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## **Primary Teachers' Beliefs about Teacher Talk in ESL Classrooms: a Perspective from India**

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**Abstract:** ‘Belief’ is a common concept in various research literatures in sociology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy and many other disciplines. Despite the diversity in the use of this term in educational context, the prior research and reviews on teachers’ beliefs about teaching/learning contribute to an agreement on some characteristics of teacher beliefs (Fang, 1996; Kagan, 1992; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Woolfolk Hoy, Davis, & Pape, 2006). Teachers’ belief systems are built up gradually over time and consist of both subjective and objective dimensions. Teachers’ beliefs influence their consciousness, teaching attitude, teaching methods and teaching policies, and finally, learners’ development. Primary teachers’ beliefs regarding teaching/learning English has been the subject of many studies over the last few decades. As Richards and Lockhart (1996:29) state, ‘what teachers do is a reflection of what they know and believe’. Teachers’ belief system plays decisive role in teaching/learning of English at primary level. Many researchers have studied beliefs of teachers like beliefs about language learning, about learners, and about themselves as language teachers (Liao & Chiang, 2003; Richards, Tung, & Ng, 1992; Yang, 2000); but there is very less study carried out on teachers’ beliefs about teacher talk and teacher talk features. The present paper focuses on primary teachers’ beliefs about teacher talk and teacher talk features in ESL classrooms. Ten in-service primary English teachers (five from English Medium and five from Marathi Medium primary schools) are the subjects of the present paper. The paper discusses these teachers’ beliefs regarding the amount of teacher talk, use of mother tongue (i.e. Marathi), and some teacher talk features like questioning, paraphrasing and repetition, and feedback.

**Key words:** *teacher talk, teacher beliefs, English for younger learners*

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## Introduction

English has almost achieved the status of global language. Educational policies in many countries are intensifying teaching of English as an essential part of the school curriculum to meet the challenges of globalization and internationalization. English is taught as a Foreign Language (FL) or Second Language (SL) in many countries, including India. In India it has got the status of second language. English is being used in various fields including in education. Indeed, Primary education is the foundation on which the development of every citizen and the nation as a whole built on. In recent past, India has made a huge progress in terms of increasing primary education enrolment, retention, regular attendance rate and expanding literacy to approximately two thirds of the population. India's improved education system is often cited as one of the main contributors to the economic development of India. At the same time, the quality of elementary education in India has also been a major concern. Therefore, the Indian government has laid emphasis on primary education up to the age of fourteen years. Education has also been made free for children from six to sixteen years of age under the **Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009**.

Around 80% of all recognized schools at the Elementary Stage are government run or supported, making it the largest provider of education in the Country. However, due to shortage of resources and lack of political will, this system suffers from massive gaps including high pupil teacher ratios, shortage of infrastructure and poor level of teacher training. The current scheme for Universalization of Elementary education in India after, The District Primary Education Programme (DPEP-1994) is the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan which is one of the largest education initiatives in the world.

Many states in India have included English in school curriculum and have started English from as early as the first grade. In Maharashtra, where the present research was carried on, English is being taught as a first language in English medium schools and as a second language in regional (Marathi) medium schools. English has been started from first standard in Marathi medium schools also from June 2000. But unfortunately, even after a decade, the desired goals have not been achieved to the full extent. Apart from many other reasons, like social and family background of the students, size of classrooms, and availability of teaching aids, the basic reason is unavailability of competent and well trained teachers. Therefore, appropriate teacher training has been the significant issue in Maharashtra. However, Teacher beliefs are important considerations in conducting teacher education designed to help pre-service and in-service teachers develop their thinking and practices. So, it's essential to study the belief system of teachers.

## **Teacher Beliefs**

During the past thirty years or so, research has made significant contributions to the exploration of teachers' beliefs, and the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices, which has produced important findings for both pre-service and in-service teacher education. It has been widely reported that teachers' beliefs significantly influence their classroom practices. Beliefs are defined as personal constructs that can provide an understanding of a teacher's practice (Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1996). The most significant contributions of research in education suggest that teacher's beliefs relate to their classroom practice (Thompson, 1992; Fang, 1996; Kagan, 1992). Belief systems are described as dynamic in nature, undergoing change and restructuring as individuals evaluate their beliefs against their experiences. (Thompson, 1992).

Teacher beliefs have already been classified into various sets of categories by some researchers (Johnson, 1992; William & Burden, 1997). William and Burden (1997) divided their discussion of teachers' beliefs into three areas: (1) about language learning, (2) about learners, and (3) about themselves as language teachers. Furthermore, a number of studies have attempted to investigate the beliefs of ESL teachers through questionnaires or inventories (Hsieh & Chang, 2002; Johnson, 1992; Kern, 1995; Liao & Chiang, 2003; Richards, Tung, & Ng, 1992; Yang, 2000). Yang (2000) discussed prospective teachers' beliefs in four areas: (1) general beliefs about child development, (2) general beliefs about language learning, (3) specific beliefs about teaching English to children, and (4) self-efficacy and expectations.

However, teacher's beliefs about his/her own talk in classrooms is also of equal importance. It shall of great use if teachers are aware about the importance of teacher talk, how to reduce teacher talk time (TTT) and amount and encourage student talk, and what the various features of teacher talk are and how to develop/use them effectively.

## **Teacher talk**

In ESL classroom it is seen that teacher's speech displays a variety of structural modifications, grammatical and lexical simplifications depending on the nature of the task and the competence of the learners. This is called 'teacher talk'. Rod Ellis (1985:304) describes it as 'teacher's adjustment to both language form and language function in order to facilitate communication'. Richards and Weber (1985:289) simply define 'teacher talk' as, 'a typical variety of language sometimes used by teachers when they are in the process of teaching'. In trying to communicate with learners, teachers often simplify their speech, giving it many of the characteristics of 'foreigner talk' and other simplified

styles of speech (Richards and Weber ). Thus ‘teacher talk’ can simply and succinctly be defined as teachers’ simplified , but not unnatural , variety of language especially uttered for the younger and newer learners of a SL/FL.

There are several features of teacher talk along with simplification and modification in speech. ‘Questioning’, ‘instruction giving’ and ‘paraphrasing’ are basic and important features (Marina Bondi and Glenn Alessi). Steven Walsh (2006) in his article ‘*Talking the Talk of the TESOL Classroom*’ presents the features of teacher talk that were found in a study in the TEFL centre, Queen’s University, Belfast, over a two year period. In this study teacher talk features such as scaffolding, direct- repair, content feedback, form focused feedback, referential and display questions, seeking clarification, teacher echo, teacher interruptions, turn completion, etc. are given.

It is believed that for successful L2 development ‘comprehensible input’ (Krashen, 1981) is necessary. For younger learners of a foreign or second language, it is the teacher who can provide such input through his/her language. For this, teachers use a number of ways and strategies. Code switching is also regarded as a successful strategy of language learning/teaching.

The present paper tries to analyse primary teachers beliefs about teacher talk and see whether they are well aware of its features and what their views are on use of mother tongue in ESL classroom.

## **Methodology**

### **Subjects**

Ten primary school teachers from Maharashtra (India) are the subjects of this study. Five of them are from English medium schools (henceforth EMTs) and five are from vernacular (Marathi) medium school (henceforth MMTs). They have varied experience from one year to twenty years.

### **Procedure**

A questionnaire was prepared which consisted thirteen questions regarding teacher talk. For first ten questions Five-point Likert scale was used and participants were asked to gauge their beliefs by indicating the extent to which they agreed with each statement using (1) SD = strongly disagree, (2) D = disagree, (3) N = neither agree nor disagree, (4) A = agree, or (5) SA = strongly agree. Next three questions were of multiple type and participants were asked to choose the option of their choice. After this task the researcher discussed informally with these teachers on their responses.

## Discussion and Findings

### Beliefs about TT, TTT, and use of MT – I:

Following table presents the responses of the participants to first ten statements. SD and D has been treated as D, and A and SA as A.

**Table 1: Teachers' responses to statements related to Teacher Talk (TT)**

N	Statements	M			E		
		MTs			MTs		
	A primary teacher should be a good story teller.						
	In English classroom teacher should talk all the time and students should only listen.						
	Teachers should talk in foreign tone to give appropriate exposure to students.						
	Giving students positive feedback at appropriate time is very important in English learning						
	Primary English teachers can give an excellent English input to students through their talk/speech.						
	Marathi must be used if children do not understand English.						
	As they are children and English is a totally new language to them, teacher should always make use of repetition and paraphrasing.						
	While teaching English, teacher should ask questions before and after lesson.						
	Marathi should never be used while teaching English to children						
0	Teachers should get appropriate training about how to talk effectively while teaching English to younger students.						

**Story telling skill:** The first statement in the questionnaire is concerned with the prime feature of primary teachers' talk: teachers' story telling skill. All of these teachers believe that in order to teach children English (or any other subject in this regard) a primary teacher must have the story telling skill. He/she should be able to catch children's attention and sustain their concentration for a longer time.

**Amount of teacher talk:** An important issue is whether the amount of teacher talk influences learners L2 acquisition. Researches in language classroom have established that teachers tend to do most of the classroom talk; up over 70 percent of the total talk. (Cook, 2000; Legarreta, 1977; Chaudron, 1988) However, these teachers are well aware about the amount of teacher talk in ESL classroom. No one agrees with the view that in ESL classroom teacher should talk all the time and students should only

listen. When asked in an informal discussion with them, whether it is really followed by them, eight (5 EMTs, 3 MMTs) of them answered that it depends on the level of students. If they are advanced they understand it easily and perform the given task/activity successfully. But if they are at beginning level and especially from non-English background, teacher inevitably has to talk more. Their response to one multiple type questionnaire also reflects the same belief. (see table 2, item 13) This belief of these teachers seems to be consistent with the survey conducted through blogs by BBC on amount of teacher talk. A question was given: *'Some people believe that a good teacher is one that says as little as possible. Others believe that students can only learn by hearing the teacher talk. How is your teacher talking time?'* Many teachers from various nations have given their views on it and most of them have preferred to have good balance between TTT and STT. For example, a teacher from Srilanka writes,

'I believe, it depends on the standard of the students... As I'm teaching English as a second language, I have to talk more when I'm given weaker students, whereas when I'm teaching the brighter students, I try to reduce my talking time as much as possible'.

One teacher from Malaysia thinks,

'I think being 'balanced' is very important. As a teacher, we always encourage students to share their views among the peers using the target language. However, somehow the students may have difficulties in expressing themselves using the target language. They may have a lot of interesting idea but they do not know how to deliver them. In my opinion, this is why they need us, to be tuned in to their needs. We start eliciting what they are trying to tell by asking questions and giving them the vocabulary which are used in that particular field. Teaching also means facilitate and interact with the students!'

A teacher from India blogs,

'Teacher talk should be evaluated on the basis of what the teacher says rather than how much s/he talks. It's always better to create situations where students can join in and lead the teaching. The role of the teacher should be to moderate the class-talk and take it in the right direction. However, before trying that it's better to have an idea of the cultural demands of the setting. In the west it's perfectly appreciated if a teacher encourages students to talk more. But, in Asian countries especially South East Asia teacher talk is what is appreciated'.

Another teacher from India says,

Teacher talking and students participation has to be well balanced. The students have to be given chance to talk. After all the aim is to help the pupils think and express their views. A good teacher is more of a guide than a mere lecturer.

One teacher from Colombia thinks,

'I think that the teacher talking time varies depending on the level of the student. Thus, in the first stages they need to listen as much as possible, but then they start applying all that knowledge and start producing orally in a higher amount'.

It reflects that having balance between TTT and STT is always preferred by teachers. But there are several factors like learner level, their cultural as well as linguistic background, lesson in progress, etc. that decide the amount of TT.

An American scholar Wong-Fillmore also argued based on her investigation in 40 classes that the amount of TT should not be decreased blindly. She suggested two conditions: one is the students must have high level language proficiency so that they can communicate with their teacher and among themselves. The other is there must be enough students who want to communicate in class. If the two conditions do not exist in classroom, the decrease of TTT won't lead to successful language learning.

**Use of mother tongue:** Use of mother tongue (MT) in second language classrooms has also been an important issue in SLL/A research. One of the first and main advocates of mother tongue use in the second language classroom has been David Atkinson (1987). Research has shown that the occasional (or judicious) use of L1 by both students and teachers increases both comprehension and learning of L2 (Cook, 2001; Tang, 2002; Wells, 1999). These teachers also believe that use of L1 (Marathi) is useful in learning English. Though all five MMTs and four EMTs believed that teaching English through English is more effective than teaching it with the help of bilingual method, eight of them (4 MMTs, 4 EMTs) also supported the statement that Marathi should be used if children are confused and baffled. To check their agreement, one contradictory statement was also given that 'Marathi should never be used while teaching English to children and seven of them (4 MMTs, 3 EMTs) disagreed with the statement and one from each medium was undecided. It shows that these teachers believe that mother tongue/L1 plays scaffolding role in second language learning. They believe that in their talk with children in the classrooms MT (Marathi) should be used as they are teaching younger children who may get baffled and give up while learning English, because they are from non-English background and newer to English. Therefore, it can be concluded that in situations like in India where MT has greater influence on SLL/A, MT plays important role as a great source of comprehensible input.

**Use of foreign tone:** Many of the times teachers think that they should use foreign tone in order to give appropriate English exposure. In case of present teachers, eight teachers (4 MMTs, 4 EMTs) disagreed that using foreign tone is essential for giving appropriate input. In informal discussion they

opined that using neutral tone is required than using foreign tone. It means they are well aware about the importance of fluency than phonological accuracy.

**Questioning:** Teachers have often been criticized for relying too much on questions designed just to elicit ‘the right answer’. The view of a teacher leading classroom interaction by series of questions to which he or she knows the answer is only partially true. Teachers do not simply make enquiries to assess their pupils’ learning, but also to guide their activity. (Bondi and Alessi) Thus a large proportion of teacher talk is indeed taken up by asking questions. The present teachers also agree that asking questions is important and useful. But knowing various types of questions like open/closed, display/referential, etc is also important. As all teachers agreed that questioning is very important while teaching younger children, the researchers asked them reason. They replied that it helps to check whether students have understood or otherwise and what kind of lacunas they have so that immediately they can cure it. As well as, if asked questions students tempt to take part in activity through trying to answer. But they don’t have much knowledge about question types and questioning behavior.

**Paraphrasing and repetition:** Giving explanations is one of the language functions that might be thought to be more typical of teacher talk: side-sequences are added to the development of teacher-learner dialogue in order to provide the learner with background information about words or ideas that (teachers think) learners may not understand. Teachers often try to make their directions and instructions more understandable by careful use of repetition and paraphrasing, in an attempt to simplify the language. This normally implies choosing more commonly used words and simpler grammatical structures, shorter sentences, avoiding subordination and using a restricted range of tenses. (Bondi and Alessi). Paraphrasing and repetition are key features of teacher talk for younger learners. Teacher frequent repetition and simplified paraphrasing facilitates English learning to a great extent. All of these teachers are well aware about it and all of them supported the statement related to it. (item 7)

**Giving feedback:** Giving positive feedback at appropriate time plays significant role in SLL/A, and all of these teachers agreed with the statement that ‘Giving students positive feedback at appropriate time is very important in English learning.’ But it is worth noting that teachers should not only give positive feedback. It is true that positive feedback tends to encourage, but negative feedback, if given supportively and warmly, will be recognized as constructive, and will not necessarily discourage.

The above findings show that these teachers are well aware about the relevance of TT in ESL classrooms. However, they need to have more knowledge about use of TT in more adequate way. It is reflected through their response to the last statement related to teachers training about how to talk effectively in classrooms which has been the most neglected area under the fashion of learning new



methodologies and techniques. It's not just a view but all of these teachers also expected to have such training, despite of their experience up to 20 years.

**Beliefs about TT, TTT, and use of MT - II:**

Table 2 describes their responses to last three multiple type questions which tried to know their views regarding importance of TT in learners' English achievements, TTT and use of MT.

**Table 2: Teachers' responses to multiple choice questions**

SN	Statements/Questions	% in average	
		MMTs	EMTs
11	...% of students learning of English depends on teacher talk. a) 100 b) 80 c) 50 d) 20 e) other... (Please specify)	90	90
12	According to me ... % Marathi should be used while teaching English. a) 80 b) 50 c) 20 d) 0 e) other... (Please specify)	3Ts-60, 2Ts-30	4Ts-0 1T- 10
13	Approximately how much of the total time in the classroom do you talk? a) 100 b) 90 c) 70 d) 50 e) other... (Please specify)	60	80

All of these teachers believed that 90% (average) of students learning depends on teacher talk. When asked, they supported their belief with saying that majority of students from this region (Western Maharashtra) are from middle class. Their parents are uneducated and they do not get much exposure through any other media like TV or newspaper. Thus, all responsibility is shouldered on teachers. Students also tend to imitate/follow their teachers. The degree of students success depends on how much skilled that teacher is. Responses about the use of Marathi are varied. Three MMTs believed that 60% Marathi should be used. Remaining two believe it should be only 30%. Totally opposite to them, all EMTs except one (10%), believed that Marathi should not be used while teaching English. In comparison with EMTs response to item 6 and 9 above it looks contradictory. But they replied that it is just their view. Teaching English through English is always better, but if students are not getting and not responding they use Marathi.

The researches on TT have suggested that the amount and type of teacher talk are contributory factors to learners' target language proficiency. So teachers should pay much attention to the appropriate use of teacher talk. Some scholars suggest that teachers should minimize TTT (e.g. Wright, 1975) But it is worth noting that teachers should not decrease the amount of teacher talk blindly. About TTT, EMTs' average is 80%, whereas MMTs' average is 60%. It seems that even though they believe that TTT should be less, EMTs' TTT is more than STT. They provided the same reason that learners are from non-English

background and don't give expected response. MMTs average is quite satisfactory in comparison to EMTs. But again there is doubt whether they actually give students chance to speak or engage them in just closed or yes no questions.

## Conclusion

In this research attempt, it can be observed that the MMTs and EMTs from Maharashtra are well aware about importance of teacher talk in primary ESL classrooms. All of them are aware about the basic features of TT: questioning, paraphrasing and giving feedback. Even if they emphasized on teaching English through English is more useful, they also believed that MT plays vital role in English learning. And most prominently, all of them expected to have training about how to talk more effectively in classrooms.

In formal training programmes designed for teachers it is quiet essential to give significant emphasis on how to 'talk' effectively in classrooms; especially how to ask questions, how to give feedback, how to paraphrase the contents, how to decrease TTT and increase STT. Knowledge about teacher talk features and its adequate influence on second language learners is to be included in such programmes so that along with effective methods, techniques and materials effective teacher talk will also assist them to be a successful teacher and it would automatically help in children English development in better way.

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