

## Group Work in ESL: A Teacher's Perception and Application

**Ashjan Allhedan**

King Abdulaziz University  
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

### Abstract

With the advent of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, scholars have recognized the importance of classroom group work as a means of providing an authentic interactive setting suitable for language negotiation. Although some teachers embrace using group work in their classrooms, there are other teachers who are reluctant to use it. In this research, an interview was conducted with a teacher to obtain her beliefs on teaching a second language and on using group work before observing her practices in classroom. The aim is to study the relationship between her beliefs and practices in order to examine reasons of possible discrepancies between these two, as this helps in pointing out areas of professional improvement that the teacher needs. A qualitative analysis of the data reveals that the teacher's general learning beliefs are more consistent with her practices than with her group work beliefs. Possible reasons of discrepancies are discussed with recommendations for further research.

**Keywords:** *Communicative Language Teaching; group work; teachers' beliefs; teachers' practices.*

## Introduction

Although the methods of language teaching have been rapidly changing since the second half of the twentieth century, they primarily fall into two broad categories: the synthetic approach and the analytic approach. It was not until the late 1970s and the early 1980s that the Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLT) got into use. This method calls for a shift in focus to linguistic fluency, without neglecting linguistic accuracy, by exploring the pedagogical aspects of the language via learners' interaction (Brown: 2007). Within this field, the need has arisen to use group work with learners to accomplish the communicative tasks of CLT. With the emergence of CLT, a considerable number of studies have come out examining the extent of the efficiency of classroom group work and the reservations about its practicality in the way that such studies have questioned how practical this approach is in promoting language learning.

Because teachers are the implementers of methodologies, their methodological beliefs and practices have become a parallel line of research inquiry. According to Phipps and Borg (2009), teachers' beliefs can be divided into core and peripheral. These beliefs can be influenced by several factors such their learning experience as students or their professional experience as teachers, which may result in a teaching practice that conflicts with teachers' beliefs (Phipps & Borg: 2009; Hill: 2010).

## Literature Review

### *Group work and language learning*

Advocates of group work as a technique in second language learning capitalize on its significant role in individuals' second language (L2) acquisition. In their research, Long and Porter (1985) have found that in contrast with whole-class discussions, group work (1) provides an opportunity for individuals to practice a richer language in both the quantity and variety of language functions; (2) it helps the students who work in groups to achieve the same level of grammatical accuracy as when they speak with their teachers; and (3) it leads the students to negotiate meaning by spontaneously correcting their group members' lexical errors more than correcting their pronunciation or syntactic errors.

The aforementioned propositions are supported by empirical research findings. Ghaith and Yaghi (1998) found that the interaction of group work benefits students with low aptitude in acquiring L2 by receiving multiple and redundant input from their group mates, whereas their high-aptitude counterparts may have an opportunity to practice their output and develop their understanding during their explanations to others. In her study of the difference between group and pair work, Dobao (2012) statistically demonstrates the superiority of the language accuracy of a task completed by groups over another task completed by pairs. Other studies also show that students who work in groups to perform tasks receive higher scores on tests than students who work on the same tasks individually, and students in groups outperform individual workers in terms of their increase in comprehension and recall of task details (Gladwin IV & Stepp-Greany: 2008 & Kim: 2008). The effect of group work on oral language production is an important topic among researchers as well. For example, Dabao (2012) concluded that the quality of L2 oral production is emphasized by students involved in small groups, unlike students who work in pairs who tend to pay less attention to language-related problems. On the psychological level, it has been shown that students who work together in a group for a considerable amount of time develop a rapport with each other (Ewald: 2004).

### ***Teachers' Reservations on the Use of Group Work***

Yet, with so much potential, why do some ESL teachers tend to shy away from utilizing group work? The answer lies in several limitations or drawbacks related to group work that may prevent teachers from effectively integrating group work into their teaching practice. The primary concern is students' use of their first language (L1) during group work. However, recent findings suggest that L1 can be put to good use in second language learning (Brooks & Donato: 1994 & Swain & Lapkin: 2000). These empirical studies explore students' use of their L1 in L2 settings within a sociocultural framework and demonstrate that L1 serves important cognitive and social functions in group tasks, such as helping students understand the requirements or contents of tasks and enhancing interpersonal interaction. Moreover, students are intrinsically motivated to control their use of L1. Storch and Wigglesworth (2003), for example, have examined students' attitudes toward the use of L1 in ESL group activities and have, surprisingly, found that students are reluctant to use it even though they are allowed to do so. This behavior is attributed to the students' belief that using L1 would slow their process of accomplishing the group tasks and that they should use L2 as much as possible to improve it.

Another major reason for teachers to avoid using group work is the fact that the language errors that the students produce during their negotiation will be reinforced, as teachers may not be able to provide error corrections to each student during group activities (Brown: 2007). As mentioned above, there is enough solid research on this issue to reassure teachers that during group work, peer-correction or other types of correction could successfully serve as an efficient error treatment. Students are capable of adopting various error treatment strategies, as teachers do, and they can address apparent breakdowns in communication (Bruton & Samuda: 1980 & Long & Porter: 1985).

The choice of group work as a classroom technique should not be made on the basis of arbitrary decisions. Instead, it should address a number of vital points to ensure its success as a learning technique. This means that its use ought to be considered with reference to the following conditions:

- (1) Groups should be cohesive, which means creating a positive relationship among group members;
- (2) the different levels of students' proficiency or communication skills must be considered when forming groups in a way that facilitates reaching the goal of the group task (Chang: 2010 & Dornyei & Maldiriz: 1997);
- (3) smaller groups of three to five students perform better than larger groups (Blatchford et al.: 2003); and
- (4) the physical environment surrounding the group plays a large role in facilitating group work. Another condition that has a twofold benefit states that arranging seats in circles and involving students in personalizing their classrooms are two ways that contribute to creating a pleasant atmosphere for working in groups (Blatchford et al.: 2003 & Dornyei & Maldiriz: 1997).

### ***Teachers' Role in Students' Group Work***

Regarding the teachers' role in implementing group work, it is of a considerable significance as they play a large role in the success of group work. Dornyei and Maldiriz (1997) argue that the traditional authoritarian teacher is unsuitable for group development in an L2 classroom. Similarly, both Brown (2007) and Willis and Willis (2007) emphasize that a teacher should facilitate group work. Dornyei and Maldiriz (1997) add that a teacher's role is to build the right environment for learning and to support groups to address any evolving difficulties. Finally,

teachers can also provide students with training on interaction skills and strategies to cope with various types of communication breakdowns and achieve more effective communication for greater group work accomplishment (Bejarano et al.: 1997; Bruton & Samuda: 1980; Naughton: 2006).

### ***Beliefs and practices in language teaching***

In the literature on teachers' beliefs and practices, Fang (1996) states two significant ideas. The first is his *thesis of consistency*, which supports the view of how teachers' beliefs shape their teaching, and the second is the *thesis of inconsistency*, which identifies the discrepancies and difficulties that hinder the implications of beliefs (as cited in Hill, 2010, p. 32). In support of Fang's thesis of consistency, Wyatt (2010: 603) coins the term *teacher's self-efficacy* (TSE) for teachers' judgments of their teaching abilities and defines this term as teachers' "beliefs in their abilities to support learning in various tasks and content-specific cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social ways." He strongly believes that if teachers reflect frequently on their beliefs, consistency with their practice will be the result.

In contrast, Phipps and Borg (2009) find that teachers' general learning beliefs are more consistent with their practices compared with the divergence between their specific beliefs on teaching grammar and their practices of teaching it in class. They also find that these inconsistencies are primarily driven by three factors; (1) students' expectations, (2) students learning preferences, and (3) curriculum and classroom management concerns. Similarly, Hill (2010) divides the tensions into *internal tensions*, which exist in teachers' beliefs and their struggle to accomplish them, and *external tensions*, which result from administrative factors and curriculum-related issues.

In fact, these tensions have more complex roots than those mentioned by Phipps and Borg (2009) and Hill (2010). Borg (2003) attributes these tensions to teachers' past experiences as learners in schools and analyzes how their previous teaching practices unconsciously influence their own cognition of teaching beliefs. However, he states that any negative effect of such an influence could improve with teacher training and teaching experience. Hence, he finds the parallel relationship between teachers' training and experience, on one hand, and their classroom practices, on the other.

### **Research Question**

Although there have been a number of valuable studies on teachers' beliefs and practices, only a few of these studies have investigated the beliefs and practices of a specific teaching technique, such as group work. Because general teaching and learning beliefs are the basis of specific beliefs, it is of interest to the researcher to propose the following question as the theme of inquiry:

- (a) What is the relationship between an experienced ESL teacher's beliefs and the classroom practices carried out by that teacher for teaching L2 and using group work as a learning technique?

### **Research Objective**

This research aims to identify the connection between an experienced ESL teacher's beliefs about using group work in L2 learning on the one hand, and her practices of implementation inside the L2 classroom on the other hand, in order to determine the reasons for any possible discrepancies between the beliefs and the practices.

### Significance of the Research

Exploring the tensions between teachers' beliefs and practices points out areas of improvements that are often not clear enough for most observers. Understanding and acknowledging the reasons behind these tensions also provide teacher training that is better constructed towards needed areas.

### Limitations of the Study

This research has a few limitations that were unavoidable at the time of conducting the study. First, the short period of the study could only lead to basic results. Consequently, further precise results as well as a variety of themes would emerge if this study has extended to cover longer periods of observations of teacher's classroom practices. Another limitation is related to the one class of students, the subject of the carried out practices. A range of observation outcomes might appear if there were more than one class with different types of students to be observed. Finally, such studies that are focused on one or a few subjects generate results specific to the subjects of the study, thus presenting results that cannot be generalized.

### Research Methods

#### *Participants*

The major participant is an in-service teacher with a thirteen-year experience in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). The minor participants were the students in the class the teacher was currently teaching. There were sixteen students with a high-intermediate proficiency level. They were of similar age groups but had mixed L1 backgrounds. The researcher had little interaction with the students, but their dynamics were the subject of attention while conducting the research.

#### *Data collection and analysis*

The data were collected via two methods: a semi-structured interview and pre- and post-class observations. After observing one class on October 1, 2012, the researcher made an appointment suitable to the teacher's schedule and conducted the interview in the teacher's office on Friday, November 16, 2012. Twenty questions were asked in semi-structured interview. The bulk of the questions asked specifically about the concepts behind the teacher's belief in group work and how to address the possible problems with group work. This interview lasted twenty-eight minutes and was followed by a class observation. The other questions were about the teacher's background and general beliefs in language teaching methodologies; these questions were asked after the class in a twenty-six minute interview. During the interview, the researcher asked some additional questions that were not originally included in the questionnaire to seek clarification on some of the teacher's answers. The interview was fully recorded via iPhone and transcribed via *ExpressScribe* for analysis and discussion.

The first class observation was oriented to the teacher's general teaching practice and focused on teaching vocabulary within group work. In the 90-minute class observation that followed the first interview, careful attention was paid to two foci: the teacher's practices and interaction with the groups and the groups' dynamics. Field notes was the method used for recording events in the classroom. Recording the class interaction was considered as a method, but then it was dismissed because of the difficulty of recording all the sounds in a large classroom and because of the stress it might provoke, which could lead to unnatural reactions. Additionally, the teacher encouraged the researcher to interact with the students while they

performed group work and to ask them questions. Only a few questions were directed to the students in order to keep the flow of group dynamics uninterrupted. These questions concerned with students' obvious behaviors, such as non-participation or the use of L1 based on the literature review on group work.

In the follow-up phase of the study, six questions were added to ask the teacher more about her general teaching beliefs as she reflected on them from the observed class. A fifteen-minute follow-up interview was conducted for this purpose on Friday, November 30, 2012.

As qualitative research, a deductive reasoning approach was adopted to analyze the data. This data analysis progressed through the following stages: (1) transcribing the interview, (2) writing notes, (3) organizing points into general and specific beliefs, (4) looking for their representatives or counter-representatives from the class observation, (5) interpreting data, and, finally, (6) drawing conclusions. Thus, the relationship between the teacher's beliefs and practices were initially categorized according to her beliefs: general beliefs about language teaching and specific beliefs about using group work in ESL classes. Within each category, we listed the consistencies between the beliefs and practices first, followed by the evident discrepancies.

## Results

This research is concerned with discovering the relationship between an experienced ESL teacher's beliefs and her classroom practices, especially those pertaining to using group work as a learning technique. Analysis of this teacher's beliefs and practices revealed that most of her beliefs were parallel to her practices. Nonetheless, some instances of discrepancies were exposed. In this account, both consistencies and discrepancies are presented within two lines of analysis: general beliefs about language teaching and specific beliefs about the use of group work.

### *1. The teacher's general beliefs about language teaching*

#### *A) Approach to language teaching*

***Teacher's belief:*** The teacher believes that the best approach to L2 teaching is the authentic, pragmatic and functional use of language. On the contrary, overt attention to grammar is avoided in her teaching.

I want them to understand the function, not the terminology. I don't expect them to know that because that they are not here to learn the grammar. They are here to learn the language and how to use it.

***Classroom practice:*** The topics taught in the observed classes manifested authentic themes related to students' life. This elevated the students' interest. As a result, the discussions in the class were eminently concerned with the correct usage of the commonly used phrases within that theme. As such, grammar rules were taught inductively.

#### *B) Teaching methods*

***Teacher's belief:*** The teacher is obviously influenced by the lexical approach, as she emphasized the importance of lexical phrases, or collocations, which she believes would vastly enhance the students' fluency:

Another theory is about collocations. We expect our students to sound fluent, while they can only sound fluent if they know these collocations.

***Classroom practice:*** This approach was evident in the first observation. Students had a task of preparing a card for each word from a given list. That card included the meaning of the word as

well as its collocations, and students in groups practiced giving these collocations in turn.

### **C) Error correction during students' interaction**

**Teacher's belief:** Since the main aim of teaching L2 in her classroom is to teach her students methods of delivering their messages, the teacher believes that correcting errors while students are negotiating language is pointless.

Well, if there are some mistakes that I know will not impede communication, so people still understand, then I'll just let it fly.

**Classroom practice:** While the teacher was monitoring group discussions, she corrected many of the students' language errors, although these errors did not impede communication as evident from group interactions.

### **D) Roles of the teacher and the student**

**Teacher's belief:** The teacher genuinely believes that she is a facilitator of language learning. She ensures that her students know about her role in order to introduce to them a concept that she highly esteems: students' autonomy.

I normally tell them that I'm here to facilitate. I tell them that I'm not here to teach English grammar because they are not English majors. I keep telling them that eighty percent of this is you, and I'm only here to help if you need help.

**Classroom practice:** These features were obvious in the teacher's practice. The two classes observed were highly communicative and consisted of various group work tasks and discussions. It is noteworthy that students were scaffolding and participating with high self-confidence while interacting within their groups in both observed classes.

## **2. The teacher's beliefs about using group work in the ESL classroom**

### **A) Benefits of using group work in language teaching**

**Teacher's belief:** The teacher is a proponent of using group work in the L2 classroom. A very significant outcome of group work interaction, according to her belief, is that it generates interactive language as the students are constantly negotiating meaning and providing feedback:

For learning a second language ... you need group work because you need to discuss what you learned with another person. Of course, you have to test it on another person just to make sure that you got it wrong... and I really like to put them in groups and just challenge each other in that way, so ... you know there is that feedback.

**Classroom practice:** The teacher's belief in the benefit of group work was clearly evident in the second class. For example, one student expressed something that was incomprehensible to his group mates, as shown by their facial expressions. As such, the group's confused facial expression were the immediate feedback that alerted the student to reconstruct his sentence into a more comprehensible expression. Moreover, this student followed up with a comprehension check question to obtain more feedback from his group mates in order to determine whether he was able to communicate his meaning.

### **B) Group work vs. individual practice**

**Teacher's belief:** Another important reason behind the teacher's advocacy for group work is that it maximizes the opportunity for an individual student to practice language when class time or size restrains the teacher from affording this opportunity to each student.

Well... feedback is one and, of course, practice, is another one, especially when you have sixteen students in a group... well... I can only do one-on-one interaction. We have to rely on group work.

***Classroom practice:*** It was noticeably observed that all of the sixteen students in the class had the opportunity to practice speaking in English to varying degrees while working in groups. This is an example of students' trial to speak.

### ***C) Fundamentals of grouping students***

***Teacher's belief:*** According to the teacher, dividing the students into groups should not be done haphazardly. Alternatively, there are some factors that must be taken into consideration while forming the groups. One very essential factor is forming groups of diverse L1 backgrounds for the purpose of ensuring the maximum use of the target language:

I don't want them to have the same language in the same group because then ... there is always a temptation of switching to the first language.

Another essential factor of grouping students is to pre-assign groups and then switch the members frequently to prevent rigid seating patterns:

I have to make the groups beforehand. I normally ask my students at the beginning of the semester, and I do that probably twice, three times a week: "Can you please sit next to someone else?"... But, no, they don't want to. So then I just have to make them.

Additionally, taking students' personalities into consideration when grouping them is substantial for group harmony.

So then I have these three guys together, and you know, different first languages. It's really nice. It works out, but the first time I put them together in a group, they almost started fighting physically because it's, you know, different personalities... And the good thing is, everybody else in the class is working very well.

***Classroom practice:*** The groups in the classrooms were counterbalanced in terms of L1 backgrounds and personalities, as observed by the researcher. Moreover, careful planning of grouping students was evident as the teacher wrote names of every group members on the board. Yet, no shuffling of group members was observed although several group work activities were carried out.

### ***D) Group work activities***

***Teacher's belief:*** The teacher designs group work activities such that it integrates individual work and group work. During the interview, the teacher provided an example about the group work task in her listening and speaking skills class:

For instance, there was one presentation about social inequality, and I had many questions about what the speaker said, and they didn't see the questions before they were taking notes. So after they watched it as many times as they wanted—and as I said, that was the individual work—and then, when time was up, they were put together, and they shared the notes so they had to answer the questions together.

***Classroom practice:*** In the class, the students were given time to work individually on a comparison between a home office and an office in the city. Then, they were grouped to share and exchange their opinions and come up with their own draft of a thesis.

### ***E) Students' use of L1 during group work***

***Teacher's belief:*** The teacher acknowledges that students' use of their L1 facilitates second

language learning only in secondary or elementary schools. However, she is entirely opposed to students using their L1 during group interaction in her high intermediate level class, and even believes that they do not need to use it as they already have the language to convey their messages. In fact, she believes that using L1 by her particular students hinders their L2 learning. As such, she makes it a policy for the students to leave the class in case they used their L1:

The reason why I'm pushing L1 in secondary schools or elementary schools is to become a balanced bilingual. So, it's that level when you need it...there's no way that you need your first language, and this is a high level group... No, it hinders it, and on this level, you don't need L1.

***Classroom practice:*** Shortly after the groups started collaborating on a grammar gap exercise, it was observed that the students began using their L1 as a means of explanation. At this point, the need aroused to question the students on their L1 use. They stated that they feel the need to use their L1 as a technique for better comprehension, though they acknowledged that it is *rude* to use it explicitly since they are in an English learning environment.

***F) Teacher's role during group work***

***Teacher's belief:*** She strongly believes that her role as a facilitator should continue to facilitate group dynamics. Nevertheless, facilitation should be accomplished in a balanced manner in which her presence does not distract group dynamics:

We're there to facilitate and we want to make sure that they are on track... if they need correction, you step in, but you don't want to be hovering over students because then they are really not producing as much, or they are distracted because they are looking at you waiting for something to happen.

***Classroom practice:*** Contrariwise, in the class observed, the teacher spent a large amount of time with one single group, leaving the other groups to their own work. Within this particular group, the teacher sat with the students to see their work and actively participated; she even dominated the discussion in this group. She also tended to correct all of the students' speech errors, which constantly interrupted the flow of the interaction

**Table 1. The relationship between the teacher's beliefs and practices**

Theme	Teacher's Belief	Teacher's Practice	Relationship
<b><i>1. General beliefs about language teaching</i></b>			
<i>A) Approach to language teaching</i>	Authentic, pragmatic and functional use of language. No overt attention to grammar.	Used authentic topics that led to teaching grammar inductively.	Consistent
<i>B) Teaching methods</i>	Focus on lexical phrases and collocations to attain fluency.	Employed an activity of collocations.	Consistent
<i>C) Error correction during students' interaction</i>	Pointless unless the errors hinder communication.	Many errors were corrected though they did not impede communication.	Inconsistent
<i>D) Roles of the teacher and the student</i>	A teacher should be a facilitator, while students should become autonomous learners.	Teacher facilitated classroom discussions, and the students were actively involved.	Consistent

<b>2. Specific beliefs about group work</b>			
<i>A) Benefits of using group work</i>	Group work is a great opportunity for language negotiation.	Groups negotiated and reconstructed meaning.	Consistent
<i>B) Group work vs. individual practice</i>	Individual students get further opportunity to practice the language when grouped.	Individuals participated within their groups with varied degrees.	Consistent to some extent
<i>C) Fundamentals of grouping students</i>	L1 background, students' personalities, planned grouping, and shuffling members.	Counterbalanced groups, though no shuffling observed.	Consistent to some extent
<i>D) Group work activities</i>	Activities should integrate both individual and group work.	Activities required the students to work individually before working in groups.	Consistent
<i>E) Students' use of L1 during group work</i>	It is prohibited since they do not need it.	Students used their L1 declaring that they sometimes need it.	Inconsistent
<i>F) Teacher's role during group work</i>	She should be a facilitator, monitoring all groups without being strongly present.	She was strongly present with one group, dominating the discussion.	Inconsistent

## Discussion

The aim of this research was to identify the relationship between an ESL teacher's beliefs and practices. The beliefs were divided into general learning beliefs and specific beliefs related to the use of group work in the ESL classroom. The data was triangulated to identify this relationship. The overall results indicate that the teacher's beliefs were not always aligned with her practices, and this discrepancy was more evident in the context of group work.

Although the teacher acknowledged that she did not intend to ground her teaching practice on any specific approach, based on the interview and class observations, it can be concluded that her beliefs on second language learning and teaching techniques resonate with the central features of the Communicative Language Approach (CLT). In addition, the teacher implemented a significant amount of group work to create opportunities for genuine classroom interaction, which is consistent with what Ellis (2005) discusses: by creating opportunities to practice input and obtain feedback on the generated output, students naturally develop their grammatical and sociocultural linguistic systems while being pushed to interact with others without paying close attention to linguistic accuracy when acquiring the language.

However, the teacher's approach of developing communicative language competence involved teaching students aspects of communicative competence more than creating tasks for learners to engage in communication that led to learning, as in the case of Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT). Group work was initiated by individual work, and the activities were staged to follow samples, produce language, and obtain feedback from peers. The purpose of initiating group work with individual work may be to ensure that all individuals are producing a linguistic output and to have them interact to provide corrective feedback that modifies their output. It was clear that students were interacting to express their ideas on the topic, and peers were asking for clarification on ideas and scaffolding each other. This process adheres to the principles of the

Interaction Hypothesis, to which Ellis (2005) refers. Ellis also stressed, within the framework of this hypothesis, the importance of having students express their ideas in interactions, just which the students did when they talked about their ideas within the group.

Additionally, the teacher explicitly clarified several times that her objective was for the students to attain fluency by understanding the function of the language and that she did not want them to focus on grammar because they will not become *grammarians*. She believed that grammar should be taught inductively rather than deductively, following one of the most important principles of instructed language learning: learners focus on form (Ellis, 2005).

The teacher's focus on learning through collocations is further proof that CLT is deeply rooted in her beliefs. The lexical approach, as explained by Brown (2007), is more concerned with building learners' language through words and word combinations. Although this approach is not very communicative, the teacher practiced an updated version of it by pushing her students to look for word collocations and practice them in groups instead of focusing on accumulating words. Nonetheless, it is significant that this approach is of little importance in learning L2 for communication, and its implementation in language production as a whole remains unclear (Brown, 2007).

Furthermore, although the teacher's beliefs showed that she followed a communicative language approach (particularly in the way she expressed her error correction methods), in practice, she was correcting students' errors immediately through recasting regardless of whether the errors impeded the students' meaning. This practice is more closely related to the rationale of the audiolingual method regarding the importance of correcting students' errors immediately to prevent their reinforcement. One reason for this discrepancy might be related to what Borg (2003) refers to as the influence of the teacher's past learning experiences and encounters with her teachers during her school years. I believe that the teacher's emphasis on correcting all errors was unconscious because it was deeply rooted in her cognition of addressing errors.

Brown (2007) states that autonomy is an important principle of *mastering a foreign language*, and it can be practiced by giving the students an opportunity to express themselves and to take initiative in class. By pushing her students to express their ideas and to give feedback to other group members and by guiding them to resources outside of the classroom, the teacher not only practiced her beliefs regarding learners' autonomy, but also expressed her belief that extensive L2 input was required for successful language learning (Ellis, 2005).

In practice, the strategic formation and maintenance of groups is directly related to the quality and quantity of group interaction. In this research, the teacher indicated her awareness of the importance of group-building and spent a great deal of time and effort to establish effective groups in her class. The teachers' methods provide practical instructional suggestions for facilitating group dynamics for ESL teachers. First, in ESL classes with varied L1 backgrounds, the teacher should always take the L1 into consideration by creating heterogeneous groups to achieve the maximum benefit of communicative practice, including give and take and the negotiation of meanings. Second, it is helpful to move students around regularly and to encourage them to interact with each other to prevent rigid seating patterns. Students naturally establish their desks as their "territories" and feel reluctant to adjust to new groups that could generate genuine interaction. Moreover, the inter-member relationship is particularly relevant to ESL teachers when forming effective groups. The teacher demonstrated a good example of successfully coping with the conflict between group members with different personalities when she put three active and dominant students in one group to form an interesting and competitive environment within the group. She did not panic when the three students were hostile to each

other initially; instead, she realized that this was a normal stage of group development that could lead to a subsequent increase in cooperation and cohesion in the group. This strategy turned out to be effective; the three students mediated and negotiated with each other to collaboratively achieve the group goals.

The students' inclination to use their L1 in class is considered as the main reason for teachers to avoid group work, as Brown (2007) stated. By strictly prohibiting the use of L1 in the class, the teacher practiced her belief that for high-intermediate students, the use of L1 as a scaffolding technique would hinder their L2 learning. However, the researcher's observations showed that the students actually risked punishment to use their L1 in scaffolding each other while working in groups, which is sufficient to prove that at least the students in this teacher's class found it helpful and necessary to use their L1 occasionally. The students also confirmed this fact during an interview with them in class. The teacher's belief on this issue was not shaped by research or training, as she expressed in the interview. Thus, exposure to some readings on this topic, for example, could convince her of the benefits of permitting the students to use their L1 within group work.

Additionally, although the teacher shared Brown's belief (2007) that the teacher's role during group work should be that of a facilitator and resource guide rather than an omnipresent controller, her practice in class indicated that she went beyond being a facilitator. She generally did a good job helping the students and instructing the group activities to keep the students on track, but she seemed more like a dominant participant in the group, such as joining one particular group, leading the conversation and correcting errors that did not impede the interaction. This behavior contradicts several group work *don'ts* that Brown (2007: 237) listed, such as "Don't spend an undue amount of time with one group; don't correct students' errors unless asked to do so; and don't assume a dominating or disruptive role while monitoring groups." This discrepancy might be the result of an external factor, as Hill (2010) indicates. The teacher believed that she should not interfere, but she also felt that she should have some control over group work. This tension resulted in unbalanced control and led the teacher to unconsciously target all of her control to one group.

## Conclusion

Researching the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their teaching practices has been encouraged by researchers as it reveals discrepancies that are hardly noticeable, and consequently discloses specific areas of improvement. Likewise, this study revealed some tensions between an experienced ESL teacher's beliefs and practices, especially those pertaining to the implementation of group work. In this particular study, the teacher may simply be unaware of the discrepancies between her beliefs and unparalleled practices, or she might feel the urge to change her practice within given circumstances inside the classroom. The greatest discrepancy was that of the teachers' belief as a facilitator of group work and her overt control over one group in the classroom observed. Such inclination may also be explained by the feeling of safety and effectiveness that the teacher was seeking and thought it could be achieved by establishing tighter control than when students are left to their own devices during group work. Yet, as suggested by many researchers, it is worth trying to maintain only a moderate degree of control and giving students more latitude to produce language and perform without too many interruptions during group work.

Finally, it should be noted that this study was primarily concerned with the relationship between a teacher's beliefs and practices that could be observed in one class period. The

observation extended to two classes but yielded the same results. This finding may be due to the observation of the same group of students performing similar activities. In addition, due to the teacher's tight schedule, the interview was divided into two sessions, before and after the second class was observed. For more findings, it would be better to conduct the interview prior to the observation, leaving enough time for the teacher to act naturally in the class without having to behave according to her comments in the previous interview. Therefore, it is highly recommended for future studies to extend the period of research for two main reasons: (1) to have ample space between the time of the interview and the time of observation, which would allow more natural practices on the part of the teacher; and (2) to get more valid and varied results concerning the relationship between the belief and the practices through multiple observations. More findings would be available if more observations of different student groups and skill classes were conducted. Likewise, more areas of improvement could be obtained and grouped into themes when such research shades light on the tensions discovered from studying teachers of different skills and expertise.

#### About the Author:

**Ashjan Allhedan** holds an MA in TESOL and a BA in English with a Teaching Diploma. Her work experience includes teaching English as a second language as well as a foreign language to young adults. Her research interests are related to teacher advocacy, multimodal teaching, and cognitive second language teaching.

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### Appendix A: Interview questions

#### 1. First interview questions

##### a) Background questions

1. How long have you been teaching English? What is your primary interest in this field?
2. Could you tell us about your educational background regarding TESOL or other related fields?
3. Have you been involved in any type of professional association? Which ones? What were your roles?
4. Could you describe the students and classes you have taught?
5. Have you ever been abroad as an ESL/EFL teacher? What was the experience like?
6. Have you ever studied a foreign language?
7. What makes you an English teacher? What do you find rewarding about being an English teacher?

##### b) General method questions

1. How do you define learning a language? What do you think best facilitates language learning?
2. Have you been given a set syllabus, lesson plans or other teaching materials? How would you approach them? If not, how would you design your lessons?

3. What is the goal that you have in mind for your students to reach? How do you organize your courses (around grammar structures or around language functions, situations, topics or something else)?
4. Can you describe your teaching methods? How do you characterize your teaching style? Have your methods and style changed over time?
5. What are the roles of the teacher and the students in your class? What do you expect your students to do?

**c) Specific questions**

1. We have noticed that you use group work in your classroom. Could you tell us how long have you been integrating group work activities in your teaching? Why do you use it as a technique for teaching?
2. To be more specific, how can group work facilitate language learning?
3. When do you use individual work, pair work, and group work? Why?
4. What types of tasks do you usually assign for group work? What factors do you usually take into consideration when designing group work?
5. How do you form groups in terms of number of group members, proficiency level, age, status, and first language?
6. How do you manage group work? What is the teacher's role while groups are working? What do you think about the fact that during group work, the teacher is no longer in control of the class, and it is difficult to monitor all groups?
7. Do you have any concerns or have you encountered difficulties when you conduct group work activities in your class? How do you address group work issues such as the following:
  - a) Students with higher proficiency or an active personality tend to dominate the group performance, whereas some silent and shy students are reluctant to participate.
  - b) Students who share the same L1 may use their L1 instead of English in the group activities.
  - c) Students may reinforce each other's errors during group talking because the teacher cannot provide corrections all the time.
8. How do you treat errors that appear within group discussions? What types of errors do you tend to correct/ignore?

**2. Follow-up interview questions**

1. What made you think of teaching English even though it is not your first language?
2. Describe your own experience in learning English. Do you find yourself teaching in a similar way to that of your teachers?
3. If you reflect on your teaching method in class, do you find yourself following the PPP?
4. We noticed that you begin the group work by having students work on their own first, so that it becomes a technique for providing feedback rather than accomplishing tasks. Can you comment on that?
5. You mentioned in the previous interview that you don't go exactly by the detailed syllabus; you have to focus on writing. Why? What do you think of changing the way a lesson is displayed in the book, such as starting from the middle or even changing the topics of the tasks to be more interesting?
6. What correction technique do you usually follow? Why?