and beliefs highlighted here are particular to the context studied, we do feel that, theoretically, the relationships between beliefs and practices and between core and peripheral beliefs we have posited are relevant to, and provide a framework for, continuing language teaching research more generally, particularly where there is an interest in understanding tensions between what language teachers do and their professed beliefs about language learning.

## 6. Conclusion

The findings of this study have clear implications for both research methodology and teacher education. We would argue that it is not enough for language teacher cognition research to identify differences, or tensions, between teachers’ beliefs and practices; rather attempts need to be made to explore, acknowledge and understand the underlying reasons behind such tensions. Methodologically, this suggests that studies which employ qualitative strategies to explore language teachers’ actual practices and beliefs will be more productive (than, for example, questionnaires about what teachers do and believe) in advancing our understanding of the complex relationships between these phenomena.

Early studies focusing on tensions between thinking and doing in language teaching suggested that tensions provide a potentially powerful and positive source of teacher learning (Freeman, 1992, 1993), while more recent work has found that a “recognition of contradictions in the teaching context” is a “driving force” in teachers’ professional development (Golombek and Johnson, 2004, pp. 323–324). We support such claims and suggest that teacher education programmes would do well to consider ways in which participants can be encouraged to explore their beliefs, their current practices and the links between them. Collaborative

exploration (e.g. among teacher educators and teachers) of any tensions which emerge is also desirable and the teacher learning that ensues from such dialogic exploration of teachers' practices and beliefs has, we believe, the potential to be more meaningful and long-lasting. This may be particularly true when such reflective analyses create awareness in teachers of the relative ways in which core and peripheral beliefs shape their work.

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