

Teachers' Beliefs and Classroom Management in EFL Primary Classrooms: Evidence from Hanoi

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the interplay between teachers' beliefs and classroom management. This study explores the relationship between teachers' beliefs and classroom management practices in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) primary education in Vietnam, with a focus on how teachers conceptualize and enact effective management strategies in real classroom contexts. A mixed-methods design was employed, combining quantitative data from a questionnaire administered to 60 primary EFL teachers in Hanoi with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The findings indicate that teachers predominantly favor an authoritative approach characterized by clear rules, structured instructional procedures, and active monitoring, alongside efforts to foster a supportive and engaging learning environment. However, the enactment of these practices is significantly shaped by contextual constraints, including large class sizes, diverse student proficiency levels, limited instructional time, and institutional expectations, which often lead teachers to adopt more controlling strategies to maintain discipline and instructional effectiveness. The results further show that teachers' beliefs function as a central framework guiding pedagogical decision-making, while remaining flexible and responsive to situational demands. These findings highlight the dynamic interplay between belief and practice and underscore the need for teacher education and professional development programs that are responsive to contextual realities and support teachers in implementing effective and adaptive classroom management strategies.

Keywords: teachers' beliefs; classroom management; EFL; primary education; teaching practices

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, English has assumed an increasingly important role in the Vietnamese education system, particularly in the context of global integration and the growing demand for early foreign language competence (Nguyen & Tran, 2024). At the primary level, English is no longer treated simply as an academic subject but as a foundation for developing communicative competence, learner confidence, and sustained motivation for future language learning (Pinter, 2017). Despite ongoing curriculum reforms and increased attention to teacher training, the effectiveness of EFL instruction at this level remains inconsistent. This suggests that factors beyond curriculum design and teachers' subject knowledge, especially classroom processes, play a crucial role in shaping learning outcomes.

Classroom management is widely recognized as one of the most influential factors affecting teaching effectiveness. In primary EFL classrooms, teachers must deal with a range of context-specific challenges, including mixed levels of language proficiency, limited attention spans, high levels of physical activity, and the need for continuous interaction (Schauer, 2019). In such environments, classroom management involves more than maintaining discipline. It requires teachers to create a supportive and engaging learning atmosphere that encourages participation and facilitates meaningful language use (Martella et al., 2021). However, how teachers conceptualize and implement classroom management strategies in these contexts remains insufficiently explored.

From a theoretical perspective, teacher cognition, particularly teachers' beliefs, plays a central role in shaping instructional practices. Teachers' decisions in the classroom are influenced not only by formal training but also by their beliefs about effective teaching and appropriate student behavior (Borg, 2019). In the context of classroom management, these beliefs guide the selection and implementation of different management styles. However, previous research has consistently shown that there is often a gap between what teachers believe and what they actually do in practice. While teachers may express a preference for learner-centered and supportive approaches, their classroom practices may become more controlling due to contextual constraints such as large class sizes, institutional expectations, and time pressure (Emery et al., 2021).

Although a substantial body of research has examined teacher beliefs and classroom management, several important gaps remain. First, many studies have treated beliefs and practices as separate constructs rather than examining their relationship in an integrated manner. Second, much of the existing research has been conducted in Western or secondary education contexts, which limits its applicability to primary EFL settings in Vietnam. Third, there is a lack of in-depth analysis of how contextual factors influence the alignment or misalignment between teachers' beliefs and their actual classroom practices. As a result, current research tends to be descriptive and does not fully explain the underlying reasons for discrepancies between belief and practice.

To address these gaps, the present study investigates both teachers' beliefs about effective classroom management styles and their actual implementation in primary EFL classrooms in Hanoi. The study is guided by two research questions: (1) What classroom management styles do teachers perceive as effective? and (2) How are these styles implemented in actual classroom practice? By examining these questions together, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive and contextually grounded understanding of the relationship between teacher cognition and classroom practice.

This study makes both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it extends existing research on teacher cognition by providing empirical evidence on the interaction between beliefs and practices in a specific educational context. It also contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the belief and practice relationship in classroom management. Practically, the findings are expected to inform teacher education programs, school administrators, and policymakers by identifying key factors that influence classroom management practices. This, in turn, can support the development of more effective and context-sensitive professional training for primary EFL teachers in Vietnam.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teachers' beliefs

Teachers' beliefs are commonly defined as the set of assumptions, perceptions, and personal theories that educators hold and use as a framework for interpreting and guiding their instructional practices (Borg, 2019). These beliefs are shaped by multiple sources, including prior learning experiences, teacher education, professional contexts, and ongoing interactions with students and colleagues. Unlike formal pedagogical knowledge, beliefs are often implicit, experience-based, and resistant to change, which makes them a powerful influence on teachers' decision-making processes.

In the field of language teaching, teachers' beliefs play a particularly significant role because they shape how teachers conceptualize language learning, learner roles, and effective classroom environments. For example, teachers who view young learners as needing strong guidance may favor structured and controlled classroom environments. In contrast, those who perceive learning as an active and social process are more likely to promote participation and learner autonomy.

However, existing research presents differing perspectives on the stability and impact of teachers' beliefs. Some studies suggest that beliefs are relatively stable and consistently guide practice (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023), while others indicate that beliefs are dynamic and may be reshaped by contextual pressures and teaching experience (Huang et al., 2021). This inconsistency highlights the need for more context-sensitive research that examines not only what teachers believe but also how those beliefs operate in real classroom settings. In

particular, there is limited research that explicitly connects teachers' beliefs about classroom management with their enacted practices in primary EFL contexts.

Teaching practices

Teaching practices refer to the observable actions and strategies that teachers employ in their daily classroom activities, including organizing instruction, managing student behavior, facilitating interaction, and maintaining the flow of lessons (Bonna, 2023). As the practical manifestation of teaching, these practices reflect teachers' real-time responses to instructional demands and classroom dynamics.

Although teaching practices are often assumed to reflect teachers' beliefs, research has shown that this relationship is not always straightforward. Teachers may express a preference for student-centered and supportive approaches, yet their actual practices may shift toward more directive or controlling strategies due to contextual constraints such as large class sizes, time limitations, and institutional expectations (Emery et al., 2021).

This divergence has led to increasing recognition that teaching should be understood as an adaptive process rather than a direct application of beliefs. Consequently, examining teaching practices in isolation is insufficient. A more comprehensive understanding requires analyzing how practices are shaped through the interaction between individual cognition and contextual factors. This perspective is particularly relevant for primary EFL classrooms, where situational demands are often complex and unpredictable.

Classroom management in EFL primary education

Classroom management is a multifaceted concept that extends beyond maintaining discipline to include the strategies teachers use to create and sustain an effective learning environment (Caldera et al., 2020). In EFL primary classrooms, classroom management also involves supporting language use, maintaining student engagement, and addressing diverse learner needs, including variations in proficiency and motivation (Schauer, 2019).

To provide a structured analytical framework, classroom management in this study is conceptualized across three interrelated dimensions. Instructional management focuses on the organization of teaching activities, materials, time, and lesson structure. People management emphasizes the development of positive teacher-student relationships, learner motivation, and classroom climate. Behavior management involves establishing rules, maintaining discipline, and reinforcing appropriate behavior (Martella et al., 2021).

While these dimensions are widely acknowledged in the literature, previous studies have often examined them separately or without explicitly linking them to teachers' underlying beliefs. This creates a gap in understanding how different aspects of classroom management are influenced by teachers' cognitive frameworks, particularly in primary EFL contexts where both pedagogical and behavioral demands are high.

Classroom management styles

To analyze classroom management approaches, this study adopts Baumrind's typology, which identifies four primary styles: authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, and indulgent (Baumrind, 1966). This framework has been widely applied in educational research due to its ability to capture variations in control and responsiveness.

The authoritarian style is characterized by high control and low responsiveness, with a strong emphasis on discipline, obedience, and teacher authority. In contrast, the authoritative style combines clear expectations with supportive interactions, encouraging student participation while maintaining structure. This style is often associated with positive educational outcomes because it balances control and autonomy (Martella et al., 2021).

The permissive and indulgent styles, on the other hand, involve lower levels of control. Permissive approaches provide students with considerable freedom but may lack sufficient structure, while indulgent approaches emphasize emotional support and responsiveness but may struggle to maintain discipline.

Despite the widespread use of this typology, there is ongoing debate regarding its applicability across different cultural and educational contexts. In particular, the effectiveness and interpretation of these styles may vary depending on socio-cultural expectations, which suggests the need to examine how such frameworks operate in specific settings such as Vietnamese primary schools.

The role of teachers' beliefs in shaping classroom management styles

Teachers' beliefs play a central role in shaping their classroom management styles, as they influence how teachers interpret classroom situations and select appropriate strategies (Borg, 2003, 2019). Teachers who prioritize discipline and structure are more likely to adopt control-oriented approaches, whereas those who value autonomy and engagement tend to implement more flexible and student-centered practices.

However, the relationship between beliefs and classroom management styles is not linear. It is mediated by contextual factors such as institutional policies, classroom conditions, and cultural expectations (Emery et al., 2021). This reflects a complex interaction in which teachers continuously negotiate between their beliefs and the practical realities of their teaching environments.

In the Vietnamese context, cultural values such as respect for authority and hierarchical relationships may influence teachers' classroom management decisions. Even when teachers express support for learner-centered approaches, they may still maintain a relatively high level of control to ensure order and efficiency in the classroom (Nguyen & Tran, 2024).

Despite recognition of this complexity, there remains a lack of empirical research that systematically examines how teachers' beliefs translate into specific classroom management styles within Vietnamese primary EFL classrooms. In particular, limited attention has been paid to the alignment between teachers' stated beliefs and their actual practices across different dimensions of classroom management. Addressing this gap is essential for developing a more comprehensive understanding of how teacher cognition operates within context-specific constraints.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of teachers' beliefs and their classroom management practices. Specifically, an explanatory sequential design was employed, in which quantitative data were collected and analyzed first, followed by qualitative data to explain and elaborate on the initial findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This design is particularly suitable for examining the relationship between teachers' stated beliefs and their actual practices, as it allows for both generalization and in-depth interpretation.

Research context and participants

The study was conducted in Hanoi, Vietnam, and focuses on teachers of EFL at the primary level. A total of 60 teachers participated in the questionnaire phase. This sample size is considered appropriate for identifying general patterns in teachers' beliefs within a specific educational context, while remaining feasible for detailed analysis.

Participants were selected using a convenience sampling method, based on accessibility and willingness to participate. Although this method may limit the generalizability of the findings, it is suitable for exploratory research aiming to generate context-specific insights. All participants were actively teaching in primary classrooms, where they regularly encounter challenges related to classroom management, including maintaining student engagement, handling diverse proficiency levels, and ensuring effective lesson flow.

For the qualitative phase, 6 participants were purposely selected from the initial sample to participate in semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The selection aimed to include teachers with varying levels of experience and differing belief profiles, in order to capture a range of perspectives and practices. This

sampling strategy supports a more nuanced examination of the alignment between beliefs and classroom behaviors.

Data collection instruments

Three main instruments were used to collect data in this study.

First, a structured questionnaire was designed to measure teachers' beliefs about classroom management styles. The instrument was adapted from established frameworks on classroom management and teacher beliefs, ensuring alignment with the constructs under investigation. The questionnaire included items covering key dimensions such as instructional control, student participation, behavior regulation, decision-making authority, and responsiveness to learners' needs. A pilot study was conducted with a small group of teachers to refine item clarity and ensure content validity. The internal consistency of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, which indicated acceptable reliability.

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore teachers' perspectives in greater depth. The interview protocol focused on teachers' interpretations of effective classroom management, the challenges they face in practice, and the factors influencing any discrepancies between their beliefs and actions (Roulston & Choi, 2018). This format allowed for flexibility in probing participants' responses while maintaining consistency across interviews.

Third, classroom observations were carried out to capture teachers' actual classroom management practices in authentic instructional settings. An observation checklist was developed based on the three dimensions of classroom management adopted in this study: instructional, people, and behavior management. This instrument enabled systematic documentation of observable teaching behaviors and provided direct evidence for examining the alignment between reported beliefs and enacted practices (Coe et al., 2025).

Data collection procedures

Data collection was conducted in two sequential phases. In the first phase, the questionnaire was distributed to 60 teachers and collected within a specified timeframe. The responses were then analyzed to identify general trends and patterns in teachers' beliefs.

In the second phase, qualitative data were collected through interviews and classroom observations. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on participants' availability, and were audio-recorded with consent. Classroom observations were scheduled in advance and carried out during regular teaching sessions to ensure naturalistic data collection. Field notes were taken to complement the observation checklist.

Data analysis procedures

Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean scores and standard deviations, to identify dominant patterns in teachers' beliefs. These results provided a baseline for further qualitative exploration.

Qualitative data from interviews and observations were analyzed using thematic analysis. Codes were developed both deductively, based on the theoretical framework, and inductively, emerging from the data. The themes were then compared with the quantitative findings through a process of triangulation.

This integrative analysis allows for the identification of convergence, where beliefs and practices align, as well as divergence, where discrepancies occur. By combining multiple data sources, the study enhances the credibility and depth of its findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Research ethics

The study adheres to established ethical principles in educational research. Participation was voluntary, and all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their right to withdraw

at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by removing identifying information from the data. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, including for classroom observations. All data were used solely for research purposes and stored securely to protect participants' privacy (Coe et al., 2025).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Trends in teachers' beliefs about classroom management styles

Descriptive statistical analysis reveals that primary EFL teachers in Hanoi demonstrate a strong preference for structured and supportive approaches to classroom management, consistent with the characteristics of the authoritative style. Table 1 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for selected belief items.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of classroom management belief items

No.	Item Description	Mean	SD
1	Rewarding appropriate student behavior	4.02	0.65
2	Setting time limits for classroom activities	3.90	0.70
3	Continuously monitoring students during tasks	3.88	0.68
4	Teacher-led decisions on lesson content and tasks	3.82	0.72
5	Managing transitions between activities	3.80	0.69
6	Providing structured guidance during group work	3.78	0.71

All items report relatively high mean scores, indicating that teachers place strong emphasis on organization, clarity, and instructional control. This pattern suggests that classroom management is conceptualized as a core component of effective teaching rather than merely a mechanism for maintaining discipline. Such a perspective is consistent with the view that effective management supports both instructional delivery and student engagement (Bonna, 2023).

At the same time, additional survey items indicate moderate support for student participation in rule-setting and classroom decision-making. This finding points to a balanced orientation in which teachers value both control and student involvement. This combination reflects key characteristics of the authoritative classroom management style, which integrates structure with responsiveness and has been widely associated with positive learning outcomes (Martella et al., 2021).

Evidence of authoritarian tendencies in practice

Despite the overall preference for an authoritative approach, both quantitative and qualitative data reveal the presence of more control-oriented tendencies. Survey responses show consistent agreement with practices such as explicitly establishing rules and consequences, maintaining close supervision, and intervening promptly in cases of misbehavior.

Qualitative findings provide further insight into how these tendencies are enacted in practice. During interviews, teachers frequently emphasized the need to maintain order and ensure lesson efficiency. Classroom observations confirm that teachers often adopt directive strategies, particularly during transitions, group work, and situations where disruptions are likely to occur.

This pattern indicates that teachers do not rigidly adhere to a single classroom management style. Instead, they employ a flexible combination of strategies, incorporating more controlling approaches when necessary to maintain instructional flow. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that teachers adapt their

practices in response to situational demands rather than strictly following predetermined beliefs (Emery et al., 2021).

The belief and practice relationship

A central finding of the study is the partial alignment between teachers' stated beliefs and their observed classroom practices. While teachers consistently express support for balanced and supportive management approaches, their actual practices do not always fully reflect these orientations.

Importantly, this divergence appears to be systematically shaped by contextual factors rather than resulting from inconsistency in teachers' thinking. Large class sizes limit opportunities for individualized support and participatory management. Differences in students' language proficiency and behavior increase the need for clarity and control. In addition, time constraints and curricular demands prioritize efficiency, often reducing opportunities for extended interaction. Cultural and institutional expectations further reinforce the teacher's role as an authority figure (Nguyen & Tran, 2024).

These findings suggest that classroom management practices emerge from an ongoing process of negotiation in which teachers balance their pedagogical beliefs with the practical realities of their teaching context. This supports the view that teaching is an adaptive and context-responsive activity, rather than a direct translation of beliefs into practice (Borg, 2003).

Integrated interpretation and implications

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings provides a more comprehensive account of classroom management in primary EFL settings. The results demonstrate convergence in teachers' preference for structured and supportive approaches, alongside divergence in the increased use of control-oriented strategies in practice. Qualitative evidence helps explain this pattern by revealing the contextual constraints that shape teachers' decision-making processes.

From an analytical perspective, the coexistence of different management strategies should not be interpreted as inconsistency. Rather, it reflects teachers' professional capacity to respond flexibly to complex and dynamic classroom conditions. This challenges simplified categorizations of classroom management styles and highlights the need to conceptualize teaching as a context-sensitive process.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that teacher education and professional development programs should move beyond presenting classroom management styles as fixed models. Instead, they should focus on developing teachers' ability to critically reflect on their beliefs, recognize contextual influences, and adapt their strategies accordingly. Enhancing this adaptive capacity is essential for bridging the gap between beliefs and practices and for improving classroom management in primary EFL contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a nuanced understanding of the relationship between teachers' beliefs and classroom management practices in primary EFL classrooms in Hanoi, highlighting both alignment and divergence within a context-specific framework.

The findings indicate that teachers predominantly endorse the authoritative classroom management style, valuing a balance between structured control and supportive interaction. This preference reflects an understanding of classroom management as not only maintaining order but also fostering a positive and engaging learning environment. Teachers demonstrate a strong orientation toward organization, clarity, and active monitoring, while also recognizing the importance of student participation and encouragement.

However, the study also reveals that classroom practices do not always fully correspond to these stated beliefs. In practice, teachers frequently incorporate more control-oriented strategies to address immediate classroom demands. This results in a hybrid approach to classroom management, in which elements of different styles are

combined rather than applied in a fixed manner. Such patterns suggest that teaching practices are shaped by situational needs rather than solely by pre-existing beliefs.

Importantly, the divergence between beliefs and practices is not arbitrary but is systematically influenced by contextual factors. Large class sizes, differences in students' language proficiency, time constraints, and institutional as well as cultural expectations all play a significant role in shaping teachers' decisions. These factors create conditions in which teachers must continuously adjust their strategies to maintain both instructional effectiveness and classroom stability.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature on teacher cognition by demonstrating that the relationship between beliefs and practices is dynamic and mediated by context. It extends existing research by providing empirical evidence from a primary EFL setting in Vietnam, where cultural and institutional conditions shape classroom management in distinctive ways. Rather than viewing inconsistencies as deficiencies, the findings support an interpretation of teaching as an adaptive and context-responsive process.

From a practical perspective, the study highlights the need for teacher education and professional development programs to move beyond presenting classroom management styles as fixed models. Instead, such programs should support teachers in developing the capacity to critically reflect on their beliefs, understand contextual constraints, and flexibly adapt their strategies to meet diverse classroom demands.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. The use of convenience sampling may limit the generalizability of the findings, and the sample size, while appropriate for exploratory analysis, does not represent all primary EFL teachers in Vietnam. In addition, the study focuses on a specific urban context, which may differ from rural or less-resourced settings.

Future research could expand the scope by including a larger and more diverse sample, as well as by conducting longitudinal studies to examine how teachers' beliefs and practices evolve over time. Further investigation into the role of institutional policies and professional development interventions would also provide valuable insights into how the gap between beliefs and practices can be more effectively addressed.

In conclusion, this study repositions classroom management as a dynamic and context-sensitive aspect of teaching, shaped by the interaction between teacher cognition and classroom realities. By highlighting the complexity of the belief and practice relationship, it offers both theoretical insights and practical directions for improving classroom management in primary EFL education.

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