

The Role of Belief in Language Teacher Education

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Abstract

The role of teacher education is of crucial importance and has been challenged over the years. The change of teacher role since the time of grammar translation up to the time of eclectic method is a proof of importance of teacher role. Therefore, efforts have always been taken, to formulate teachers role and to guide them in their career. Carter and Doyle (1996) mention teacher role as being quite personal and rooted in one's beliefs as well as some other factors. Dewey (1933, cited in Barcelos, 2000) mentions belief as being equal to thought, but later on belief is viewed as a social process (Wright, 1987). Anyway, whether belief is considered as thought or social process, none of them is formed during a few years, and belief formulation starts from the early years of life (such as Lortie 1975, [as cited in Egbert, 2002], Stern, 2004). Therefore, in order to change prior beliefs different procedures have to be taken.

Hence, the present article first tries to define belief from different points of view and next to show the importance of teacher belief. Then it continues with the formulation of teacher belief from the time the teacher is still a young student. It also pictures the importance of formulation of correct beliefs during these early years. Finally, it tries to picture the outcome of all the efforts that are taken to formulate new beliefs and their practicality in practice.

Keywords: Belief, teacher education, change, formulation, student, attitude

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Introduction

Teaching has been described as a contradictory activity, full of nervousness and difficult situations or dilemmas (Lampert, 1985). In daily practice, teachers are confronted (and sometimes torn) with problems that cannot be easily solved. Although there are no definite answers or methods that can provide the best solution for the dilemmas they confront in everyday practice, teachers' self-knowledge may be one of the means of dealing with dilemmas, since when they know themselves better they can become empowered to solve their problems (Barcelos, 2010).

Role is defined as "a complex grouping of factors which combine to produce certain types of social behaviors" (Wright, 1987, p. 7). Several studies have addressed the variety of roles language teachers and learners can play (Wright, 1987; Richards & Lockhart, 1994). One fundamental common supposition in these studies is that the teacher's role varies within a continuum from a more directive to a more facilitative role. By the same demonstration, students' roles vary a lot depending on the teacher philosophical orientation (Oxford et al., 1998), different teaching methodologies, students' beliefs and expectations about teachers' and their own roles (Barcelos, 2010)

Carter and Doyle (1996) mention that "teaching is deeply personal and rooted in an individual's identity and sense of meaning" (p. 134). Thus, in order to understand teaching we have to make sense of our own knowledge and beliefs and how they influence our practice.

Some of the factors which influence the teaching are beliefs, attitudes, task related behaviors, interpersonal relationships, and communication content and style. Beliefs are part of teaching and learning as a social process, where "relationships are established, maintained, and evaluated through communication" (Wright, 1987, p. 10). The way teachers and learners act and what they say in the classroom are an indicator of the kinds of beliefs they have (Barcelos, 2010).

Belief

Teachers' "beliefs" about teaching play a fundamental role in the way they formulate goals and define the tasks of teaching. This is up to the point that when such beliefs are disregarded, the systems of practices they guide or make sense of will be correspondingly opaque. At a surface level, this may result in one measuring or analyzing aspects of the classroom which have no prominence for the participants, or, conversely, it may lead one to look over or ignore features of the situation which greatly influence those involved in it. At a more profound level, failing to attend to beliefs leaves the researcher in the position of being able to develop only an abstract model of the structures or regularities underlying classrooms processes – the functions and uses of classroom structures, and the social "rules" governing their use, remain hidden (Nespor, 1985).

Breen (1985) characterized the language classroom as "coral gardens" a place in which subjective views of language, various learning purposes, and different beliefs about learning appear.

The difficulty of defining belief has been distinguished by several researchers, and due to this characteristic it has been called a "messy" construct (Pajares, 1992). According to Pajares, this hardship is partly due to the paradoxical nature of beliefs and agendas of researchers. James and Pierce also mention the paradoxical nature of beliefs. James (1907; as cited in Barcelos, 2000) did not see beliefs as separate from our experiences in the world. According to him beliefs influence actions, and actions or facts one after another modify beliefs.

Other educational researchers have also alluded to the paradoxical nature of beliefs (Eisner, 1991; Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996 as cited in Barcelos, 2001; Pintrich, Marx & Boyle, 1993). Feiman-Nemser & Remillard (1996, as cited in Barcelos, 2001) have mentioned that beliefs also help people to interpret and to assess "new ideas and potentially conflicting information"(p.80-81). They have mentioned that the beliefs from our prior experiences, that aid us in learning, make learning new information difficult for teachers and students.

Dewey (1933, as cited in Barcelos, 2000) defines beliefs as a form of thought:

[belief] covers all the matters of which we have no sure knowledge and yet which we are sufficiently confident of to act upon and also the matters that we now accept as certainly true, as knowledge, but which nevertheless may be questioned in the future- just as much as knowledge in the past has now passed into the limbo of mere opinion or of error (p.6).

He further on describes belief as part of our experience, and if they are not consistent with our experiences this may cause conflict.

Peirce (1978, as cited in Barcelos, 2010) mentioned that beliefs lead desires and form actions by preparing individuals to act in case the situation arises. He explained that beliefs are paradoxical since they can stop doubt and can make thought begin at the same time (i.e. after belief is reached, thought relaxes and comes to rest for a moment). However, belief is a rule for action. It is a "stopping place" and a "starting place" at the same time. (p.121),

Learning to understand our beliefs and dilemmas is part of the process of becoming a critically reflective teacher (Brookfield, 1995; as cited in Barcelos, 2010). According to Brookfield, if we seek to instill in our students the attitude of examining their own beliefs, we have to model it and show that, as teachers, we are also struggling for insight, critical clarity, and openness. Third, by listening to our students' voices we initiate a dialogue with them that can help us "unlearn" many of our common assumptions about learning and teaching (Wink, 1997; as cited in Barcelos, 2010).

Teacher Role and Belief

Richards and Lockhart (1994) emphasize that the way the contexts in which teachers work, and their beliefs about their role can influence their approach to work and the strategies they employ to achieve their goals. Teachers may select various roles for themselves such as planners, managers, quality controllers, group organizers, motivators, empowerers, and team members. However, according to Richards and Lockhart, these roles often have something in common. Teachers cannot be everything to all people, and their role may change in the process of the lesson. Among the aspects that can influence the role types, teachers may adopt, three sites

are mentioned. First, the way teachers interpret their roles will cause “different patterns of classroom behavior and classroom interaction” (p. 106). Second, the various phases of a lesson also affect the role that teachers play. This means that the teacher can make use of a more controlling role when directing a drill, or adopt a more facilitative role during an open discussion. Eventually, teachers as well as learners can interpret their roles according to a) a number of various teaching settings and teaching methods employed, b) individual characteristics and teachers’ personal interpretation of problems, and c) cultural suppositions about teachers’ responsibility, concept of learning and teaching, and learners’ roles and duties in the classroom.

Featherstone's research shows that the switch of role from student to teacher is not a simple change, rather beginning to teach is now seen as a difficult and complex task that can have a major impact on the professional development of first year teachers (Featherstone, 1993, as cited in Farrell, 2009). Indeed, prior assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes built up during student years, are often challenged as learner teachers learn about teaching (Loughran, Brown, and Doecke, 2001; cited in Farrell, 2009). Therefore, language teacher educators need to consider how the prior assumptions and beliefs which often serve as a lens through which novice teachers view teaching, can be explained during the language teacher education program.

Formulation of Language Teacher Belief

In foreign language teaching literature, research shows that language teacher candidates have pre-existing beliefs and expectations about foreign language teaching and learning that originate from their own formal and informal language learning experiences (Freeman, 1991; Johnson, 1994) & Freeman, 1994 as cited in Hanson, 2011). Teachers' knowledge and beliefs are formulated through and by the normative ways of thinking, talking, and acting that have been historically and culturally imbedded in the communities of practice in which they participate (as both teachers and learners) (Johnson, 2009).

Stein (2004) mentions that teachers' carry, sets of beliefs which they have gathered from childhood.

Those who choose the teaching profession gain many of their attitudes and beliefs about teaching from the teachers and school-related events that they have observed and experienced throughout their lives (Lortie 1975, as cited in Egbert, 2002)

The practices of teachers who have completed training in normal universities are affected by the beliefs of their teacher educators as well as by the training they have received (Wang, 2002).

Allwright (1984, as cited in Barcelos, 2010) offered a different view from the long-held belief that teachers control the classroom interaction. He explained that teachers teach only by agreement, and that learners contribute to the management of their own learning. This management may involve trying to “socialize their teachers into being the sorts of teachers they themselves want” (p.75).

Patro (2002) mentions that teacher education is likely to consist of four elements: increasing the quality of the general educational background of the trainee teachers;

increasing their understanding and knowledge of the subjects they are to teach; education and understanding of children and learning; and improving practical skills and competences.

Teacher learners also examine theories of SLA; discover cultural, linguistic, and sociological matters as they affect the student learning; engage in active practice with a number of different methods; "investigate models of effective instruction and authentic assessment, and network with teachers and community leaders through semester length field experiences" (Hones, 2002, P. 14).

During the early 20th century the belief that teaching was an art and that teachers were born rather than made was still prevalent (Schulz, 2000).

Vygotsky was interested in the social and cultural characteristics of individual human development. His recognition of the social origins of higher mental capacities is shown in his argument that 'every function in the child's cultural development occurs twice: first, on the social level and later on the individual level; i.e. first, between people (inter-psychological), and then inside the child' (Vygotsky, 1978, as cited in Clarke, 2008). The small class sizes are claimed to facilitate educational conversations and dialogues through which student teachers can develop, share, process and formulate appropriate ideas and theories (Clarke, 2008). In addition, group project work encourages student teachers to discuss ideas and represent their thinking to others. As another part of this process, previous models are consciously explored, externalized and placed side by side with different images and models of teaching. As Johnson (1999 as cited in Clarke, 2008, p.57-8) urges:

"If teachers' epistemic beliefs are to be refined, expanded, or transformed, and teachers' projected or newly emerging beliefs are to become more dominant, teachers must become cognizant of their own beliefs; question those beliefs in light of what they intellectually know and not simply what they intuitively feel; resolve conflicting images within their own belief systems; and have access to, develop an understanding of, and have successful encounters with alternative images of teachers and teaching."

This encourages teacher educators to meet student teachers on their own conditions and to acknowledge, validate, challenge and extend their previous experiences and present understandings (Clarke, 2008).

Peacock (2001; as cited in Attardo, & Brown, 2005), conducted a three-year longitudinal study of teacher trainee beliefs about second language learning. He showed there were significant differences between the beliefs of trainee teachers and experienced teachers considering the roles of vocabulary and grammar learning and the role of intelligence in language learning, and these beliefs were inclined to change little over time. Peacock claims that it is important for trainees to have beliefs that more closely picture those of experienced teachers. Peacock claims to let the trainees use their own (in this case non-communicative-language-learning-oriented) beliefs once they become teachers themselves.

In the specific field of language teaching, the 1990s witnessed a burgeoning of research into teacher knowledge and teacher beliefs. Much of this work is summarized in Borg's comprehensive review of research into language teacher cognition (2003). However, as reflected in the term 'cognition', this work is often

supported by a psychological approach, with a focus on individual minds, in contrast to the socio-discursive and socio-cultural approaches (Clarke, 2008).

At some point in life, all individuals will have to choose and behave according to compatible beliefs. That is the time when the most predominant beliefs are discovered. Pajares (1992) mentions that at this time, beliefs "appear more consistent than they really are" (p.319).

Current research on teacher development focuses on teachers' beliefs with relation to their practices rather than on the teaching skills approved by educators or policy makers (Carter 1990; Richardson, 1994, as cited in Sato, 2002).

Language Teachers' Beliefs

As mentioned earlier, the recent researches participate on ways of thinking about the teaching role of the teacher/learner relationship, focuses on the things that go on in the minds of teachers and teacher education learners' as they participate in learning to teach, planning, classroom action, reflection, and assessment (Richardson, 2003).

Teachers' belief is a relatively new subject. It can be followed to the mid-1970s when Lortie published his classical study on teachers' socialization. Lortie's study contributed to the identification of teacher thinking as an idea in education and thinking as a concept in education and teaching as a cognitive undertaking. The concentration was now put on the teachers' mental lives and knowledge. The new paradigm gave birth to teacher thinking, learning, knowledge and cognition (Freeman, 1996; as cited in Barcelos, 2000).

Beliefs are what underlie the best teaching, which lead, in turn, to the best learning (Wang, 2002).

Change in Beliefs and Practices

Feiman-Nemser & Remillard (1996; as cited in Barcelos, 2000) mentioned that beliefs can change. Pajares (1992) claims that beliefs are inflexible and basically unchanging. He refers to Rokeach (1968) in saying, "beliefs differ in intensity and power; beliefs vary along a central-peripheral dimension; and the more central a belief, the more it will resist change" (p. 318). In fact, empirical studies show the difficulty of changing beliefs and practices. Foss and Kleinsasser (1996; as cited in Barcelos, 2000), for example, studied pre-service mathematics elementary teachers' beliefs and practices during a mathematics methods course. The authors concluded that while pre-service teachers were supposedly developing pedagogical and content knowledge, the teachers' beliefs and practices were little changed.

Richardson (2003) mentions that changing the beliefs of the teacher candidates is a relatively difficult job and it is mostly due to their teaching experiences.

Richardson et al. (1991; as cited in Sato, 2002) conducted a three-year research project on thirty-nine elementary teachers' beliefs and practices about reading instruction. They found that a majority of teachers lacked reading theories to implement in the classroom. Only one teacher changed her beliefs and practices. Five others showed slight changes in beliefs but did not change their practices.

As Richardson (1996; Attardo, & Brown, 2005) notes, “beliefs are thought to drive actions; however, experience and reflection on action may lead to changes in and/or additions to beliefs.” In fact, Richards and Lockhart (1994), among others, would put reflection at the core of teacher education and change.

Richardson and Kile (1999; as cited in Attardo, & Brown, 2005) examined changes in beliefs of traditional and nontraditional students taking part in a first semester teacher education course. They found that teacher candidates' basis changed from traditional to a more constructive theory of learning. There were also differences in the responses between traditional and nontraditional students. At the beginning the nontraditional teacher learners' brought views of teaching that concentrated on teachers' role and the traditional teacher learners' concentrated on learners' roles. By the end of the course the nontraditional teacher learners' had strengthened their view and the traditional learners' had changed their concentration from student to teacher.

Other researchers/teacher educators, who have examined changes in their teacher learners during a course, found that many of the teacher learners' beliefs and conceptions did not change (Ball, 1990; Civil, 1999).

Conclusion

According to Schirmer Reis (2011) intellectual analysis alone is not sufficient to cause changes in beliefs and attitudes as well as the critical social perspectives are necessary to change in educational contexts.

Teachers need to clarify what they ‘learn’ in regard to their cultural and teaching contexts, to their beliefs, to their expectations, and to their needs (Slaouti & Motteram, 2006).

The outcomes of belief upon the belief of others and on behavior may be so important, that men are forced to take into consideration the grounds or reasons of their beliefs and its logical consequences (Dewey, 1997).

The relationship between beliefs and actions in teaching has been documented in a clear way (Richardson, & Placier, 2001; cited in Richardson, 2003). Smith (1996; as cited in Barcelos, 2000) concentrated on the affect of teachers' beliefs on their decision making. Her results showed that teachers' decisions showed an eclectic use of their beliefs, theory, and practices and they were internally consistent. Her study also showed that teachers choose and modify theoretical ideas based on their personal beliefs about teaching and learning and their knowledge of the instructional context.

On the other hand, other studies have shown that teachers' beliefs may lack consistency with their classroom practice, because teachers deal with contradictory ambiguities and interests in their practice (Lampert, 1985).

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