

TEACHERS' BELIEFS

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Abstract

This study explores the sources of teachers' beliefs about different elements that play a key role in the learning/teaching process. It includes the results from a research project which evidences that what teachers' claim to believe does not necessarily match their classroom practices. Throughout this work the idea of being aware of one's beliefs is emphasized as a means for professional empowerment.

Introduction

Teaching is a dynamic process. Teachers should often engage in activities which provide them with new insights into what and how to teach. A major component in estimating the changes that need to be implemented by instructors is reflection. Through reflection, teachers can "become aware of their beliefs and views of the world, which lead them into the notion of reflective practitioner" (Williams & Burden p. 53).

By means of reflection, teachers can become aware of their beliefs and build their actual classwork around them. However, some authors have suggested that there is a mismatch between teachers' beliefs and their actions. Chris Argyris and Donald Schon (cited in Williams & Burden) claim that "there is almost always a discrepancy between what professionals say they believe in and the ways in which they act" (pp. 53-54).

The clash mentioned above has several implications for the language teachers. For one thing, if a teacher is not certain about his beliefs, he will be likely to stick to teaching approaches that may not be the most appropriate for his learners. Also, if a teacher is unaware of his beliefs, he will

not be able to evaluate his performance according to reliable criteria. Thus, he will hinder his own opportunities to grow as a professional and become a more effective instructor.

The current project is designed to find out what teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning are. The outcome of this study will serve as the baseline for further reflections and development of a new course of action. At the micro level, it may help teachers "re-focus their own beliefs and attitudes" (Gardner & Miller p. 49). At the macro level, it will improve English as a foreign language instruction through raising awareness about teacher's beliefs.

Review of the literature

Several authors have asserted that teaching does not take place in a vacuum. For this reason, it is necessary to stress the influence of the environment on the teacher. Richards (1990) says that "a teacher's actions are influenced by intentions in the social setting and by the beliefs and chains of reasoning that are held before and after the occurrence of the action" (p. 203). The influences on the teacher may come from different sources, which I refer to below.

Richards and Lockhart (1996) claim that "teachers' beliefs systems are founded on the goals, values and beliefs teachers hold in relation to the content and process of teaching, and their understanding of the systems in which they work and their roles within it" (p. 30). These experts state that belief systems serve as the background for all the decision making and actions that teachers carry out.



Concerning the sources of teachers' beliefs, authors such as Kindsvatter, Willen, and Ishler mentioned in Richards & Lockhart state that teachers' beliefs derive from:

1. Their own experience as language learners:

Whether consciously or not, teachers have a natural tendency to teach their pupils in the same way that they were taught when they were students.

2. Experience of what works best:

Most teachers agree that this is the most common source for their beliefs. Based on experience, teachers are able to make decisions as to what to keep if it is successful and what to discard if it has limited use.

3. Established practice:

This aspect relates to the teaching styles and practices preferred by a particular school, institution, or group of teachers.

4. Personality factors:

Teachers hold personal preferences for teaching patterns, arrangements, and types of activities, to name a few. These preferences depend on the teacher's personality and influence teaching. For instance, a teacher who is very outgoing will probably like his students to perform role-plays and simulations.

5. Educationally based or research-based principles:

Teachers' beliefs may be shaped depending on their education and on-going training. They can vary what they do in the classroom depending on the theoretical perspectives they are in touch with.

6. Principles derived from an approach or method:

Teachers may believe in the effectiveness of a particular approach or method of teaching and try to implement it in the classroom

Taxonomy of Teachers' Beliefs

I. Beliefs about learning

Gow and Kember (cited in Williams & Burden) suggest that most approaches to learning can be classified in two groups, reproductive approaches and meaning approaches.

A. Reproductive Approaches

Learning is...

1. a quantitative increase in knowledge,
2. memorization,
3. acquisition of facts, procedures, etc. which can be retained and/or put into practice.

B. Meaning Approaches

Learning is...

1. the abstraction of meaning,
2. an interpretative process aimed at the understanding of reality,
3. some form of personal change.

This classification does not intend to label approaches as belonging to either one or the other group. Actually, as the authors claim, most approaches to learning have overlapping characteristics. These characteristics place teachers' beliefs at different points in several schools of thought, such as behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism.

II. Beliefs about teaching

Johnson (cited in Richards and Lockhart, 1996) conducted a study in which he identified three different approaches that teachers have about teaching.

1. Skills-based approach

Focuses on the development of the macro skills (speaking, writing, listening, and reading).

2. Rule-based approach

Emphasizes the importance of grammatical rules and a conscious understanding of the language system.

3. Function-based approach

Focuses on interactive communication and cooperative learning, and the ability to function in "real" situations.

The beliefs about teaching will obviously differ significantly from teacher to teacher. Every professional in the field of EFL teaching brings to the classroom his own assumptions and criteria for judging roles, methods, resources, classroom management, qualities of good teacher, and many other aspects related to classroom dynamics be it internal or external.

III. Beliefs about learners

Roland Meighan (cited in Williams & Burden) claims that learners can be classified into two groups depending on the roles assigned to them by teachers. When the classroom is teacher-centered, the learners will be distributed along the categories of resisters, receptacles, raw material, and clients. On the other hand, if the instruction is learner-centered, students will be seen as partners, individual explorers, and democratic explorers.

IV. Beliefs about teachers themselves

The language teacher will supposedly behave according to his beliefs on what a teacher should be. For instance, a humanistic teacher will design his classes in a way such that it facilitates the development of his students as a whole. On the contrary, a behaviorism-oriented teacher will promote audiolingualism in his classroom.

Within this heading, we may also include the beliefs that teachers have about themselves as professionals. In reflecting about this aspect, Lewis (cited in Richards & Lockhart) provides questions such as:

1. How would you characterize English teaching?
2. What changes are necessary in your profession?
3. What kind of training do teachers need?

V. Beliefs about English

The significance of English varies from person to person. English may be seen as a means to make

money, the language of English literature, a sign of colonialism, and many other conceptions. The beliefs about English are always influenced by the culture. Richards and Lockhart (1996) advice that people should not base their beliefs about the target language culture on stereotypical impressions. The same authors also observe that it is necessary to bear in mind that the "underlying beliefs teachers hold about English will influence the attitudes towards teaching it."

The study

General objective:

Identify teachers' and students' beliefs concerning EFL instruction

Specific objectives:

1. Pinpoint commonalties between teachers' and students' beliefs
2. Determine if there is a gap between teachers' beliefs and their practices
3. Identify the way in which teacher's beliefs relate to the role of reflective practitioners.

Subjects:

Twenty teachers are included in this study. They are divided into two groups depending on their workplace and target students. Group 1 is made up of ten teachers from a language institute. Six of them are female and four are male. Five teachers have more than 7 years of experience. The other 5 subjects have 4 years or less, being a year and a half the minimum. These teachers work with young people and with adults regardless of their proficiency level in English. The second group also consists of ten subjects. Nine of them are female and only one is a man. They all work at bilingual primary schools in either San José or Heredia. Only 3 of these teachers have more than 5 years teaching. The other 7 instructors have from 1 to 3 years of experience.

Instruments

Data collection was carried out by means of 2 surveys found in Richards and Lockhart's *Reflective Teaching in Second Language Classrooms* (pp. 48-51).

1. Teachers' Beliefs Inventory 1: Approaches to ESL Instruction

This survey contains 14 statements. The subjects were asked to choose the 5 statements that more closely represented their beliefs about English instruction.

Original Source: K. Johnson (1992) "The relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices during literacy instruction for non-native speakers of English," *Journal of Reading Behavior* 24: 83-108.

(See Appendix 1)

2. Teachers' Beliefs Inventory 2: beliefs about language learning

This survey contains 23 statements. The teachers expressed their beliefs about language learning by agreeing or disagreeing with the proposed statements.

Original Source: Adaptation from E. Horwitz, "Surveying student beliefs about language learning" in Anita Wenden and Joan Robin, *Learner Strategies in Language Learning* 1987, pp. 127-128

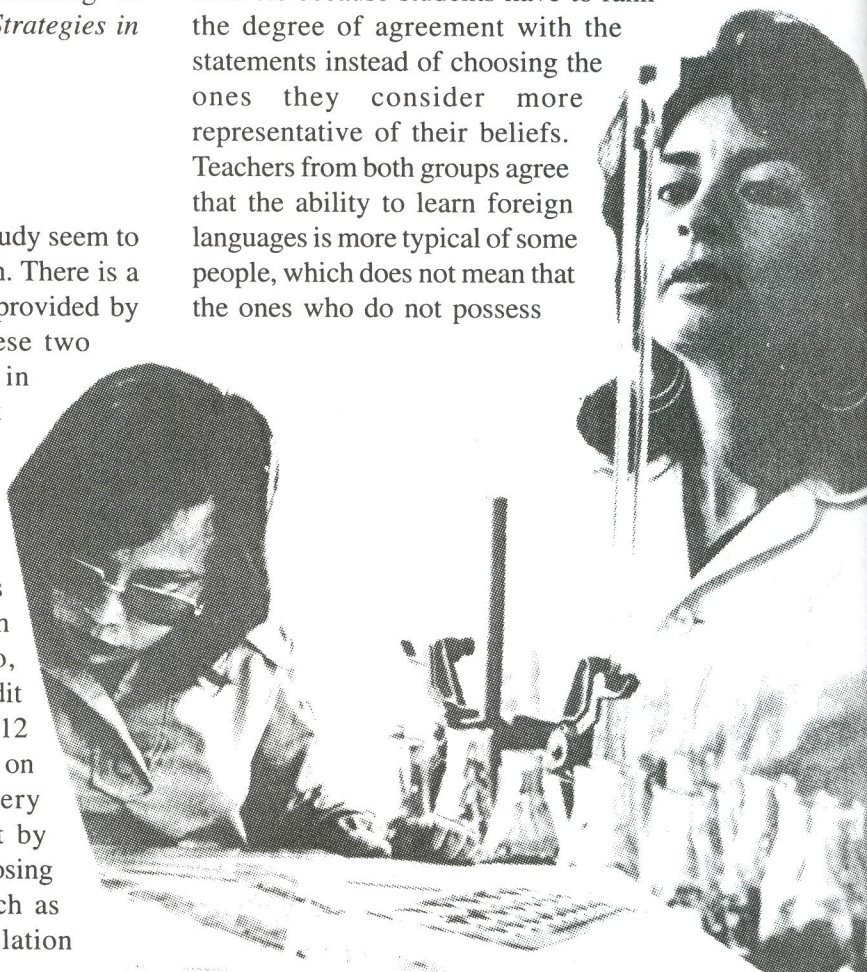
(See Appendix 2)

Analysis of the Results

The two groups considered in this study seem to share several beliefs about EFL instruction. There is a striking correlation between the answers provided by both groups to statements 7 and 9. These two statements got the highest frequencies in groups one and two. Statement 7 is about giving the students a lot of practice to help them overcome their oral mistakes. Statement 9 refers to the importance of focusing on meaning and not on accuracy. This means that the majority of the teachers hold beliefs that support the implementation of the communicative approach. Also, teachers from both groups do not give credit to statements 1 and 12. Statements 1 and 12 relate to the teaching of English focused on grammar and constant drilling in a very controlled environment. It is clear that by rejecting these statements, teachers are opposing behaviorism-derived methodologies, such as audiolingualism and the grammar translation

method. To my surprise, in spite of the different backgrounds of the teachers from both groups, preference for the communicative approach and rejection to behaviorism are salient shared beliefs. The only relevant exception to this common ground is evident in statement 3. Nine out of ten teachers from the language institute chose statement 3 as one of their most representative beliefs. Thus, teachers from this group believe that students should focus more on what to say and not how to say it. On the contrary, only one primary school teacher considers this statement representative of his beliefs. However, this does not mean that primary school teachers do not think that focusing on meaning is more important than accuracy. As mentioned above, statements 7 and 9, chosen by most of the primary school teachers indicate the opposite of their answer to statement 3. This clarification is necessary in order to avoid misleading interpretations due to the somehow contradictory data.

The second inventory provides a wider range of answers because students have to rank the degree of agreement with the statements instead of choosing the ones they consider more representative of their beliefs. Teachers from both groups agree that the ability to learn foreign languages is more typical of some people, which does not mean that the ones who do not possess



this special ability cannot develop it. Teachers also believe that the best environment to learn the language is an English-speaking country. If this is not possible, lots of repetition and practice are to be encouraged by the teacher in an EFL classroom. This seems to contradict the communicative-oriented beliefs derived from the first inventory. Yet, teachers' view of repetition is that of a component that is useful as long as it is not overused.

English instructors from group 1 and group 2 disagree about similar aspects too, for instance, they give high numbers to indicate disagreement with statements 7, 15 and 16. This means that they do not consider grammar the key element in learning a foreign language. Also, they claim to respect the silent period and help students understand the language instead of pushing them to speak it.

Dissimilarities also derived from the study. For example, more teachers from the Language Institute than Primary School teachers believe that learning a foreign language is different from learning any other subject. Also, teachers from the language institute, consider English a language of medium difficulty, while primary school teachers have a split opinion. Some of them think that English is a difficult language, and others say that it is a language of medium difficulty. Moreover, on statement 23 a significant difference stands out. Half of the teachers from the Language Institute believe that it is possible to learn English with an-hour-a-day instruction for 3-5 years. In contrast, most of the primary school teachers claim that you cannot learn a language in one hour a day.

Conclusions

Teachers' beliefs are central components in the active decision-making process of teaching. It is necessary that teachers be aware of their beliefs because they influence all the aspects related to English

instruction. As Kral (1994) states "the more interest teachers have in gaining awareness of how they teach, and the more informed they become about what it is that they do in their classroom and the impact this has on their students, the more freedom they will have to direct their own teaching toward successful student learning" (45).

As seen above, some of the beliefs teachers hold are sometimes contradictory. This may create a high level of uncertainty in the classroom. If teachers themselves are not aware of what it is that they want and how they want to achieve it, they cannot expect the students to reach a high level of command in the language. However, it is important to point out that beliefs are not fixed. Teachers, as responsible professionals, have to devote more effort to first becoming aware of what their beliefs are and second taking a course of action that promotes holistic development of themselves and their students, even if this process implies changing their beliefs.

References

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APPENDIX 1

Name: _____ Workplace: _____
Level: _____ # Years Teaching: _____

Dear Colleague:

Thank you for your contribution to this study. I assure you that all the information you provide will be confidential. Your name will not appear in the report of the study. You will be assigned a subject number for the sake of analysis of the results.

Teachers' Beliefs Inventory

Directions: Please read all 14 statements. Then select 5 statements that most closely reflect your beliefs about how English as a second language is learned and how ESL should be taught (please circle your answers).

1. Language can be thought of as a set of grammatical structures, which are learned consciously and controlled by the language learner.
2. As long as ESL students understand what they are saying, they are actually learning the language.
3. When ESL students make oral errors, it helps to correct them and later teach a short lesson explaining why they made that mistake.
4. As long as ESL students listen to, practice, and remember the language which native speaker use, they are actually learning the language.
5. ESL students generally need to understand the grammatical rules of English in order to become fluent in the language.
6. When ESL students make oral errors, it usually helps them to provide them with lots of oral practice with the language patterns which seem to cause them difficulty.
7. Language can be taught of as meaningful communication and is learned subconsciously in non-academic, social situations.
8. If ESL students understand some of the basis grammatical rules of the language they can usually create lots of new sentences on their own.
9. Usually it is more important for ESL students to focus on what they are trying to say and not how to say it.
10. If ESL students practice the language patterns of native speakers they can make up new sentences based on those language patterns which they have already practiced.
11. It is important to provide clear, frequent, precise presentations of grammatical structures during English language instruction.
12. Language can be described as a set of behaviours which are mastered through lots of drill and practice with the language patterns of native speakers.
13. When ESL students make oral errors, it is best to ignore them, as long as you can understand what they are trying to say.
14. ESL students usually need to master some of the basic listenig and speaking skills before they can begin to read and write.

APPENDIX 2

Teachers' Beliefs Inventory About Language Learning

For each statement indicate if you agree or disagree (1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=disagree, 4=strongly disagree). For 22 and 23 circle the letter

STATEMENT	RATING			
	1	2	3	4
1. It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.				
2. Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages.				
3. Some languages are easier to learn than others.				
4. People from my country are good at learning foreign languages.				
5. It is important to speak English with excellent pronunciation.				
6. It is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures in order to speak English.				
7. You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly.				
8. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.				
9. People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning a foreign language.				
10. It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country.				
11. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary words.				
12. It is important to repeat and practice a lot.				
13. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.				
14. If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on.				
15. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar.				
16. It is easier to speak than to understand a foreign language.				
17. It is important to practice with cassette tapes.				
18. Learning a foreign language is different than learning other academic subjects.				
19. People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.				
20. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.				
21. It is easier to read and write in English than to speak and understand it.				
22. English is:				
a) a difficult language				
b) a language of medium difficulty				
c) an easy language				
d) a very easy language				
23. If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take him/her to speak the language very well?				
a) less than a year				
b) 1-2 years				
c) 3-5 years				
d) 5-10 years				
e) you can't learn-				