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# Exploring the relationship between teacher beliefs and styles on classroom management in relation to actual teaching practices: a case study

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## Abstract

Classroom management is one of the primary areas of concern expressed by teachers and teachers' personal belief system is believed to guide their choices of classroom management approaches. The present study investigates the beliefs of a Turkish teacher of English as a foreign language on classroom management and examines the similarities or differences between her classroom management beliefs and actual teaching practices. Data coming from the Attitudes and Beliefs on Classroom Control (ABCC) Inventory (Martin et al., 1998), a philosophy of teaching statement, and a stimulated recall session revealed a congruence between the participating teacher's beliefs on classroom management and her actual practices in the classroom.

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*Keywords:* Classroom management; teacher beliefs.

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## 1. Introduction

Classroom management is one of the primary areas of concern expressed by educators at all levels. A number of studies have revealed that teachers' personal belief system guides his/her choices of classroom management approaches (Agne, \*Greenwood & Miller, 1994; D. W. Ellis & Karr-Kidwell, 1995). Glickman and Tamashiro (1980) conceptualized a framework to explain teacher beliefs toward classroom management in terms of three approaches, i.e., interventionist, non-interventionist, and interactionist. According to this model, interventionists believe that students learn appropriate behaviors primarily when their behaviors are reinforced by teacher-generated rewards and punishments. Therefore, teachers should exercise a high degree of control over classroom activities. Non-interventionists, however, believe that students have an inner drive that needs to find its expression in the real

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world. That is why students should be allowed to exert significant influence in the classroom and teachers should be less involved in adjusting student behaviors. As for the interactionalists, students learn appropriate behaviors as a result of encountering the outside world of people and objects. Therefore, interactionalists suggest that students and teachers should share responsibility for classroom management. Some teachers are able to use different approaches at different times depending on the needs of their students; however, Laut (1999) states that one approach usually dominates a teacher's actions.

In a number of studies, teachers' different approaches to classroom management have been investigated considering various factors that might have possible effects on their choice. The findings revealed that, for example, teachers in alternative certification programs were significantly more interventionist than traditionally certified teachers regarding instructional management (Martin & Shoho, 1999), urban teachers were significantly more interventionist than rural teachers in people management (Martin & Yin, 1999) and experienced teachers were significantly more interventionist than novice teachers in relation to people and behavior management, but not instructional management (Martin & Shoho, 2000).

To our best knowledge, there are not many studies focusing on the relationship between teacher beliefs and actual practices on classroom management. Thus, the aim of the present study is to whether there were any similarities in terms of the beliefs of a Turkish EFL teacher with regard to classroom management and to see whether there any similarities or differences between her classroom management beliefs and actual teaching practices.

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1. The Setting and the participant*

The present study was conducted at a preparatory school of a private, English-medium university in Istanbul, Turkey. The participant was a 29-year old teacher with 7 years of teaching experience and at the time of the study she was teaching a beginner level class for 15 hours a week. At the beginning of the study, the teacher was informed about the aims of the study and she volunteered to participate.

### *2.2. Data collection instruments and analysis*

The data for the study was collected through The Attitudes and Beliefs on Classroom Control (ABCC) Inventory (Martin, Yin, and Baldwin, 1998), a philosophy of teaching statement, and a stimulated recall session.

ABCC Inventory, designed to find out classroom teachers' interventionist, non-interventionist, and interactionist orientations, composed of 26 items with three subscales that address components of classroom management—instructional management (14 items), people management (8 items), and behavior management (4 items). Examples of items include: 'During the first weeks of class, I announce the classroom rules and inform students of the penalties for disregarding the rules' (instructional management); 'I allow students to select their own seats' (people management); and 'When students behave appropriately, I provide a reward of some kind such as points toward a party or free time' (behavior management). The items are answered on a Likert-type scale with 4 points ranging from 'Describes me very well' to 'Describes me not at all'. On this inventory, high scores indicated a more controlling, interventionist approach to classroom management, while low scores indicated a less controlling, non-interventionist approach and the scores obtained on each subscale were calculated to find the participant's orientations regarding the dimensions of instructional, people and behavior management.

The participating teacher was asked to write a philosophy of teaching statement, a narrative that includes a person's conception of teaching and learning, a description of how he/she teaches and justification for why he/she teaches that way (Brookfield, 1990), in order to see the extent to which she views classroom management as part of the teaching and learning process.

Finally, the teacher was observed and video-taped for three classroom hours to see whether she behaved in the manner revealed by her responses in the ABCC Inventory. Following the classroom observation, a stimulated recall method was used to study the teacher's pedagogical thinking during the teaching-learning process. The teacher was asked to comment on and analyze her personal observations and recollections of events that took place during the

lesson videotaped and to focus on the incidents that happened that are related to the classroom management. The tape recorded stimulated recall interviews were transcribed verbatim to be analyzed qualitatively.

### 3. Results and Discussion

In order to find out the classroom management related beliefs of a Turkish EFL teacher, i.e., whether she was interventionist, non-interventionist, or interactionalist in terms of her classroom management orientations, data obtained through the ABC Inventory were analyzed and the teacher received a total score of 59 indicating her interactionalist orientation. More specifically, when the scores on each subscale were calculated, she was found to have an interactionalist orientation on two of the three dimensions with the scores of 32, and 13 on instructional, and people management subscales, respectively. Her orientations on behavior dimension, however, were interventionist with the score of 14.

With the aim of seeing whether there are any similarities and/or differences between the teacher's beliefs and practices, data from her teaching philosophy, and stimulated recall were analyzed to support the findings of the ABC Inventory under the following three assertions: teaching, learning, and teacher's role.

#### 3.1 Teaching

'Teaching is the application of theories in a comfortable, caring, and collaborative environment controlled by the teacher who is concerned with the use of various activities depending on the context.'

In the description of her teaching philosophy, the participating teacher emphasizes the importance of the application of principles and techniques driven from university-based theories and methods considering the realities of teaching contexts. However, as she stated in the following excerpt from the field notes, she also recognizes the importance of time and place:

*When I started teaching at high school I began teaching according to the theories and methodologies which we were taught at university. Of course, applying the suitable method and technique in the right place and time is important. (April, 8, 2008, fieldnotes)*

She also mentions the importance of creating a comfortable and cooperative learning environment in which the students feel not threatened as illustrated in her following statement:

*I always try to create an environment for my students in which they feel willing and comfortable to participate in the lesson. (April, 8, 2008, fieldnotes)*

Based on her answers on the ABCC inventory, she believes that the students should be allowed freedom to pursue their own interests, and to be part of the decision-making process in terms of the selection of the topics and in-class tasks. Hence, for the participating teacher of our study, teaching should take place in a comfortable environment which promotes the participation of students not only in classroom activities but also in the selection of content.

During the stimulated recall in which she was asked to describe her feelings and opinions about the lesson observed, she evaluated the lesson as successful due to the large amount of student participation. She attributed this amount of student participation to the use of a variety of activities which enhanced the cooperative learning environment promoting student motivation.

Her views on the significance of the classroom environment for effective teaching were supported by the observations in which the participating teacher was found to be very friendly with her students trying to create a relaxed and non-threatening learning environment to get them more involved in the activities. As confirmed later by herself during the stimulated recall session, she was quite humanistic in her approach to students seeing them as individuals, like interactionalist teachers do, with their own personalities, interests, abilities and even their own problems mainly family related. Similarly, parallel to her answers on the behavior management subscale of the inventory, she showed an interventionist tendency in monitoring the participating students, directing the transition between the activities and constantly trying to maintain student participation by calling out names, and asking them questions, which made the interaction more between the teacher and the individual student.

### 3.2 Learning

‘Learning is facilitated by designing activities relevant to the students' personal backgrounds, interests and learning styles.’

The teacher stated that it is very important for her students to feel valuable and respected in her class, and be perceived as individuals with different backgrounds, learning styles, and needs. The following excerpt illustrates her point:

*The teacher should deal with the personal backgrounds, interests, and learning styles of the students for effective learning to occur. (April, 8, 2008, fieldnotes)*

She also emphasizes the continuing nature of learning process as follows:

*Learning should be integrated into the lives of the students so that students will feel the need to learn a specific subject. (April, 8, 2008, fieldnotes)*

By this remark, she believes that learning cannot be limited to the classroom environment. In other words, not only should learning include intensive in-class learning, but also extensive learning outside of the class which is also purposeful. Her focus on individual students' backgrounds, interests and needs is also reflected by her answer on a related item of the ABCC Inventory showing her beliefs that a teacher should allow students to progress at their own rate when moving from one learning activity to another. This focus was also present for classroom management. Her beliefs in the significance of taking individual differences into account, however, were mainly supported by the data obtained from the stimulated recall during which she continually referred to individual students and their own problems while commenting on the off-task behaviors observed by the researchers.

First, about students' calling out answers without raising their hands, she stated that as long as the students say something relevant to the lesson without interrupting the others, she would tolerate it. Second, regarding her different reactions towards different students, she said that she considered individual differences as in the case of an off-task hyperactive student who has been on medication for some time, and a wandering student who she believes is a kinesthetic learner. Referring to another student with the family problems she said:

*The one with no books is 22 years old, and he gets beaten by his father. The first day we met, he told me that he doesn't like his father, and he doesn't like it here as he sent him here. So I do my best to make him feel that he is important and precious to me. I can't be another source of pressure for him, because he spends 6 hours a day here. This experience shouldn't be a torture for any of them.*

### 3.3 Teacher's Role

‘A teacher should be humanistic, a guide not a ruler and a facilitator not a director’.

The early teaching experiences of the participating teacher contributed to her understanding of the roles of a teacher who should not stand as an authoritative figure who is mainly concerned with the transmission of knowledge. She experienced in her early teachings that being an authoritative figure in the past prevented her from establishing strong relations with her students, and that affected her teaching practices. Being a guide and a facilitator, on the other hand, helped her improve her relations with her students.

Unlike her personal statement favoring a facilitator teacher role, the subject acknowledges the importance of directing students' transition from one activity to another and of monitoring student learning behavior during the seatwork as revealed by her interventionist scores on the dimension of behavior management of the ABCC Inventory. Her interventionist views on behavior management are also revealed by her remarks on the necessity of directing students, monitoring them and setting rules with them during the stimulated recall session. However, because of the special conditions of her students, she ignores some misbehaviors and shows tolerance to her students. Upon a question during the interview she stated that if she worked with a different group of students, she could be less tolerant to such behaviors.

She justifies these thoughts with some experiences in which her humanistic approach is abused by her students. When that happens, she explains that she tries to talk to them about the problem outside of the class and gives them a chance to think about how they behaved.

Although no patterns of rules were followed during the observations, she also believes in the necessity of rules that need to be set at the very beginning of the semester. However, she confirmed her answers on the inventory by stating the importance of having rules and daily routines that need to be set with students, but not in all cases. She explained:

*Before setting them, I try to get to know my students, because I know that not all rules are good for all students. I ask them how we can make this experience more effective. Let's come up with some rules together! One of them says, for example, I get distracted when some one walks out of the class, and I say 'ok! No going out is allowed!'. But later I see that when some students are not allowed to go out during the lesson, they cause problems and misbehave in the classroom and I end up sending them out for the sake of others. But, of course, in some cases I have to set my own rules. I can't ask them if it is ok with them not to play with their cell-phones during the class.*

As also justified by the teacher herself, due to the contextual factors and the profile of her students, the teacher adopts an interventionist approach though she believes in the importance of being a guide and a facilitator to the students.

### 3. Conclusion and Limitations

The present study was conducted to investigate the beliefs of a Turkish EFL teacher on classroom management and to see whether there were any similarities or differences between her classroom management beliefs and actual teaching practices. Data collected through the ABCC Inventory showed that the participating teacher was interactionalist in her general beliefs regarding classroom management. When her scores on each dimension of instruction, people and behavior management was calculated, it was found that she had interactionalist orientations on instructional and people management while she had interventionist beliefs on behavior management.

The study also revealed some degree of congruence between her beliefs and actual practices. In other words, her classroom management orientations were influenced by her personal beliefs (Clements, 1983; Emmer, et al., 1983). As she believed, she tried to create a relaxed and cooperative learning environment in which she considered individual differences and the reasons behind their actions that stem from their individual problems.

From the data gathered, it was obvious that the participating teacher viewed classroom management as a significant part of the teaching and learning process indicating her awareness of the multifaceted concept of classroom management. She knew that effective teaching and learning could be achieved with effective classroom management.

However, a number of limitations should be mentioned regarding the present study. First of all, this was a case study that investigated the classroom management beliefs and actions of a purposefully selected teacher in one of the English-medium universities in Istanbul, Turkey. Therefore, by no means the findings can be generalizable to other EFL contexts. Secondly, the participating teacher was observed three times in her classroom. Moreover, because of the difficulties in getting permission for videotaping, only one class hour could be videotaped.

Despite these limitations, finally, the study showed the importance of observing teachers to gather in-depth information about their beliefs and classroom practices, and stimulated recall proved to be an effective tool in understanding the motives behind teacher actions.

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