

Investigating Teacher Beliefs in TESOL

INTRODUCTION

This article reports on research into the beliefs of a group of teachers working in the field of TESOL, specifically teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). In particular, the aim was to see if it is possible to identify a coherent system of beliefs about teaching and learning that may account for different approaches to teaching.

The area of teacher beliefs is a relatively new field, which dates back more or less to the mid-seventies (Freeman, 2002) in mainstream education but is even more recent in TESOL (Borg, 2003). Although previous research has produced a rather mixed picture, Johnson (1994:439) identifies three basic assumptions underlying this growing body of research:

- Teachers' beliefs have an effect on what teachers do in the classroom insofar as beliefs affect perception and judgment.
- Teachers' beliefs are fundamental in learning to teach in that they influence how new information about learning and teaching is interpreted and how it becomes classroom practice.
- Understanding teachers' beliefs has an important role to play in improving teacher education.

However, research in this area has also shown that beliefs can be remarkably resistant to change and that teacher education programs may have little real effect on a teacher's classroom behaviour (see for example, Freeman 1991; Gutiérrez Almarza, 1996; Peacock, 2001). Moreover, working with beliefs on teacher education programmes may not be straightforward, given that it would seem that these beliefs tend to be individualised and context dependant (Cumming, 1989:46-47 cited in Burns,

1992:57-58).

PARTICIPANTS AND SETTING

Five teachers participated in the study. All the teachers, three women and two men, were British and their first language was English. They ranged in age from late twenties to mid-forties and all taught adult learners, although in different contexts. Two teachers, (Pam and Simon¹) taught academic English at British universities; three teachers (Charlotte, Linda and Tony), taught general English to adults in a university language centre in Italy. Charlotte and Linda also taught English to undergraduates in an Italian university.

The teachers differed not only in the contexts in which they were teaching, but also in their qualifications and experience. Thus they ranged from no qualifications and very limited experience to a Master's degree and over 20 years of experience.

It was felt that this group of teachers allowed for variables such as sex, age, qualifications and teaching experience to be considered, while eliminating variables such as nationality and the age of learners.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

In common with most recent studies in this field, a qualitative, interpretivist approach was taken (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998; Hammersley, 1991; Silverman, 2001; Richards, 2003) because the aim was to investigate teachers' own accounts of teaching and learning by giving individual teachers a voice and focusing on their perceptions, language, actions, thoughts and feelings (Johnson, 1994:441).

Data collection methods used were semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, all of which were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as it was thought that they would allow the teachers space to express their beliefs, both explicitly and implicitly, while at the same time ensuring a focus on the research agenda was maintained.

Classroom observation had two main functions. Firstly, it allowed the researcher to observe the teachers' classroom practice first hand and to see if what the teachers said or thought they did in the classroom corresponded to what they actually did (Fang, 1996:53). Secondly, observation allowed the identification of classroom episodes which then formed the basis for discussion with the teachers in the interviews about what they did and why. Thus the teachers talked about their beliefs both about teaching and learning in general and with reference to specific activities and learners.

Two initial semi-structured interviews and two observations were carried out with all five teachers using questions that were chosen in order to focus on the areas that have been identified in previous studies as key in teachers' professional lives and about which 'teachers have complex, interacting beliefs' (Borg, 1998:28). These include context (the institution, the students and the lessons), content (subject matter, the materials) and previous experience of both language learning and teacher education (see for example, Borg, 1998; Breen et al., 2001; Burns, 1996; Richards and Lockhart, 1994). See appendix A for a list of the questions used.

From these interviews it became apparent that, when asked about their beliefs about language teaching and learning, there was a surprisingly focused range of answers the teachers gave to most questions. Moreover, the teachers appeared to be consistent in the focus of their answers across a whole range of questions. More specifically, these answers could be seen to fall into two groups: those concerned with what might be called the more personal side of teaching and those concerning the more professional side of teaching. The following example should clarify this emerging

pattern.

When asked what they believe the qualities of a good teacher are, the teachers in the study divide quite clearly into two groups. Charlotte, Pam and Tony all emphasise the contact with learners and the ability to get on with them. For example:

Well, I suppose being somebody who's got a good relationship with the students and sensitive to students. I mean thinking back to sort of school, negative teachers sort of sarcastic, sort of humiliating, not being interested in the students. (Charlotte)

Linda and Simon, on the other hand, both place more emphasis on the professional aspects of teaching and the teacher's competence, for example:

The qualities of a good teacher is the teacher has to be credible to the students. [...] She has to seem to know what she's talking about. She has to be fairly well-organised in that she has to, you know, have the right material, get there in time. (Linda)

On the basis of a rough coding and analysis of the interviews it seemed that the way that teachers express their beliefs cohere around two basic orientations. On the one hand, there are Pam, Charlotte and Tony who place a definite emphasis on people. They underline relationships and contact; teaching focuses on learner enjoyment and interest, which are equated with motivation and, consequently, learning. In other words, they are person-oriented. Linda and Simon on the other hand, emphasise the learning process and the teacher's professional role in ensuring that learning takes place. They too focus on the learners, but in terms of using the teacher's knowledge and competence in order to help the learners to achieve. They are procedure-oriented.

On the basis of this initial data analysis, two of the teachers working in the university language centre in Italy, Charlotte and Linda, were chosen as the main case studies as they appeared to best represent the patterns that were emerging from the data.

Moreover, they worked in similar contexts and had similar experiences of teacher education, thus keeping constant two variables that have been identified as potentially important influences on teacher beliefs (Cumming, 1989:46-47 cited in Burns, 1992:57-58, Fang, 1996:52-53)

A further six interviews and observations were carried out with both Charlotte and Linda. A final interview was carried out with both teachers together in order present the findings and to discuss them. Thus the final database for the two main case study teachers consisted of nine interviews and eight observations for each teacher carried out over a period of just over two years. All the interviews were transcribed and then analysed by coding. The interviews were coded and categorised and the categories sorted into themes one at a time. The process continued until no further modifications were made and the categories and themes could be considered saturated (Strauss and Corbin, 1997).

Although there is no space here to go into detail, from this analysis of the data, it was clear that, when talking about teaching and learning, Linda's and Charlotte's beliefs could clearly be seen to cohere into a procedure orientation and a person orientation respectively.

PERSON AND PROCEDURE ORIENTATIONS TO TESOL

The main feature of a person orientation is an emphasis on relationships, on the personal and affective side of teaching. This can be seen in the way the teachers in the study talk about both learners and colleagues. It is important for teachers to be genuinely friendly and have an ability to establish rapport with learners. This may also extend to contact with learners outside the classroom and to friendships.

Person-oriented teachers show a strong empathy with their learners and their

classroom decisions are based on their perception of learners' wants and interests. The teacher makes a conscious attempt to involve the learners directly in their own learning by seeking out their preferences and being sensitive to what are felt as learner needs, adapting if necessary, to these needs.

In the classroom, teachers and learners clearly have their own roles, but these are not underlined in the talk of person-oriented teachers. The teacher takes a guiding and supportive role, with learners placed on centre stage. This secondary role for the teacher can also be seen in the way that, in the talk of person-oriented teachers, learners appear to make progress without any reference to the teacher's contribution to this.

Person-oriented teachers are focused on what they do, and on what they could do in order to ensure the best learning conditions possible for their learners. The route to learning in a person-orientation is the creation of a positive affective environment in the classroom, where learners are interested, engaged and enjoying themselves. This is the key to motivation and hence learning. In other words, the teacher creates the right conditions and the learner learns.

A process-orientation is characterised by a focus on learning outcomes. For this reason, the emphasis is on the knowledge and professionalism of teachers and on their ability to give the learners the input they need in order to achieve those outcomes.

For process-oriented teachers, a good relationship with learners is part of the learning process because this relationship is based on clearly defined roles, where each classroom participant has expectations of the other. Learners expect their teachers to know their subject, be able to transmit it and be friendly. Teachers expect learners to be interested, motivated and to want to learn.

The role of the teacher is central in this orientation, as can be seen in the emphasis that process-orientated teachers place on the active contribution that teachers make to learners' achievements. For this reason, process-oriented teachers are focused on being the best teacher they can be in whatever working conditions they find themselves, as the teacher holds the key to learning

In the classroom, decisions are based on what is perceived as useful and interesting to the learners. The teacher is in charge insofar as it is she who must take responsibility for the learning process and has the authority to do so.

The route to learning in a process-orientation is via a well-prepared, competent and professional teacher who understands her learners' needs and is able to address them, thereby striving to ensure that the learning process is constantly moving forward.

IMPLICATIONS

The study reported here offers evidence that teacher beliefs there it is possible to identify coherent systems of beliefs, shared amongst teachers, that may account for different approaches to teaching. It must be underlined, however, that I am not suggesting that EFL teachers can be neatly pigeon-holed into two clear categories of teacher beliefs. What I am suggesting is that the orientations, as presented here, can offer a useful tool in teacher education.

Freeman (2002:11) maintains that, given the importance of teachers' mental lives in influencing their classroom behaviours, reflective practice should become the norm in teacher education.

This approach means a shift in teacher education as it is necessary to help 'teachers

understand practice rather than dictate practice to them' (Meijer et. al, 1999:81). Thus, such concepts as 'best method' are abandoned in favour of supporting teachers in 'becoming the unique and best teacher it is in them to be' (Underhill, 1992:71) by accepting the idea that 'best teaching' is 'the individually best-next-step for each teacher' (Edge and Richards, 1998:571) because:

The most appropriate way for a person to teach is exactly the way that person does teach, provided that he or she is committed to this process of exploration, discovery, and action. (Edge, 1996:18)

The role of external input thus becomes that of helping teachers to articulate their experience and to make sense of their work. The two orientations identified in this study can play a fundamental role in this by offering simple but powerful constructs that provide not just conceptual clarity but a practical tool to enable better understanding of the roots of teachers' work, their representation of it, and the ways in which they interpret it. By working with an awareness of their own beliefs through the two orientations, teachers have an effective means to help them gain insights into their own teaching, into how they give meaning to what they do and the reasons that underlie their practice.

Ultimately, the practical aim of research on teacher beliefs must be to empower teachers themselves. This comes about by enabling teachers to become more aware of who they are as teachers and why, thereby allowing them to establish their own professional development agenda, rather than having it imposed from outside. Although the research presented here identifies two broad personal belief systems, this does not mean there is not scope for individuality. What the two orientations offer is a better way of understanding the nature of that individuality in pedagogic terms.

References

Appendix A

Below are the questions which were used as a guide in the first two interviews with the five teachers.

First initial interview

Past language learning experiences

What do you remember, good and bad, about your experiences of learning a foreign language?

What kinds of methods were used?

Do you recall if you enjoyed learning the language?

What do remember about your teachers?

What are the best ways to learn a foreign language, in your opinion?

Do you feel that your own education as a student has had any influence your teaching?

On past career

Could you tell me something about how and why you became an EFL teacher?

Tell me something about your career to date.

Where have you taught? (country, type of institution, how long etc.)

Do you have any preferences for the types of institutions where you teach?

If yes, why?

On teacher training experiences

Tell me something about your formal teacher training experiences.

Did they promote a particular view of teaching?

What aspect(s) of the course(s) did you find most memorable?

On being a teacher

What or who would you say have been the greatest influences on your development as a teacher?

What do you feel your strengths are as an EFL teacher? and your weaknesses?

Would you say that your teaching has changed in any way over the years? If so, how?

What is the most rewarding aspect of teaching for you? And the hardest?

Can you describe one particularly good experience you've had as an EFL teacher, and one particularly bad one?

Second initial interview

On lesson planning and preparation

How do you decide what you will teach?

How do you prepare lessons?

What about materials?

What role does the textbook play in your lessons?

What do you look for in a textbook?

What other teaching resources do you use?

Are there any particular activity types you tend to favour? or try to avoid?

Would you say that there are any particular teaching methods you try to follow?

How do you see your role in the classroom?

On attitudes to teaching and learning

How would you define 'effective teaching'?

What is your idea of a 'successful' lesson?

In your opinion, what are the qualities of a 'good' teacher?

And a 'good' learner?

And a 'good' group?

On learners and learning

Do you prefer to teach a particular level? Or type of learner?

What kinds of learning styles and strategies do you try to encourage and discourage in your learners?

What are the most important things for learners to learn in your opinion?

What roles are learners expected to assume in your classes?

Appendix B

Transcription conventions

Most features of speech have been left out of the interviews in favour of a very simple transcription. This is because the interviews are analysed for what is said, rather than

how it is said. However, some transcription features are present.

All names of people and places have been changed.

(teaching)	indicates uncertain transcription
(<i>unint</i>)	indicates unintelligible utterance
(=face)	is used for translations
((<i>pause</i>))	is used for glosses
((<i>laughter</i>))	indicates joint laughter
((<i>laughs</i>))	indicates only the speaker laughs
...	indicates the extract has been edited

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Notes

¹ Pseudonyms have been used throughout.