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EXPLORING TEACHER'S LEARNING THROUGH THEIR BELIEFS AND PRACTICES: DEVELOPING A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I present a discussion on the important and relevant literature on non-native English-speaking teachers (NNEST) who are learning to teach (LT) English/language in a given English language teaching (ELT) context. LT phenomenon is explored and understood through the teachers' beliefs and practices regarding their ELT and learning to teach English (LTE). By doing so, this article aims to focus on teachers and other academics that are teaching language at different levels. Moreover, it also attempts at establishing a conceptual and theoretical framework regarding LT through the lens of teachers' beliefs and practices. This model has been further elaborated through an analysis of a small sample of data, thereby indicating its potential for empirical studies on teachers' learning to teach. Limitations of the current relevant studies on the said phenomenon have been outlined to highlight areas for further research.

INTRODUCTION

Research on learning to teach (LT) is not a new phenomenon, but the one which began during the late 1970s and 1980s, which evolved through different historical periods, (Behaviourist, cognitivist, and sociocultural), all of which depicts the prevalent approaches of that specific time. It emerged due to a movement in research, focusing on the description of 'best' teaching practices which teachers were supposed to adopt (the prevalent model till mid-1970s) to an extensive focus on the role of a teacher in classroom teaching practices, and more recently to the social, situated, and distributed views on human cognition (Paker & Winne, 1995; Greeno, Collins, & Resnick, 1996; Cobb & Bower, 1999; Putman & Borko, 2000). This study elaborates the paradigmatic

development of research on teacher learning (TL) through a historical overview of the studies and perspectives on LT, describing the various perspectives and paradigms within which LT is studied during the last four decades. Such a rundown leads this study to the conceptualisation of LT, through teachers' beliefs and practices, a model which practical application is demonstrated through a sample analysis, as an example for similar future studies.

Focus of the paper:

This study aims to develop a conceptual and theoretical model on teacher's learning through their beliefs and practices regarding their ELT and learning to teach English (LTE) by looking at the relevant research on these areas

LITERATURE REVIEW

The research on teaching during 1960s until the middle of 1970s, which depicted the prevalent behaviourist approaches of this specific period, focused mainly on teachers' observable behaviours and the corresponding learners' achievement (Clark & Peterson, 1986: 257; Chaudron, 1988: 13-14). This time period is seen as a bifurcation between process and content. Therefore, "learning to teach involved mastering the specific content one was to teach, and separately mastering methodologies for conveying that content to learners" (Freeman, 2002: 4). This implied LT as a linear and straightforward process where "the university provides the theory, skills, and knowledge about teaching through coursework; the school provides the field setting where such knowledge is applied and practiced; and the beginning teacher provides the individual effort that integrates it all" (Wideen et al., 1998: 133). This process-product, simplistic notion of LT under-estimated the teacher's personal experiences and tends to avoid the contexts of its occurrence (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). Then, teachers were simply seen as "mechanical implementers of external prescriptions" (Borg, 2006: 7).

The considerable focus on observable behaviours, describing teaching, started to alter during the middle of 1970s with an increasing awareness of the importance of teachers' thinking during the teaching process. Such a shift added to the rise of an area of research known as 'teacher thinking' or 'teacher cognition' or 'teacher thinking' that was marked by shifting the focus of research from "what teachers do" to "why they do what they do" (Jesry, 2014). The 'thought processes' in which teachers would engage when planning and giving their lessons, began to be explored. This growing research attention towards the teachers' "mental lives" (Walberg, 1977) was specifically noticeable during the 80's and got linked with the viewpoint that, to better comprehend teaching, it is equally important to explore the thinking processes of the teachers. Research needs to focus more upon the "hidden side" (Freeman, 2002: 1) and "unobservable cognitive dimension" (Borg, 2003: 81) in the work of teachers. This points to what teachers know, believe, and think so as to grab a more actual, accurate and better picture of their instructional experiences as well as the teaching act.

Against this background, arose research in an area called as 'learning to teach', which explored the teachers' work focusing on "the cognitions, beliefs, and

mental processes that underlie teachers' classroom behaviours" (Kagan, 1992b: 129). This area of research attempted to comprehend "what teachers actually know' and 'how they get to know what they know'" (Jesry, 2014), thus placing teacher/instructor at the centre of their investigation/analysis, and so their mental lives (For example, Clark & Peterson, 1986; Calderhead, 1996; Dann, 1990). As Borg (2009: 163) argues,

"Teacher cognition research, by providing insights into teachers' mental lives and into the complex ways in which these relate to teachers' classroom practices, has made a significant contribution to our understandings of the process of becoming, being, and developing professionally as a teacher".

In the 1990's and 2000's, the significance of the teaching contexts got noticeable when LT was seen from the sociocultural perspectives. Effect of such sociocultural turn gave rise to new understandings regarding how L2 teachers learn to accomplish their teaching tasks (Johnson, 2006). Sociocultural theory views language learning in terms of social and cultural interactions; suggesting that it is a dynamic and lifelong process that occurs in physical and social contexts, in which a vital role is played by interactions, tools, and human activities (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Salomon, 1993; Rogoff, 2003; Wretsch, 1985, 1991). Varghese (2002: 3) argues that "learning and understanding occur as people participate in activities where they increasingly become participants". [LT] entails lived practices, . . . , and the processes of learning are negotiated with people in what they do, through experiences in the social practices associated with particular activities" (Johnson, 2006: 237)

Sociocultural theories also claim that development of TL depends on particular social activities in which teachers engage. Therefore, TL is not a result of "external, socially mediated" knowledge and skills only, but also a progressive movement to teacher's internal mediational control, thereby resulting in transformation of teacher as well as the activity performed (Johnson, 2006). In the field of L2, Johnson (2006) grabs current views of TL research from SCT perspective and conceptualises:

"L2 teacher learning as normative and lifelong, as emerging out of and through experiences in social contexts: as learners in classrooms and schools, as participants in professional teacher education programs, and later as teachers in settings where they work¹. It described L2 teacher learning as socially negotiated and contingent on knowledge of self, subject matter, curricula, and setting. It shows L2 teachers as users and creators of legitimate forms of knowledge who make decisions about how best to teach their L2 students within complex socially, culturally, and historically situated contexts". (p. 239)

According to Johnson and Golombek (2002), TL evolved from a reshaping of the already occurring beliefs, knowledge, and practices, instead of simple imposition of new methods, materials, or theories upon teachers. Engagement in different kinds of activities, as learners in schools, institutions, and

classrooms where the teacher learners work, are responsible for shaping their thinking, and thereby reasoning.

With the development of the new sociocultural turn, 'teacher cognition' oriented research began to receive criticism on the ground that it favoured a view of LT as existing solely and entirely within teachers' minds. In other words, research on LT carried out within the 'teacher cognition' framework, started to comprehend the process of LT by just looking at teachers with less or no consideration given to the teaching context where learning process takes place. Sociocultural perspectives increase our comprehension by emphasizing on the process of learning by giving exceptional weightage to the teaching context within which this teaching process unfolds. Contextual concerns, which include institutions, along with their environmental demands, have now been considered as significant components that affect and thus shape the LT process. It is crucial to study and comprehend such socio-cultural environments, "in which some actions and ways of being are valued and encouraged, whereas others are downplayed, ignored, and even silenced," (Freeman & Johnson, 1998: 409) to understand the LT process completely.

Learning to teach in this study

"Our perspectives on learning matters i.e., what we think about learning influences where we recognise learning, as well as what we do when we decide that we must do something about it – as individuals, as communities, and as organizations".
(Wenger, 1998)

The above-mentioned historical overview of the research on LT presents LT as encompassing both what initially Clarke and Peterson (1986: 257) presented as 'thought' and 'action' as observable components of the classroom and unobservable psychological context of the teaching, respectively. Both 'thought' and 'action' influence each other and impacted upon by opportunities and constraints that teachers confront in their work/workplace (Clarke & Peterson, 1986). Feiman-Nemser and Remillard's (1995) provided further elaboration by describing these three factors as the "cognitive processes" and the "learning opportunities". The cognitive process loosely refers to what is going on in a teacher's head whereas "learning opportunities" entail both the contexts of learning (e.g., settings, interventions, programs) as well as social interactions inside such contexts which promote learning (Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1995). However, both these internal (cognitions) and external (context) dimensions of the LT process are reconciled in the teacher's 'acts' or 'practice' as clearly laid out, in the field of language teaching, by Borg's (2003) in his conceptual model below (figure 1).

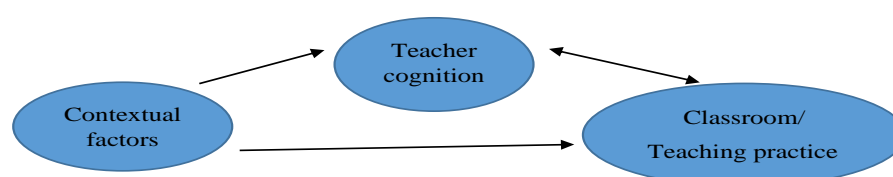


Figure 1: Borg's conceptual model of cognition²

²Adapted from Borg's (2003) conceptual model of cognition

This model clearly shows that teaching practice(s) is a mediating element which links both the cognitive processes and learning opportunities/contextual factors. It indicates that cognition, context, and practice are all mutually informing (Borg, 2015). While Borg's main focus was on teacher's cognition, his research helped in presenting a comprehensive picture of 'learning of teaching' which has been clearly articulated by Johnson and Dellagnelo (2015). These scholars brought together (cited) the research of the main scholars in the field, such as, Cochran-Smith et.al, (2008), Borg (2006), Freeman (1996, 2002), Kubanyiova and Feryok (2015) and summarised 'learning of teaching'

“as a process of appropriation of culturally valued patterns of the social situations within which teachers interact on a regular basis. Typically this involves appropriating normative ways of acting and interacting that reflect the values, assumptions, and attitudes that are embedded in the classrooms where teachers were once students [for example Lortie's (1975) 'apprenticeship of observation'], in the teacher education programs [for example, Johnson (2009), Johnson and Golombek (2011), Kiely and Askhams' (2012) 'furnished imagination'] where they receive their professional credentialing, and in the schools where they eventually work. As a result, this life-long process of appropriation shapes the complex ways in which teachers come to think, believe, and know about themselves, their students, and the activities of teaching and learning”. (p. 11)

This is how I conceptualise LT and argue for investigating LT through this model. This involves investigating teachers' cognitive processes as shaped by different influences during their learning and teaching history including their workplace (henceforth – teaching) context where contextual factors play a significant role “in mediating the extent to which teachers are able to implement instructions congruent with their cognitions” (Borg, 2015). These influences/experiences are important as a means of understanding the factors which shape teachers' mental lives (Borg, 2015).

Where teacher cognition research showed that what teachers do/act/practice, it cannot be separated from their thinking processes or cognition. Bell and Gilbert (1994: 493) linked the teacher's doing/act/practice and their cognitive processes further to their learning as: “in learning, the teachers [are] developing their beliefs and ideas, developing their classroom practice, and attending to their feelings associated with changing”. Kennedy (1991) also concluded that the research on teachers' beliefs added in a significant way to the development of understandings regarding process of TL. Similarly, the pioneer scholars, Freeman and Richards (1996) in the field of L2 learning to teach research, reported a research in which the researchers have investigated the participant teachers' LT by examining how the trainee teachers have developed their beliefs and ideas about teaching during a teacher training program. Borg (2011) has seen beliefs to be a crucial factor in language teacher learning. In this field of L2 teaching, the dialectical relationship between teacher's learning and teaching/practices can be further confirmed from Worden's findings, as cited in a recent article by Johnson and Dellagnelo (2015). Worden empirically documented the dialectal relationship between the learning of teaching and

actual teaching, illustrating in real-time what and how teachers learn as they engaged in the activities of teaching, as well as how what they learn gets instantiated in how they teach. Owing to the dialectical relation between teaching and the learning of teaching, Johnson and Dellagnelo, (2015) have asserted that it is counter-productive to look at teaching as somehow separate from the learning of teaching, thus providing strong foundation to look at teachers' teaching practices in order to know about their learning to teach. This implicitly shows that the phenomenon of (teachers') learning, not directly measurable and observable, can be indicated and evidenced through teacher's beliefs and practices. Therefore, it may be summed up that teachers' LT can be best known and understood by looking at their beliefs and classroom/teaching practices (henceforth – teaching practices) (Borg, 2015). According to Kane, Sandretto and Heath (2002), it is important to examine both “espoused theories-of-action” (teachers' beliefs) and “theories-in-use” (teachers' practices) of a particular teacher. Research focussing only on teachers' “espoused theories of action”, that is, what they say without observing what they do, is having a risk of telling only the half of the story (Kane, Sandretto & Heath, 2002). This is further explained through an example analysis of a small sample of data in the following section.

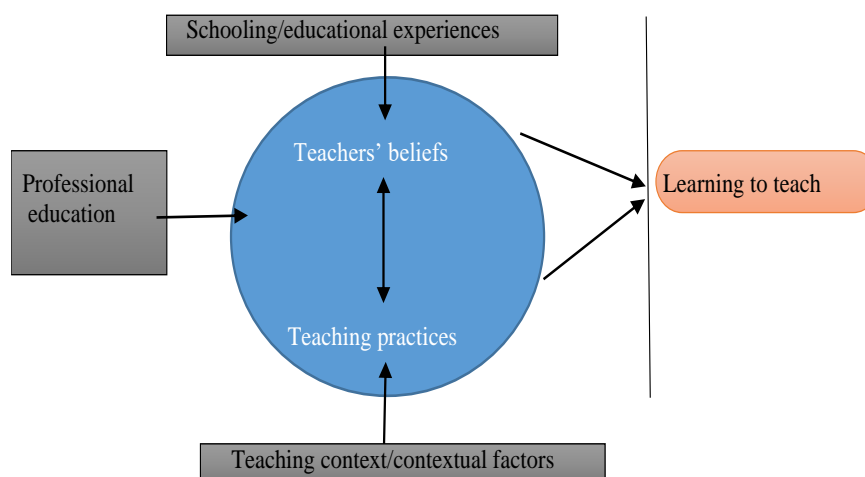


Figure 2: Conceptualisation of LT in this study

Approach

This study reviews and consolidate the general trends regarding teachers' beliefs and practices from previous studies, which includes, empirical research articles, e-books, and some review papers. This provided the basis for developing the above-mentioned model (Fig. 2). The sample data is taken from a larger study to understand the practical application of the above-mentioned model. This sample is an example of a with-in case analysis (observation followed by interviews) of one of the individual participant teachers (PT) which was followed (in the main larger study) by with-in case analyses of the rest of the teachers, further followed by with-in case analyses between teacher participants of the same school and finally cross-case analyses between the eight teachers from four secondary schools.

The sample presented below is an analysis of the beliefs providing insights into the process of LTE of one of the participant-teachers, Nawaz (pseudonym) based on his interview ('professed' beliefs- Speer, 2005) corroborated by his classroom teaching practice (enacted/'attributed' beliefs- Speer, 2005).

Data Analysis: Beliefs regarding teaching and teaching method

In the classroom observation data presented below, Nawaz is teaching a class of 80 junior high school/secondary level students, aged 13–15 and of low-intermediate language ability. The lesson presented for analysis is typical for this class, follows the course-book closely characterized by grammar translation teaching method and language learning through repetition and drills. Most of the teaching is in 'lockstep', with the class working together as one group and no use of pair and group work. The topic of the lesson is "The Medina Charter" and teacher's main pedagogic focus apparently is vocabulary development.

Influence of professional education on teacher's beliefs

The interviewee Nawaz, talks about his preferred method of teaching, that is the direct method/communicative approach taught to him in his pre-service teacher education course. According to Nawaz:

"In B.Ed.³ they tell you about the direct method for teaching"

Thus, Nawaz initial belief about teaching English through using English was shaped by his pre-service teacher education course and made it his preferred method as is visible from his words below. This method involves talking directly to students in the target language (English here) based on the principles of communicative language teaching which involves learning language through using language accompanied by related activities such as pair work, role play etc. Nawaz underlying belief is that one advantage of this method is to help students improve their pronunciation. His words verbatim are:

"I can teach them through some other best method. I can teach through direct method. I can take these kids along with me so that their pronunciation becomes good"

By "some other best method", Nawaz meant direct method as he said both these first two statements in one go. Hence, the second statement is an explanation of the first one which I also confirmed by asking clarification question in interview.

Influence of contextual/workplace factors on teacher's beliefs and teaching practice(s)

Despite his preferred method above, Nawaz strongly adhered to GTM in his teaching as is visible both from his interview and classroom observation as is shown by his words below from one of his classes:

³Bachelor of Education (1 year general pre-service course for teachers)

“we teach translation to kids in Urdu language”

Also, in the same excerpt, we can see that his teaching in the classroom dominated almost three quarter of his total teaching time (from 00:20 – 12:01/16:04)⁴ doing literal translation of each line and difficult words (according to his thinking) of the course book text to the students.

It can be clearly seen in the excerpt that the teacher is literally translating line by line from English to either Urdu or mainly Pushto from the text book. When I asked Nawaz about the reason, he attributed it mainly to the contextual factors: student factor (students' poor command on English language) which made it hard for students to understand any conversation in English, exam policy (English question paper must contain two questions regarding translation from English into Urdu and vice versa), classroom factor (big strength of students - 80 here), insufficient resources (class room size is not appropriate to accommodate any kind of arrangement required for different communicative approach oriented activities). The words of Nawaz below points to all these factors:

“For direct method, it [the class] should not have more than 25 students”.

“If I make group of 80 people in class, have you noticed the situation, how I will do grouping in them”

“Here in school there is no such big room or hall, where I can take students and make the groups there for any activity”

“Second problem is of exam. Here in the paper pattern, two questions are must for translation, like translate into English or translate into Urdu. For that we teach translation to kids in Urdu language. We do it in Pushtu so that they understand it as their Urdu is also weak”.

Also the interaction in the same excerpt from Nawaz classroom teaching also reflects student poor command of English as one of the reasons for using GTM teaching. This fact can be confirmed when we look at the teacher's general mode of address/clarification “poyeegay (do you understand)” in line 20 and his explanation of the text in the regional language Pushto in line 22 when that explanation, at least, could have been easily done in English language. Also, in line 21, the students prompt reply showed by a latched turn “=” (where one turn follows another without any pausing -Walsh, 2011) “aw ji” indicates as if they quickly understood teacher question. Similarly, in lines 9/10, 12/13 and 22/23 students' overlap speeches with the teacher are examples of quick sudden reply to teacher's question. For example: in line 9, teacher asked in urdu “kiss sheher main (in which city), and teacher's reply and student sudden reply overlapped “Madinashehar main (in the city of Medina) in line10. Same goes to teacher display question in line 22, when teacher asked in Pushtu “agha group of people

⁴The excerpt only shows around first 4 minutes of analysis where we still can see that GTM dominates. However, 16:04 shows the actual total classroom recording, in which around 12 minutes (timings 12:01 in video) the teacher was doing literal translation

kay sokoo” (who were among the group of people), once again teacher and students’ reply in line 23 overlapped - “muhajirino”. This is contrary to teacher extended time, 3 seconds and 5 seconds in line 2 when he asked two short questions in English and handed over a turn to students but could not elicit any students’ response, instead of increasing their response(s) (Walsh, 2011). However, after that, in line 4, we see a prompt answer from students taking the turn immediately when the teacher used a prompt in Pushto language in line 3. It might have occurred because the learners did not know a particular word or phrase or did not possess the appropriate communicative strategies (Walsh, 2002). Therefore, the teacher had to resort to scaffolding (intervene and feed in the missing language) by switching to the students L1 as timing and sensitivity to learner needs are of utmost importance for teacher (Walsh, 2002). All these instances can be said to be indicative of student’s sudden grasp of meaning, their understanding of the teacher’s message being in their regional languages. This seems to have shaped Nawaz belief about GTM as the most appropriate method in this context.

Regarding reason for GTM being paper pattern, can also be evidenced from the same extract and spread throughout the extract where teacher is mostly using Pushto (being the mother tongue of students) for their main understanding but possibly due to paper requirement he is also translating the whole text in Urdu for students to somehow meet that requirement as well.

Professed and enacted teacher’s beliefs

The above mentioned teacher’s quotes verbatim and the extract from classroom teaching also provided me an opportunity for comparing the teacher- Nawaz’s professed and enacted beliefs (teaching practices) to gain a more accurate understanding of Nawaz’s beliefs about English language teaching, thus shedding light on how he is learning to teach English. In the above mentioned example of Nawaz, we can clearly see that the teacher belief, about how English language should be taught, is visible in his classroom teaching practices. That is, at least in this instance, there is a similarity between teacher’s stated and enacted belief about how to teach English language.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

We can see from the above literature that in the last decade an increasing focus is seen on the impact of the local teaching context on the process of LT, a factor making LT an intricate, and multi-faceted process, thus suggesting the need to dig more in-depth into teachers’ experiences working in their local teaching contexts particularly in the ELT field. Johnson (1992) suggests that some cognitive demands may be similar across many fields, whereas others may be unique to L2 teaching. Borg (2009: 166-7) also argues that “context is a fundamental variable in understanding teaching; research into language teachers’ cognitions and practices that does not attend to the context in which these cognitions and practices unfold is, I would argue, conceptually flawed.” Similarly, even more recently, Kubanyiova and Feryok, (2015) stressed that; “there must be a greater recognition in language teacher cognition research that the immediate classroom interaction, the research context in which such interaction is documented, the teacher’s sense of the broader institutional

setting, the status of his/her profession in the society, the global context of L2 learning and use, and the social status of students' home languages and socioeconomic circumstances, all play decisive roles in determining which of the teacher's unobservable dimensions are relevant at an instant and over a career" (Scarino, 2014; Razfar, 2012; Varghese, 2008). Contrary to this, most of the previous cognition/beliefs-oriented studies have not taken into consideration the importance of contextual factors to understand LT, thus believing that teachers' thoughts and ideas exist in a 'vacuum' in their minds, as pointed out by Borg (2006). Borg (2006) argues that research regarding teachers' beliefs lacks substance and requires 'testing' through facts from actual experiences of the teachers. The theory of belief is quite 'cerebral' (i.e., exist within individuals' heads), whereas LT being a social and cultural process is greatly affected by contexts. As a result, it is imperative to study teachers in their workplace environment and settings, which will help to comprehend their actions and how they are shaped by their beliefs, and to elaborate if their course of action is facilitated or hindered by contextual factors. This means that the 'cognitive' model of LT cannot be considered the only available solution to understand the LT process; views grounded on the 'socialisation' model of the LT are furthermore required to complement the one-sided analysis of LT process and to present a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of teachers' experiences of LT.

Even on the 'socialisation' level, few studies, particularly in the field of ELT, have attempted to show "how contextual forces such as the wider community's common educational beliefs, the school culture as a workplace, and the classroom as an immediate instructional setting" (Jesry, 2014) of teachers' practises can influence and shape teachers' LT experiences. In particular, research on LT, which has been primarily documented within a "cognitive" model, shows how teacher beliefs can guide teachers' experiences of LT, but discusses only to a limited extent, how these experiences within the teaching context can contribute to the construction and re-construction of new thoughts, assumptions, and beliefs that lead teachers behave in ways which are situationally accepted in the workplaces instead of ways congruent with their prior beliefs. As a result, without taking into account the contextual dynamics at action in the classroom, our comprehension of the LT process would be constrained.

The literature on L2 teacher education suggests drawing on understanding teachers in relation to their particular teaching contexts to have a complete depiction of teachers' behaviour, where LT occurs so as to achieve conformity amid "teacher education and how teachers learn to teach" (Jesry, 2014).

Furthermore, most of the studies carried out within the 'cognitive' model have usually over-relied on a single research tool, more specifically interviews, in which the records are mostly self-reported; and thus, it tends to overlook the complex and multifaceted nature of the notion of 'belief' where more focus is required on observational teaching data (Jesry, 2014). Little effort has been made to explore teacher beliefs employing numerous research tools to better grasp the complexity and idea of the 'belief' concept as a notion held by the teachers either being aware of them or not (Jesry, 2014) and which cannot be

comprehended by just reliance upon what teachers say. Hence, a research is required which can investigate teachers' beliefs by also observing their teaching practices in their classrooms, showing the potential of linking self-report (interview) data with actual classroom behaviour – comparing teachers' 'saying' with 'doing' to better understand the phenomenon under discussion.

Even within the classroom observation, a small number of studies have been conducted to analyse interactional processes in the classroom, working on which is crucial to establish teachers' understanding about teaching, students, themselves, and the teaching content (Li & Walsh, 2011). That is, focusing the fine-grained understandings of teachers' beliefs through studying classroom interactional processes. In a nutshell, there seems a dearth of research that adopt a multi-layered approach for investigating teachers' LT (Jesry, 2014), owing mainly to more focus upon a specific way of comprehending the process. Comprehending the intricate process of teachers' LT requires not only considering their 'saying' or 'doing' but also what happens in their environment both at the micro level of their classrooms and beyond within the wider context of their workplace and society.

Contribution:

This study has attempted to establish a conceptual and theoretical framework regarding learning to teach (LT) through the lens of teachers' beliefs and practices. This purpose has been achieved by reviewing the paradigmatic development of research on teacher learning (TL) through a historical overview of the studies and perspectives on LT, established during the last four decades. This led to the development of a model on LT for future empirical research studies.

Limitations:

Teacher's LT is intimately connected to teacher's LT at other levels of a system. The complexity of schools and other educational agencies emerges through the reciprocal influences within and between systems so that learning and change in any particular part of the system can result in change in other parts (Curtis & Stollar, 2002; Stollar et al., 2006). The point here is not that all levels must be taken into consideration for each and every aspect of teacher's LT, but that any attempt to understand teacher's LT at only a subsystem level i.e. the classroom and the school institutions as a workplace (not the wider educational system) in this study, may be understood as partial, and incomplete.

Furthermore, the qualitative nature of study with a limited number of participants is its inability to lead to greater generalizations.

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