

Understanding Teachers' Knowledge and Beliefs and Their Impact in EFL Language Teaching

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Abstract : This paper aims to examine what we know about teachers' beliefs and knowledge concerning language instruction, reporting on two broad themes: 1. the theoretical underpinnings of research on teachers' beliefs and knowledge; and 2. how they work in ESL/EFL teaching practice. This research will firstly discuss the definition of teachers' beliefs and knowledge from different perspectives to provide a complete picture. Secondly, several research results from empirical studies are taken into consideration to identify aspects of teachers' beliefs and knowledge in language teaching.

Key words: teacher's knowledge/教師知識, teacher's beliefs/教師信念, EFL teaching/英語外語教學

摘要 : 本文探討主旨分為以下兩點：一、在英語外語教學領域中，英語教師知識、信念的重要論述；二、其對教師教學的影響為何？本文旨在對英語外語教學中，英語教師的知識及信念的定義及論述作多方闡述；並透過文獻中實際研究案例中的研究結果，說明教師的教學知識與信念對其教學所產生的實質影響。

I. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine English language teachers' teaching beliefs and knowledge following the recent tendency in TEFL research to capture a holistic understanding of language teachers' cognitive world; namely teachers' beliefs and knowledge. The key issues reviewed in this paper cover the following:

1. A discussion about the definition of teachers' beliefs and knowledge from different perspectives and how they are differentiated from each other.
2. The beliefs and knowledge that EFL/ESL teachers hold.
3. The influence that teachers' beliefs and knowledge have on EFL/ESL teaching.

Borg (2003: 81) claims that teacher cognition refers to the psychological process underlying a teacher's teaching practices; it concerns what a teacher knows, believes and thinks. The purpose of research studies conducted on teacher cognition is to acquire an understanding about teacher behaviour, decision-making, teaching practice in the classroom, and self-reflection. Furthermore, it is hoped that these understandings can be of



some help to improve teaching practice and achieve a better performance in the classroom. However, whether the findings about teacher thinking can be of use to teachers or teacher education, they have posed questions for researchers like Clark (1988), Cole (1989) and Fenstermacher (1979). They suggest that a better way to look at teacher behaviour is to focus on teachers' beliefs (e.g. Clark, 1988; Cole, 1989, Fenstermacher, 1979, 1986). Some researchers suggest that beliefs are a better way to understand the decisions that individuals make during the teaching process (e.g. Rokeach, 1968). Fenstermacher (1979) predicted decades ago that teachers' beliefs would be the focus of the effectiveness of teacher teaching. Echoing Fenstermacher's prediction, Pintrich (1990) claimed that beliefs would eventually prove a valuable psychological construct for teacher education because they are one of the key elements to understanding teachers' teaching processes.

This paper will firstly review research studies mainly focusing on teachers' beliefs and knowledge in order to acquire an understanding of the influence they have on teaching practices. It will then particularly focus on arguments about the studies in respect to English as Foreign Language (EFL)/English as Second Language (ESL) teachers' beliefs and knowledge. There have been abundant studies on teachers' beliefs and knowledge, but studies on EFL/ESL teachers' in this regard are still less when compared with other studies on beliefs and knowledge.

This paper is divided into four sections. Following the introduction, section II reviews key concepts and definitions concerning teachers' beliefs and knowledge. Several types of knowledge will be specified and discussed, including practical knowledge, content knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge. The function of teachers' beliefs towards teaching will be reviewed to explain the interrelations between beliefs about teaching and teaching behaviours. Section III offers a discussion concerning EFL/ESL teachers' beliefs and knowledge, followed by a discussion of empirical studies from literature review that explore how beliefs and knowledge influence English language teachers' classroom practices. The conclusion summarises the points discussed in this paper.

II. Theoretical Underpinnings of Teachers' Knowledge and Beliefs

This section starts by introducing the theoretical underpinnings of teacher knowledge and further classifies the types of knowledge. Second, it will provide an overview of the current understanding of teacher beliefs. Third, it will discuss the differences between teachers' knowledge and beliefs.

2.1 Teachers' Knowledge



The focus of this section is on examining teacher knowledge according to different approaches. As Tsui (2003, p. 43) indicated in her book, “*Understanding Expertises in Teaching*”, she points that one of the most important contributions to understanding teacher knowledge is the Schon’s work. She claims that the concepts Schon suggests are “knowing in action’ and ‘reflection in action”, with both enhancing our understanding of teacher knowledge. Tsui (2003) states that in Schon’s argument (1983), he believed professionals have developed a kind of knowledge, not from their previous education but from their actions in the classroom (see Tsui, 2003). In other words, knowing and action is one thing, with knowing being in the action itself. Another concept Schon (1983) proposes is “reflection in action” He claims that practitioners are engaged in both reflection on action and reflection in action. Tsui indicates that Schon’s description “knowing in action” appears when teachers reflect on what they have done and that ‘reflection in action’ happens during the action, particularly in situations they find problematic, unanticipated or unique. As a result, they have come to see a problem or situation differently, and furthermore they develop a new understanding that allows them to make an immediate response (see Tsui, 2003, p. 45).

2.1.1. Practical Knowledge

Echoing Schon’s suggestion about how professionals gain knowledge from their work, Elbaz proposed the ‘practical knowledge’ concept (1983). She believes that, according to her study, teacher’s knowledge is understood and acquired by and from their everyday practice and from their thinking behind this practice. Elbaz conducted a study of a highly experienced high school teacher, Sarah, regarding her teaching delivery awareness during the teaching process. Elbaz did not emphasise how skilful Sarah’s instruction was but instead focused on what Sarah knew about her teaching, how she understood it and how she delivered this knowledge in her class as a teacher. From the result of this study, Elbaz concludes that a particular kind of knowledge is oriented to a particular context and is highly experiential and personal. She summarised her findings in the following:

This knowledge encompasses first hand experience of students’ learning styles, interests, needs, strengths and difficulties, and a repertoire of instructional techniques and classroom management skills [...]. This experiential knowledge is informed by the teacher’s theoretical knowledge of subject matter, and of areas such as child development, learning and social theory.’ (1983, p. 5)

From the above description, five categories of knowledge emerge in Elbaz’s argument: knowledge of subject matter, knowledge of the curriculum, knowledge of instruction, knowledge of self and knowledge of the environment of schooling. Elbaz argues that these



five categories of knowledge are interrelated to practice and that they constitute the “knowledge of practice” and “knowledge mediated by practice” (Elbaz, 1983, p. 47)

Elbaz does not agree that a teacher’s knowledge is entirely from their practical experience, but rather, she believes that theory and practice are firmly interrelated in a teacher’s knowledge. She indicates that there is not only the knowledge of knowing how to do things but that there is also the knowledge of knowing that. She claims that theoretical understanding about teacher knowledge is an implicit theory of knowledge which informs teachers’ knowledge in their teaching practice (1983, p. 23).

Based on the above argument concerning Elbaz’s practical knowledge theory, evidently, Elbaz was trying to bring two opposing perspectives of knowledge together: one being procedural knowledge—knowing how; the other is declarative knowledge—knowing that. In other words, what she aims to do is to develop a way of understanding a teacher’s knowledge where theory and practical experience are closely interrelated.

2.1.2. Content Knowledge

While Elbaz and Schon emphasise the experiential nature of teacher knowledge, Shulman (1986) points out that questions regarding 1) how teachers’ knowledge is transformed into their practice and made it comprehensive to the students, 2) how teachers’ understanding of subject content knowledge affects the quality of their instruction, and 3) how teachers use their subject content knowledge to develop their instruction and representation, are rarely discussed by practical knowledge researchers (see Shulman, 1986; Wilson, Shulman, and Richert, 1987).

The term ‘content knowledge’ here refers to Schulman’s (1986) subject matter knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and curricular knowledge. To address the questions mentioned above, Schulman and his colleagues at Stanford University launched the programme “Knowledge of Growth in Teaching”. They investigated the knowledge development of novice secondary teachers in English, mathematics, science and social studies during their teaching preparation year and their first year of teaching. Schulman and his colleagues constructed a theoretical framework that distinguishes these three content knowledge categories.

From Schulman’ (1986) viewpoint, subject matter knowledge refers to the basic knowledge that teachers have of the subjects they teach and that they understand that the knowledge about the subject is linked to other disciplines and can be applied to the real



world. Schulman (1986) claims that teachers seek a way of expanding their knowledge to enhance their teaching, as well as developing a variety of teaching skills to assist students to learn new knowledge.

Pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) refers to how teachers represent the subject by using analogy, examples, explanations and demonstrations to make their teaching more comprehensible to students. The key elements of Schulman's PCK are not only knowledge about how to present the subject matter but also an understanding of students' specific learning difficulties and finding out if their conceptions of the subject they perceive are correct. He suggests that the more strategies and presentations of a subject that teachers incorporate in their teaching, the better it will help teachers understand their students' learning situations (Schulman 1986). Finally, curricular knowledge is knowledge about programmes and course materials designed for particular topics at appropriate levels.

2.2 Teachers' Beliefs

Some literature on teacher education indicates that teachers' beliefs are closely related to teacher knowledge. Researchers such as Kagan and Lewis argue that teachers' beliefs can be considered as equal to teacher knowledge (1992b, 1990). Kagan (1992b) suggests that most of a teacher's professional knowledge can be regarded as beliefs, whilst some researchers see it as having a close interrelation with teacher knowledge (e.g. Calderhead, 1996). However, other researchers hold a contrary view, seeing teacher beliefs as distinct from teacher knowledge. Nespor (1987) claims that belief systems have a more affective and evaluative loading than knowledge systems. This section will provide a concise description of these two controversies and account for why I think that 'belief' and 'knowledge' should be used in conjunction when examining teachers' teaching cognition.

The Influence of Beliefs on Teaching

The influence of beliefs on teaching can be demonstrated in three different aspects. Researchers, such as Nespor (1987) and Bird's (1993) findings, have showed that teachers' beliefs can impact on defining the teaching task, choices of teaching strategies and ways of dealing with complicated teaching problems.

(1) Defining the teaching task

One of the functions to investigate teachers' beliefs is to understand what teachers think about teaching. Nespor's research (1987) indicates that some teachers define teaching as a job or a job for living. Some teachers view teaching with regards to morality



for them, as a way to help children become socialised. Bird (1993) claims that a teacher's interpretation of the environment and message decides their most appropriate way to teach. The purpose of investigating implicit beliefs to teachers is to make them aware of what they believe about the role of a teacher, their students' behaviours, teaching process, interactions with students, and all the values and judgements about teaching per se.

(2) Teaching strategies choices

When teachers have defined their teaching tasks, the next stage is to decide what teaching strategies they will employ to achieve the tasks, with teaching beliefs being one of the elements in need of consideration when making decisions during the teaching process. Bauch (1982a) indicates that teaching strategies differ from one teacher to another, with differences in their thinking, planning and presentation when teaching indicating these different beliefs. Calderhead & Robson (1991) investigated pre-service teachers' beliefs, finding that the beliefs that these pre-service teachers held were rooted in their past learning experiences, which impacted on their interpretation of their teaching practice. Additionally, Munby (1983) suggests that teaching improvement relies on the understandings of teaching beliefs, of the ways teachers construct their teaching structure and how they put it into practice. In other words, only when the beliefs become meaningful and clear, and when the teaching construction process is understood can teaching be genuinely understood and be improved.

(3) Dealing with complicated teaching problems

The situation in a classroom or school can hardly be predicted because schools or classrooms are dynamic and not always under teacher control. Munby (1983) argues that the focus of examining teachers' teaching should be included in the area of organising teacher thinking, instead of teacher behaviour. He suggests that placing the research focus on the way teachers organise their thinking can truly reveal the problems of teaching. As a result, he focuses particular attention on teachers' beliefs because they are the basis for organising teaching plans and dealing with teaching problems.

III. The Interrelation between Teachers' Beliefs/Knowledge and EFL/ESL Language Teaching

This section discusses the interrelation between teacher knowledge and beliefs and EFL/ESL teaching. Many research studies demonstrate that teacher knowledge and beliefs influence teaching practice, even though few investigate the knowledge and beliefs of EFL/ESL teachers. The following will discuss several examples from empirical studies to examine the impact of beliefs and knowledge on EFL teaching.



3.1 Empirical Studies on EFL/ESL teaching

3.1.1. Knowledge

In order to define and examine the impact of teacher knowledge and beliefs on language teaching, it is necessary to provide results from empirical studies as support. Tsui's study, conducted in 2003, observed and interviewed four EFL teachers at a secondary school in Hong Kong. The purpose of this research was to explore the concept of expertise in teaching and explore our understanding of expertise as a process, using ESL teachers as cases for investigation (Tsui, 2003, p. 67). Tsui points out, according to the findings, that Marina, one of her participants, demonstrates that her judgement in practice was made on the basis of her knowledge about her students and their culture. Furthermore, in Marina's case, Tsui indicates that she initially thought that the reason for conducting group work or pair work in the class was simply to give students an opportunity to speak/practice English with others. However, as she gained experience and received input from a professional training course, Marina began to realise that pair work and group work should be used as a means for collaborative learning. Moreover, there should be a purpose for students to be working on a task and come out with an outcome and shared with the class (Tsui, 2003, p. 146).

Tsui (2003) echoes Elbaz's proposition about practical knowledge, which encompasses first hand experience of students' learning styles, interests, needs, strengths and difficulties, and a repertoire of instructional techniques and classroom management skills. Marina's practical knowledge is embedded in and impacted on her teaching practice. Also, the pedagogical knowledge she received later from professional training led her to a more effective teaching practice approach (2003, p. 155).

Golombek's work (1998) shows that L2 teachers' personal practical knowledge (knowledge of self, subject matter, instruction and context) was "*personal relevant, situational, oriented towards practice...[...]*" (1998, p. 452). Golombek examined two ESL teachers to explore 'tensions' in their teaching. The 'tension' in his work is discussed with respect to the teachers' desire to provide a balance in their teaching between paying attention to both accuracy and fluency. The results highlight that one of the ESL teachers had a negative experience being overcorrected by her teacher when she was learning a language, which obstructed her from achieving the level of accuracy she wished for and was afraid to make her students feel bad. Golombek (1998) concludes that "*The teachers' personal practical knowledge informed their practice by serving as a kind of interpretive framework through which they make sense of their classrooms as they recounted their experiences and make this knowledge explicit*". (1998, p. 459)



3.1.2. Beliefs

Burns (1992) conducted research investigating six ESL teachers' teaching beliefs and identified a core of underlying beliefs that influenced the teachers' teaching approach to language teaching and their instruction. One of the beliefs that teachers hold concerns the nature of the language classroom and the teacher's role within it. Burns comments that establishing a positive and non-threatening classroom atmosphere is considered a crucial element in a language classroom. As a result, teachers saw themselves as having a central role in the class and the responsibility of establishing a good relationship with and among the students. Burns indicates that teachers believe that providing a comfortable and non-threatening classroom is related to effective learning factors; thus teachers make an effort to build up their students' confidence levels, reduce their passivity and help students relate to each other positively.

Smith (1996) explored post-secondary ESL teachers' consistency between their beliefs and practice at a Canadian school, finding that a teacher's instruction decision was highly consistent with the beliefs that the teacher expressed. He points out that a teacher's personal beliefs influence how they rank their institution's explicit course objectives for the course they were assigned to teach. Among teachers teaching the same course, different teaching beliefs led their instruction towards different teaching goals.

The above empirical studies examined the impact that teachers' beliefs have on their actual teaching practice, indicating that personal experiences are one of the elements that formed their beliefs. Other researchers, such as Freeman (1993), suggest that teacher training programmes also change teachers' beliefs. Freeman's research, conducted in 1993, explores the longitudinal change of four foreign language teachers doing an in-service MA degree, which had a specific aim of developing teachers' understanding of professional education discourse. According to his results, tacit conceptions held by the teachers emerged during the course. The professional discourse prepared the teachers to develop the ability to articulate and reflect on them, as well as to reconceptualise their understanding of the purpose of this process (1993). Freeman claims that his study programme certainly impacted on these teachers' cognition and that there was also evidence of a change in their behaviour.

On the contrary, other researchers argue that a teaching programme might not change a trainee's knowledge or beliefs. Peacock (2001) conducted research into change in 146 ESL trainee teachers' beliefs about L2 over their 3-year BA TESL programme. By using



Horwitz's Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), the first year trainee teachers' beliefs were collected and compared with those of experienced teachers.

Peacock found that the percentage of first year student teachers agreeing with these statements was much higher than that of experienced teachers. For example, for the second statement, 52% of experienced teachers disagreed with it, compared to only 7% of first year trainee teachers. He indicates that such beliefs are "*detrimental to their [trainees'] own language learning or to their future students' learning*" (2001, p. 183). Peacock asked the trainee teachers to complete the BALLI at two further points on their course; surprisingly he did not find any significant change over the three years for the two core beliefs Horwitz suggested concerning vocabulary and grammar, or for the role of intelligence in language teaching. He concludes that the "*data does not support the belief that trainees' beliefs are shaped by their preservice methodology courses*" (2001, p. 187).

Not all researchers agree with Peacock's (2001) conclusions. Borg (2003) argues that some studies focus on the 'content' of cognition (i.e. beliefs, knowledge, attitude) (2003, p. 91), whilst others which focus on the 'process' and 'structure' of cognitive development have devoted a conclusion that training programme in teacher education has made some changes to the trainees. Additionally, from my own empirical research, several interns claimed in the interview that the training courses that they had taken in the past four years provided them with professional knowledge about teaching English to children. They claim that these courses facilitated their teaching and that they noticed progress from time to time during their teaching internship.

IV. Conclusion

This section will conclude observations about the literature review discussed above, defining teachers' beliefs and knowledge, and examining the present research of EFL/ESL language teachers.

Borg claims that teacher cognition is about the psychological processes a teacher employs in their teaching instruction; to be more specific, it is what a teacher thinks, believes and knows (2003). Section II examined the theoretical underpinnings of teacher knowledge and beliefs, particularly in respect to EFL/ESL language teaching and firstly taking Elbaz's perspective about practical knowledge (1983) as a start. Elbaz believes that a teacher's knowledge is understood and acquired by and from their daily practice and the thinking behind their practice. She conducted a study of a very experienced teacher, Sarah, regarding her teaching delivery awareness during the process. Elbaz proposed that this experiential knowledge is informed by the teacher's theoretical knowledge of the subject



matter and of areas such as child development, learning and social theory. All these kinds of knowledge are referred to as “practical knowledge” (1983, p. 5).

Secondly, I introduced pedagogical knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) because these kinds of knowledge have attracted significant attention in arguments concerning teacher cognition. Pedagogical knowledge, as Tsui (2003) points out, is a general pedagogical principle and skill towards the teaching of all subject disciplines. It is ruled by a specific curriculum and lessons for a specific study level. Pedagogical content knowledge was originally proposed by Shulman in 1986 and is the knowledge that teachers need to know about how to teach a lesson well and help students learn effectively. The key elements of Shulman’s PCK conception are knowledge to present the subject matter and understanding students’ specific learning difficulties and their conceptions.

The part focusing on teacher beliefs examined the definitions and functions of beliefs on language teaching from different perspectives. Studies showed that teacher beliefs are received from teachers’ life experiences, conceptions of learning, personal values and teachers’ previous academic experiences. Additionally, the studies examining the influence that teacher beliefs have on teaching include defining the teaching task, the choice of teaching strategies and dealing with complicated teaching problems.

The third part of this paper examined the interrelations between teacher beliefs and knowledge and language teaching. The purpose of providing empirical examples was to demonstrate the impact that beliefs and knowledge have on language teaching. The examples provided in this paper coincide with the theoretical issues discussed earlier, with the aim of providing readers with a clear vision of the interrelationships present in language teaching.

Understanding teachers’ beliefs and knowledge is an appropriate way to investigate a teacher’s psychological process and how this process influences their teaching. As a result, it is necessary and important for teachers at any level to have an awareness of their teaching beliefs, which has been shown above to be closely related to their teaching practices.

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