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BELIEFS IN PRACTICE: AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY OF TEACHER PERCEPTIONS ON ACTIVITY BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING IN AN ESL CONTEXT

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Abstract
This study addresses the critical belief-practice gap in implementing Activity-Based Language Teaching (ABLT), a student-centered approach pivotal for developing communicative competence in ESL education. The research aimed to, first, explore ESL teachers' beliefs, understandings, and perceived benefits of ABLT and, second, investigate the challenges and facilitating factors they face in translating these beliefs into classroom practice. An exploratory qualitative case study was employed, drawing on semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis with six ESL teachers at a university level (IUB ELT department) adopting a communicative curriculum. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. It is found that while teachers held unanimously positive beliefs about ABLT, valuing its capacity to enhance student engagement and foster deeper language acquisition, their understanding varied from a focus on genuine communication to form-focused exercises. A significant belief-practice gap was identified, primarily driven by overwhelming contextual constraints: time pressure, large classes, and, most profoundly, the "washback effect" of grammar-focused exams that forced teachers to prioritize test preparation. Collaborative planning was identified as a key facilitating factor. The study concludes that the ABLT implementation gap stems not from a lack of teacher belief but from systemic and contextual barriers. To bridge the gap found in current study, it is recommended to reform high-stakes assessment systems to align with ABLT, provide structural support through dedicated planning time, and transform professional development into collaborative, practice-focused learning communities. Future research should investigate the long-term impact of these systemic interventions.

INTRODUCTION

The current scenario of English as a Second Language (ESL) education is increasingly characterized by a shift away from traditional, teacher-centered methodologies towards

communicative and student-centered approaches (De Jong & Harper, 2014). This prototype shift is driven by the overarching goal of developing students' communicative competence, the ability to use language effectively and appropriately in real world contexts. In response to this, Activity Based Language Teaching (ABLT) has emerged as a protuberant pedagogical model (Oxford, 2006). ABLT is grounded in constructivist principles, positing that students learn language more effectively through expressive, interactive, and goal oriented tasks rather than through the passive reception of grammatical rules and vocabulary notes (Chou, 2017). This approach aligns with the belief that language is a tool for communication, not only a subject to be studied, and focuses learning by doing (Gibbes & Carson, 2014).

The theoretical and empirical case for Activity Based Language Teaching (ABLT) is strong. Deep-rooted in the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), ABLT is designed to increase student engagement, foster authentic language use, and promote the development of both fluency and accuracy (Praratch & Tutwisoot, 2024). Proponents argue that by situating language learning within purposeful activities, students are more motivated, and the language acquired is more deeply processed and retained. Accordingly, educational policymakers and curriculum developers in many ESL contexts have advocated for the widespread adoption of activity-based frameworks, anticipating improved learning outcomes.

However, the successful execution of any educational modernization is not guaranteed by its theoretical merits alone. A critical determinant of its success lies in the hands of the classroom teachers who are tasked with its enactment (Ogilvie & Dunn, 2010). Research in teacher perception consistently highlights that teachers are not passive technicians merely implementing prescribed methods; they are active, thinking decision-makers whose classroom practices are deeply clarified through their internal belief systems, prior experiences, and contextual perceptions (Samar et al., 2025). These beliefs, often implicit and formed over years, profoundly influence how a teacher interprets, adapts, and ultimately executes a new methodology like ABLT. Therefore, a gap can often exist between the theoretical design of a curriculum and it's practical reality in the classroom.

This potential for a "belief-practice gap" is principally salient in the context of ABLT. While teachers may express theoretical agreement with student-centered approaches, the implementation of ABLT presents significant challenges. These may include perceived constraints of time, large class sizes, examination pressures, lack of resources, or concerns about classroom management. Beside this, teachers' own language learning experiences, which may have been for the most part traditional, can create deeply-held beliefs that conflict with the principles of ABLT. Thus, understanding teacher perceptions is not a peripheral concern, but a central one for understanding the very feasibility and effectiveness of ABLT implementation.

It is within this conceptual space that the present study is situated. While much research has examined the effects of ABLT on student achievement, there remains a relative shortage of in-depth, qualitative research exploring the phenomenon from the perspective of the ESL practitioners themselves. This study, therefore, seeks to contribute a nuanced understanding of this critical interface between teacher cognition and pedagogical practice.

1.1Statement of the Problem

Despite its strong theoretical grounding and advocated benefits for language acquisition, the effective implementation of Activity-Based Language Teaching (ABLT) in ESL classrooms remains inconsistent and often problematic in Pakistan. A critical factor influencing this implementation is the mediating role of teacher cognition. While ABLT is promoted in curricula and teacher training programs, a significant disjuncture frequently exists between its theoretical principles and its practical enactment by teachers. The core problem is that the success of this pedagogical innovation is depending upon teachers' internal beliefs and perceptions, which are not hitherto sufficiently understood within

specific ESL situation. Without a deep understanding of these perceptions encompassing their beliefs about language learning, their interpretations of ABLT, and the contextual factors they navigate professional development and support strategies may be misaligned with the realisms of the modern classroom. This gap between policy and practice can lead to superficial implementation, teacher resistance, and ultimately, the failure to realize the potential communicative benefits of ABLT for learners.

1.2Research objective:

To explore the various beliefs, understandings, and perceived benefits that ESL teachers hold regarding Activity Based Language Teaching.

To investigate the perceived challenges and facilitating factors that ESL teachers identify when translating their beliefs about Activity Based Language Teaching (ABLT) into actual classroom practices.

1.3Significance of the Study

For ESL Teachers and Teacher Development, this research offer a platform for practitioner voices, validating their experiences and challenges. The findings can foster a reflective community of practice where teachers can critically examine the alignment between their beliefs and their teaching methods. In addition, the insights engendered can inform the design of more empathetic, practical, and effective professional development programs that address teachers' genuine concerns rather than imposing top-down mandates. For Educational Policymakers, Curriculum Designers, and Administrators, this study is responsible for critical, empirical evidence on the ground realities of implementing communicative approaches. Understanding the specific perceived barriers (e.g., resource constraints, assessment pressures, class size) allow for the creation of more supportive implementation frameworks. This can lead to better-resourced initiatives, more realistic timelines, and contextualized curriculum guides that bridge the gap between policy ambition and classroom feasibility. For the Academic Community, this study contributes a rich, qualitative case study to the existing body of literature on teacher cognition and language teaching methodology. It deepens the theoretical understanding of the relationship between belief and practice within the specific context of ABLT. The findings can serve as a foundation for further research, including larger-scale studies, longitudinal designs, or action research projects aimed at co-developing implementation strategies with teachers. In the last but not least, by illuminating the complex interplay of beliefs and practice, this study provides a critical foundation for developing more sustainable and effective support systems, thereby enhancing the quality of ESL instruction and student learning outcomes.

Literature Review

This review situates the proposed study within three interconnected bodies of scholarship: (1) the theoretical and pedagogical evolution of Activity-Based Language Teaching (ABLT), (2) the foundational theory of teacher cognition and beliefs, and (3) the empirical evidence on the nexus between teacher beliefs and practical implementation, specifically in communicative language teaching contexts.

2.1The Evolution and Principles of Activity-Based Language Teaching (ABLT)

Activity-Based Language Teaching (ABLT) is not a singular method but a sun shade term for pedagogies that prioritize learning through meaningful, goal-oriented tasks. Its theoretical roots are deeply embedded in Constructivist Learning Theory, which posits that knowledge is actively constructed by the learner through experience and social interaction (Sofiana et al., 2022). Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, in particular, provides a rationale for the collaborative nature of activities, where peer support can scaffold language learning. ABLT is a direct descendant of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). As articulated by Rahmatillah (2019), CLT shifted the goal of language instruction from grammatical accuracy to communicative competence, the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts. This shift necessitated a move from mechanical drills to interactive language use. Building on CLT, Task-

Based Language Teaching (TBLT), as formulated by Ellis (2003) and Nunan (2004), provided a more structured framework. TBLT centers on the use of "tasks" activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose to achieve an outcome (e.g., solving a problem, creating a map, designing a poster). ABLT amalgamates these approaches, emphasizing "activities" which may be broader than the strict definition of a "task" but share the core principle of "learning by doing." Kumaravadivelu (2006), argued for context-sensitive strategies through his research where the teacher acts as a mediator of student-generated learning. ABLT aligns with this view, positioning the teacher as a facilitator who designs interactive environments such as role-plays, information-gap exercises, and project-based work where linguistic forms are acquired through the necessity of communication rather than through explicit, front-loaded instruction.

2.2Teacher Cognition: The Theoretical Foundation of Teacher Practice

The critical mediator between any pedagogical innovation and its classroom application is the teacher's inner world of beliefs, knowledge, and thoughts, collectively termed teacher cognition. Borg (2003) defined the seminal work as teacher cognition as "the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching what teachers know, believe, and think" (p. 81). This field of research firmly establishes that teachers are not passive conduits of curriculum but active, thinking decision-makers whose practices are filtered through a complex, personalized system. This system of beliefs is formed through a teacher's apprenticeship of observation, meaning their own experiences as students profoundly shape their initial conceptions of teaching. These beliefs are often deeply entrenched and can be highly resistant to change, even after pre-service training. Furthermore, Borg (2015) illustrated a model that cognition interacts dynamically with contextual factors (e.g., curriculum, resources, students) and professional experiences, which collectively shape classroom practice. Therefore, to understand why a teacher adopts, adapts, or rejects ABLT, one must investigate this underlying cognitive framework.

2.3The Belief Practice Nexus in Communicative and Learner-Centered Contexts

A substantial body of empirical research highlights the complex, and often non-linear, relationship between teacher beliefs and their classroom practices, particularly concerning communicative approaches. Studies frequently reveal a belief-practice incongruence. As, in Asian context, Hu (2002) documented significant constraints, such as large classes and exam-oriented systems, that led Chinese teachers to perceive CLT as culturally incompatible and practically unfeasible, causing a retreat to traditional methods despite their beliefs. However, research also shows that this gap is not inevitable. Contextual factors are powerful moderators. Farrell and Kun (2008), in a case study of Singaporean teachers, showed how national exams and prescribed textbooks could override personal beliefs, forcing teachers into a "teaching to the test" mode. Conversely, supportive contexts, such as collaborative teacher communities and adequate resources, can empower teachers to align their practices more closely with their beliefs (Borg, 2015). Specific to ABLT, studies point to particular perceptual barriers. Teachers may perceive activity-based methods as time-consuming, chaotic, and less effective for direct grammar instruction (Jeon & Hahn, 2006). They may also lack confidence in their own linguistic or classroom management skills to facilitate open-ended activities (Gorsuch, 2017). These perceptions, whether grounded in reality or not, become de facto truths that guide their instructional choices.

2.4Gap in the Literature and Contribution of the Current Study

While the literature establishes the importance of teacher cognition and identifies a common belief-practice gap, there is a need for more fine-grained, qualitative explorations that capture the practical experience of ESL teachers specifically grappling with ABLT. Many existing studies are large-scale surveys or focus on CLT/TBLT in a broad sense.

An exploratory case study, as proposed, offers the depth and context-specificity to illuminate:
The precise nature of teachers' beliefs about what constitutes "learning" in an ABLT framework.
The nuanced ways in which they adapt, rather than simply adopt or reject, ABLT principles to fit their specific context and beliefs.
The personal and institutional narratives that teachers construct to justify their pedagogical decisions.
By providing a thick, descriptive account of this phenomenon, the present study will contribute a critical, emic perspective to the literature, moving beyond simply identifying a gap to explaining the complex cognitive and contextual processes that create and sustain it. This understanding is paramount for designing teacher support systems that are not only theoretically sound but also psychologically and contextually attuned.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory case study design to achieve an in-depth understanding of the beliefs and perceptions of ESL teachers regarding Activity-Based Language Teaching (ABLT). This approach is chosen as it is uniquely suited to investigating a complex, real-world phenomenon within its authentic context, where the boundaries between the phenomenon (teacher perceptions) and the context (the ESL classroom) are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018).

3.1Research Design

The study is grounded in an interpretive paradigm, which seeks to understand the subjective meanings and lived experiences of the participants. A single, bounded case study design will be utilized, with the "case" defined as a specific group of ESL teachers within a single institutional context. This design allows for a rich, thick description of the complexities inherent in their perceptions and practices.

3.2Site and Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling was used to identify information-rich participants. The study conducted at IUB ELT classroom, known for its formal adoption of a communicative curriculum that encourages ABLT. A cohort of six (6) ESL teachers with varying years of experience (from early-career to veteran) invited to participate. This variation allowed for the exploration of how perceptions may differ across career stages, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives within the single case.

3.3Data Collection Methods

To ensure methodological triangulation and enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, data was collected from three primary sources:
Semi-structured Interviews: The primary source of data was in-depth, one-on-one interviews lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. An interview protocol was guided the conversations, exploring teachers' definitions of ABLT, perceived benefits and challenges, beliefs about language learning, and the influence of contextual factors. This format allows for both consistency and the flexibility to probe emerging themes.
Classroom Observations: A minimum of two non-participant observations per teacher was conducted using a low-inference observation protocol. This focused on documenting evidence of ABLT principles in practice, instructional strategies used, and student interactions. Observations was provide a crucial counterpoint to the interview data, illuminating the relationship between stated beliefs and enacted practice.
Document Analysis: Relevant documents, including lesson plans, curriculum guides, and teaching materials, was collected and analyzed. This analysis was provide insight into the institutional expectations for ABLT and how teachers plan for and resource their activity-based lessons.

3.4Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using a systematic thematic analysis approach, following the phases outlined by Jamal et al. (2024). All interviews and observation noted transcribed verbatim. The analysis involve:

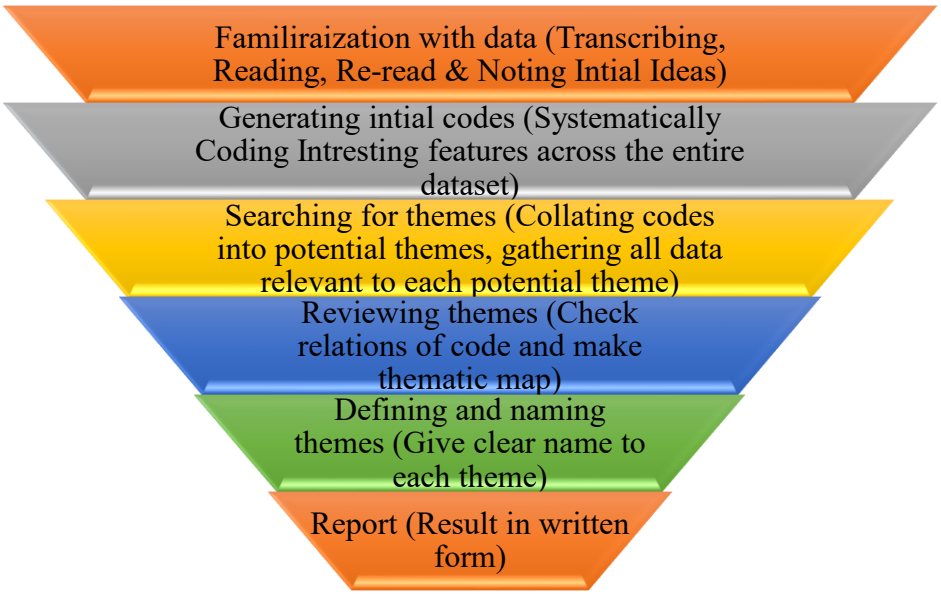

Figure 1 Data Analysis Process for Thematic Analysis

A constant comparative method was used throughout to compare new data with emerging themes, ensuring the analysis remains grounded in the participants' experiences.

Findings of the Study

Table 1 Findings of the Study Representation

Theme	Key Findings	Illustrative Quote
Conceptualization of ABLT as Learning by Doing	All six teachers conceptualized ABLT around the core principle of active student involvement. However, a spectrum of understanding emerged, from viewing it as a framework for genuine communication to perceiving it as a series of engaging grammar exercises.	**Interview Data:** "It's not just me explaining the rules. It's about setting up a situation where they need to use the language to achieve a goal." (Teacher 4). **Observation Note:** Teacher 2's "role-play" was observed to be a highly structured dialogue memorization task, indicating a more discrete, form-focused interpretation of an "activity.
Perceived Benefits: Enhanced Students Engagement	A unanimous finding across all data sources was that ABLT significantly increased student motivation and participation. Teachers reported and were observed leveraging activities to create a more dynamic and risk-tolerant classroom environment.	**Interview Data:** "The room gets loud, but it's a productive noise. You can see they are more willing to take risks and speak up." (Teacher 1). **Interview Data:** "For my quiet students, a well-paired activity gives them a safe space to talk." (Teacher 5).
Perceived Benefits: Deeper Language Processing	Teachers strongly believed that ABLT led to better long-term retention and practical language use. They connected the "use" of language in activities to the development of	**Interview Data:** "They remember the vocabulary from the role-play because they had to use it, not just memorize it for a test." (Teacher 3).

	fluency and pragmatic skills, beyond rote memorization.	**Document Analysis:** Lesson plans from 5 teachers showed a conscious effort to link target vocabulary to a communicative outcome in the main activity.
Contextual Constraints: Time and Class Size	The most frequently cited barrier across all interviews was the pressure of time—for both planning and curriculum coverage. Large, mixed-ability classes were also seen as a major impediment to effective activity implementation.	**Interview Data:** "It's a constant battle between doing a meaningful activity and the need to finish the unit before the exam next week." (Teacher 6). **Interview Data:** "In a class of 40, how can I monitor all groups effectively? It easily becomes chaos." (Teacher 2).
Facilitating Factors: Teacher Collaboration and Resources	Teachers identified collaborative planning and access to a shared bank of proven activities as the most critical support mechanism. This directly enhanced their sense of agency and readiness to implement ABLT.	**Interview Data:** "When we have time to plan together and share what works, I feel much more prepared and willing to try new things." (Teacher 4). **Document Analysis:** The institutional shared drive contained few ABLT resources, which teachers lamented in interviews.
Systemic Inconsistency: The Washback Effect	A profound challenge was the perceived misalignment between ABLT's communicative goals and the grammar-focused summative exams. This "washback" created significant tension, often pushing teachers to prioritize test preparation.	**Interview Data:** "I believe in these activities, but the final exam doesn't test their communication skills. It tests their grammar rules. So, I feel pressured to drill them." (Teacher 1). **Document Analysis:** Analysis of past exam papers confirmed a heavy emphasis on discrete-point grammar and vocabulary items, with no integrated skills assessment.

Conclusion

It is concluded that while ESL teachers hold a fundamentally positive belief system towards Activity-Based Language Teaching (ABLT), understood universally as "learning by doing" and valued for enhancing student engagement and fostering deeper language acquisition, a significant belief-practice gap persists. The translation of these beliefs into consistent practice is critically mediated by two factors: a spectrum in teacher understanding, ranging from genuine communication to form-focused exercises, and overwhelming contextual constraints. The most profound barriers include time pressure, large classes, and a debilitating systemic misalignment where grammar-focused exams create a "washback effect," forcing teachers to prioritize test preparation. Ultimately, the study underscores that bridging this gap requires systemic change, with collaborative planning and shared resources identified as a crucial facilitator for empowering teachers to align their practices with their beliefs.

Recommendations of the Study

On the basis of findings of the study following recommendations are given for all stakeholders including researcher to conduct research in future.
Reform high-stakes assessment systems to align with ABLT principles, integrating authentic evaluations like portfolios and oral proficiency interviews to counteract the limiting "washback effect" of grammar-focused exams.
Provide structural support for teachers by allocating dedicated time for collaborative planning and working to reduce class sizes, thereby

addressing the critical constraints of time pressure and large, mixed-ability classes.

Transform professional development from theoretical workshops into ongoing, job-embedded training through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), enabling teachers to collaboratively design, implement, and refine ABLT practices.

Develop and maintain a centralized, institutional resource bank of vetted ABLT materials to reduce individual planning time and ensure consistent access to high-quality, ready-to-use activities.

Direct future research towards longitudinal and intervention-based studies that investigate the long-term impact of systemic changes on classroom practice and student outcomes, moving from identifying problems to testing practical solutions.

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