

Comparing experienced and inexperienced foreign language teachers' beliefs about language learning and teaching

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ABSTRACT. Teachers' beliefs about language learning and teaching are an important concept to research as they affect the teachers' decisions when teaching (Johnson, 1994; Richards, 1998). Research has focused on how teachers' beliefs are formed (e.g. Lortie, 1975; Johnson, 1994) and on whether beliefs that prove to be inconsistent with the reality of the classroom can change (e.g. Weinstein, 1990; Brown and McGannon, 1998). Studies have mainly targeted the beliefs of inexperienced teachers and the effects of pre-service training on their beliefs (e.g. Joram and Gabrielle, 1998). There are also studies which compare the beliefs held by experienced and inexperienced teachers (e.g. Mok, 1994; Peacock, 2001). The study described in this paper comprises of two small-scale qualitative case studies carried out in Greece. The beliefs held by experienced and inexperienced teachers are compared and contrasted and the effects of pre-service training are explored. The focus is also on the factors that influence the shaping of teachers' beliefs and on the needs of experienced teachers from training. Also, a framework is suggested that can guide research on teachers' beliefs. The findings indicate that the context of work plays a pivotal role not only in the shaping of beliefs but also in aiding change. Also, with time, experienced teachers seem to focus more on the learner as a person rather than on language issues. There are small differences in the beliefs held by experienced and inexperienced teachers and no dramatic change has been identified in inexperienced teachers' beliefs after training.

Keywords: teacher beliefs, training, experience

Introduction

The concept of teacher beliefs and their role has become fundamental in educational research in the last 30 years and it is recognised that an understanding of how beliefs operate will give us insights into how teachers work and how they learn (Richards, 1998). Teachers are "active, thinking decision makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practically-oriented, personalized, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs" (Borg, 2003) and this is why the beliefs held by teachers about language, language teaching and learning are an important concept to research; they affect the decisions made by teachers when planning their lessons but they also influence their actions in the classroom (Johnson, 1994).

The purpose of the present study was to examine the type of influence

- a) participation in pre-service teacher education programmes and
- b) teaching experience

have on what teachers believe about language, language learning and language teaching. It was also examined the extent to which the above aspects affect change. Gaining such an understanding is hoped will help to provide a basis for pre- and in-service training.

Literature Review

Due to their complexity, beliefs pose a challenge to anyone who tries to define them (Pajares, 1992; Johnson, 1994). One reason why it is difficult to clearly define beliefs, is that they “travel in disguise” (Pajares, 1992.: 309), as there is a variety of terms used when referring to the concept of ‘beliefs’: e.g. attitudes, values, judgements, axioms, opinions, ideology, perceptions, conceptions, dispositions, personal theories, perspectives, rules of practice. Another reason is that beliefs are difficult to access, measure or observe, as they can only be inferred from people’s actions (Rokeach, 1968). In fact, it is a challenging task for research to attempt to show how ways of talking, thinking and behaving directly relate (Freeman, 1996). Donaghue (2003) explains that beliefs are difficult to elicit as they are subconscious; and this is why there are differences between what theories a teacher claims to support and how these are reflected in action. What most scholars, however, agree on is that when we talk about beliefs, we actually talk about a system, a set of beliefs or a network “which is coherent ... focused around some central issue, and ... is not held by everyone in a given culture” (Linde, 1980: 13).

For the purposes of the present study I have adopted Borg’s (2001:186) definition:

“A belief is a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by the individual, and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further, it serves as a guide to thought and behaviour.”

Borg’s (2001) definition brings together the common features of beliefs as these have been identified in various attempts to define beliefs:

- I. beliefs may be consciously or unconsciously held
- II. beliefs are evaluative
- III. beliefs are personal
- IV. beliefs guide action.

In educational research teacher beliefs are seen as having a filtering effect on all aspects of teachers’ thoughts, judgements and decisions (Basturkmen *et al*, 2004), and research studies are based on three assumptions (Johnson, 1994):

- Beliefs influence teachers’ actions in the classroom
- Beliefs affect the way teachers understand what learning and teaching are and how they integrate this knowledge in the classroom
- Beliefs need to be understood in order to design effective teacher preparation programmes.

Influential factors in the development of beliefs

The following four factors are said to be responsible for the development of the beliefs teachers hold:

a. Apprenticeship of observation

Teachers’ beliefs about teaching are formed early in life through their experience as learners (Pajares, 1992), which means that teachers’ development is closely linked to their prior individual personal experiences as students (Haritos, 2004). These early beliefs exert an influence on teachers throughout their professional lives (Mok, 1994; Borg, 2003) and as these beliefs form the basis of prospective teachers’ conceptualisations of language teaching (Borg, 2006a), they are resistant to change even when there is evidence that contradicts them (Nisbett and Ross, 1980).

b. Knowledge and educational development

When students enter university they already have fixed beliefs about teaching and learning, which according to research are rather stable (Johnson, 1994) and sometimes unrealistic or naïve (Posner *et al*, 1982; Brookhart

and Freeman, 1992). However, during their studies, they accommodate into their system the theories and the ideas they are presented with.

c. Teaching experience

“Classroom experience has been shown to have a powerful influence on teachers’ practical knowledge and hence to shape teachers’ actions” Borg (2006b: 40). In the classroom teachers have the opportunity to experiment with new ideas, to construct hypotheses that they then confirm or disconfirm (Williams and Burden, 1997).

Although I support that experience is among the most influential factors in the shaping of our beliefs, I question the learning value of teaching experience only. I view experience more broadly and by ‘experience’ I refer to the wisdom the teacher gains as a result of

- I. the everyday teaching in the classroom
- II. exchanging ideas with colleagues
- III. attending seminars
- IV. reading
- V. receiving various stimuli from the general context.

My definition of ‘experience’ above is a broad one, because I agree with those who support that experience alone is not enough and learning only from oneself is limited (Johnson, 1994; Kunzman, 2003).

d. Contextual factors

Due to the fact that teacher development is quite complex, it is necessary to examine the practice of language teaching in its context (Richards, 1998; Haritos, 2004). Highlighting the importance of context, Borg (2003: 94) explains that context includes “the social, psychological and environmental realities of the school and classroom”, i.e. parents, the school society, curriculum mandates, school policies, availability of resources, government documentation. Fullan (2000) adds that when there is rapport between all these contextual forces then learning occurs. However, because of the uniqueness of context, conclusions should not be drawn about behaviour without considering the defining context characteristics in which the behaviour occurs (Wright, 1992). Eraut (1994: 20) explains that “learning to use an idea in one context does not guarantee being able to use the same idea in another context”.

Learning and teacher change – belief change: the requirements of training programmes

In the present study *change* is viewed in terms of change in the beliefs language teachers hold about language, language learning, and language teaching that might happen as a result of:

- a) pre-service training
- b) teaching experience
- c) in-service training
- d) university studies.

Research has shown that teacher beliefs are stable and resistant to change (Kagan, 1992) and when changes occur then these are achieved slowly (Calderhead, 1996; Peacock, 2001) and only when considerable support is available to teachers (Calderhead, 1996).

As to linking change to teacher programmes, Guskey (1986) explains that such programmes aim to bring about change in the teachers’ classroom practices, in their beliefs and attitudes, and in the students’ learning outcomes. However, there is little empirical evidence which suggests that teacher training on its own can influence teachers’ beliefs (Peacock, 2001). Besides, input does not equal intake (Pennington, 1996), as

teachers take in only those aspects of the input provided that are accessible to them. In addition, a teacher in the present study, Elaine, when interviewed gave another reason why some seminars fail to promote change:

“In seminars they just present new and exciting ideas, but they never tell us what difficulties we are going to face in the classroom when teaching. It is only with experience that you know, for example, what difficulties your students are going to face when you present a grammatical phenomenon, so then you can adapt the focus of your lesson by taking the difficulties under consideration in your lesson plan.” (Elaine, IW)

Eraut (1994: 35) highlights this when he says that “we never really learn something until we have to teach it.” However, there are teacher training programmes that are successful and the following characteristics are suggested to add to the effectiveness of a training course:

- offering practical ideas that can be used in the classroom to enhance learning outcomes in students (Guskey, 1986)
- paying attention to how teachers understand their classrooms, the syllabus, their teaching and act accordingly (Williams and Burden, 1997)
- helping teachers become aware of their beliefs (*ibid.*)
- fostering the notion of critical reflection (*ibid.*)
- combining development and training (*ibid.*)
- building upon participant teachers’ existing beliefs and feature systematic and consistent long-term support in a collaborative setting (Wideen *et al.*, 1998).

Accepting that belief change happens, how does it happen? Guskey (1986) has proposed a model (Figure 1) that illustrates teacher change as a learning process that is developmental and experientially based. According to Guskey (1986), very few teachers leave a development seminar thoroughly convinced that the ideas presented will work for them. Therefore, the moment the teachers enter their classrooms after a training seminar, they should allow themselves some time for experimentation. But during that time they should be provided with enough support and guidance by their trainers or employers to help increase their confidence and they should be given opportunities to interact and share ideas. This process of interaction can provide teachers with feedback on the students’ progress as a result of the new practices implemented; and when teachers see from the feedback that the new ideas were effective in their classrooms they might change or adapt their beliefs and attitudes.

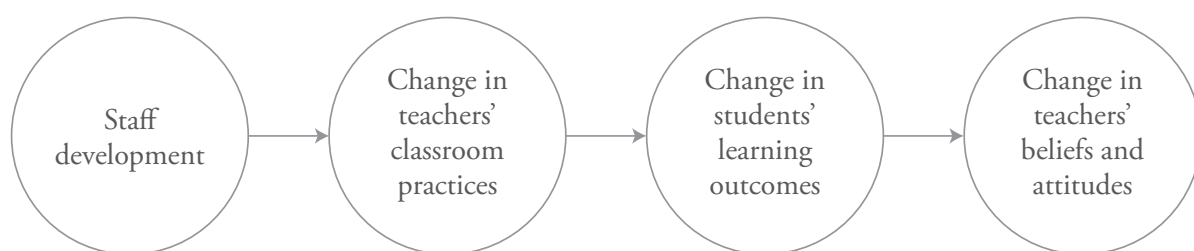


Figure 1: Guskey's (1986:7) change model

But is change a linear process? I would argue that each stage in Guskey's model above raises a number of questions:

- What makes a teacher enter staff development? Is this decision extrinsically or intrinsically motivated? Motivation, I think, plays an important role and affects the way input is received.
- Is change in practices at the second stage more like the teacher experimenting with new practices? Does belief change precede or follow from such experimentation?
- Does change in student learning outcomes refer to improved outcomes for all students, or the

majority? How soon should changes like this be apparent? What if a teacher is already happy with the students' outcomes? Would s/he then 'experiment' with new practices?

- What is the role of context in the whole process?
- Is change in beliefs in the last stage a result of the input the teacher received in stage one or of what happened in the classroom? In other words, it is really important for teachers to *believe* in an innovation before they can make it work (Fullan, 2001), which means that what happens and how ideas are communicated in stage one is quite important.

Woods (1996) identifies two aspects which he argues are catalysts for change: reflection and interaction. Reflection allows for processes to take place at a deep personal level (Pennington, 1996) and it helps teachers to make sense of the situations they find themselves in (Williams and Burden, 1997). Interaction, i.e. talking about the details of one's teaching, allows teachers to make their beliefs explicit (Orton, 1996), which is a necessary step before beliefs can be subject to examination.

So, change is not impossible as it is natural for teachers to evolve over time (Woods, 1996). It is, however, a complex process and it involves the questioning and challenging of one's beliefs (Burns, 1992) and a deconstruction of the existing belief system, which might result in periods of frustration and disorientation (Woods, 1996).

Towards a conceptual framework

I designed the present study based on the assumption that as teachers gain teaching experience they test out their beliefs and knowledge about teaching and learning. This might lead to belief change and therefore to changes in classroom practice. My view is presented schematically in figure 2, towards a framework that aims to illustrate how belief systems operate.

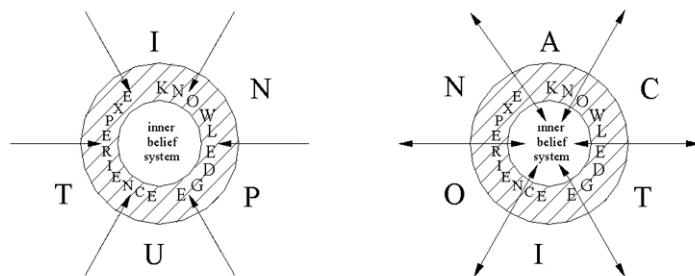


Figure 2: Belief structure (towards a conceptual framework)

The circles represent belief structures. The inner circle, the nucleus, represents those central beliefs that are resistant to change. These beliefs are protected by a filter (the outer circle) consisting of:

- I. the amount and type of experience and knowledge an individual has and
- II. the teaching context

The arrows in the first circle represent knowledge input and the arrows in the second circle represent action. The arrows between the inner belief system and the filter are two-sided, to illustrate the relationship between the two. The first image shows that the quantity and quality of input individuals receive are controlled by outside sources. The input is first processed by the protective filter and is either rejected or accepted into the inner belief system, depending on how consistent it is with the stable perceptions already held by an individual.

The action circle shows that the decisions teachers take are deeply affected by their beliefs. They are guided and formed by the beliefs located in the inner circle; however, before being actually translated into

actions, they again pass through the filter. The arrows in the second graphic are bi-directional in order to illustrate reflection. Teachers get feedback about their actions from the students, the school environment etc., so they reflect on the results of their actions and modify them in order to be more effective, i.e. to lead to effective learning.

The Study

This is an empirical, qualitative case study of an exploratory-interpretive nature, investigating the beliefs held about language learning and language teaching a) by experienced teachers and b) by student teachers attending pre-service teacher education courses. The study was conducted in Greece in the contexts of:

- private schools of foreign languages
- state and private schools
- teacher training courses

The study comprises of two small-scale studies:

- a) Study A, focusing on the beliefs held by experienced teachers about language learning and language teaching, on the expectations experienced teachers have from training, and on the factors that influence the shaping of beliefs of experienced and inexperienced teachers
- b) Study B, focusing firstly on the beliefs held by inexperienced trainee teachers about language learning and language teaching in comparison to those held by experienced teachers and secondly on the effects of pre-service training on trainees' beliefs.

The study addresses the following research questions:

- 1a) What beliefs do experienced teachers hold about language, language learning, and language teaching?
- 1b) What factors affect the beliefs held by experienced teachers and by student teachers?
- 1c) What expectations do experienced teachers have from training?
- 2) What are the similarities and/or differences in the beliefs held by experienced teachers and by student teachers about language, language learning, and language teaching?
- 3) In what ways do pre-service teacher training programmes affect the beliefs student teachers hold about language, language learning, and language teaching?

I would describe the study as ethno-cognitive (Woods, 1996), which means that it is ethnographic in orientation with regard to the research tools adopted in the data collection and analysis stages and cognitive in terms of what it is trying to describe, i.e. the beliefs teachers hold.

Participants

The participants include the following groups of teachers:

- a) six experienced teachers, with at least five years of teaching experience
- b) nine student teachers attending teacher training courses

Methodology

Primary data were collected and the data collection process for study A involved three stages, comprising of questionnaires, observations and audio recorded interviews; for study B it involved two stages, comprising of pre- and post- questionnaires.

The questions in the questionnaires were open, derived from reviewing the literature on beliefs and were grouped in three main categories: a) language learning, b) language teaching and c) development and change.

The experienced teachers were observed and interviewed, after having completed the questionnaire. The observations² were conducted in order to serve as a background for the interview. During the observations I kept field notes on issues linked to the teachers' answers in the questionnaire and to any issue I felt we should further discuss in the interview. The interviews were semi-structured, as the course of the interview was determined by topics and issues emerging from the questionnaires and the observations.

Analysis

A preliminary analysis was carried out immediately after the data collection. So, as for the experienced teachers', questionnaire data was first analysed. It was displayed in tables, and when the observations took place, the field notes were analysed and the questionnaire data were revisited and finally after the interviews all three data sources were again examined. This allowed for data reduction by identifying links among the different types of data collected before conclusions could be drawn. As for the data obtained by the trainees, the pre-course questionnaires were first analysed. Then, the post-course questionnaires were analysed and compared with the pre-course questionnaires. The categories were determined in advance and they were structured from the questionnaire.

Findings and Discussion

Research question 1a

The findings of the first part of the first research question were grouped into three themes (table 1). Beliefs experienced teachers' hold

Theme 1	language use versus language acquisition
Theme 2	focus on the learner as a person
Theme 3	importance of context

Table 1 Research Question 1a: Findings

Theme 1: When the experienced teachers talk about easy or difficult aspects of learning they distinguish between language acquisition and language use. They explain that although the students may know the grammar rules or the vocabulary they have difficulty in using them in production. Foppoli (2006) also highlights this when he says that

“A student who has memorized the rules of the language may be able to succeed on a standardized test of English language but may not be able to speak or write correctly.”

Theme 2: The experienced teachers seem less preoccupied with matters of language system and learning process and more concerned about the learner as a person. When they talk about learning they place emphasis on using learner-friendly material, on combining the students' interests with the language, on making the learning process fun and less complicated for the learner, and finally there is emphasis on the learners' individuality. Similarly, when they talk about teaching they place the learner in the centre and link effective teaching with the students' progress. Highlighting the humanistic rewards of teaching (Breen *et al*, 2001; Richards, 2006), they state that the teacher should help the students to develop as individuals and to be responsible citizens.

Theme 3: The fact that there are differences between state and private school teachers indicates that the context of work is of paramount importance in shaping a teacher's beliefs but also in dictating her needs. Private and state schoolteachers may share some beliefs about what constitutes effective teaching and learning, but there are also differences, which can be attributed to the different contexts of work. For

example, they have a different approach towards classroom management: state school teachers work with larger groups and shout more or punish a student more often, whereas their colleagues in private schools opt for other techniques (e.g. gestures, eye contact).

Research question 1b

Regarding the influential factors in the shaping of beliefs of experienced teachers and of student teachers, both groups value their own experience as learners, a point that has been highlighted by other researchers as well (Lortie, 1975; Mok, 1994; Johnson, 1994).

Experienced teachers, however, place their own experience on top. Teaching experience is really valued (Mok, 1994) and teachers feel they learn a lot every day from what takes place in their classrooms or from their mistakes. State school teachers, however, stated that in the context of Greek state schools teaching experience might also be the cause for inflexibility and it might also be a factor that constitutes an impediment to change, teachers may be reluctant to change due to established routines.

While both experienced and inexperienced teachers put their studies as last in the list, the role of knowledge and training is not undervalued. The experienced teachers state that they have made changes in their beliefs about learning and teaching as a result of experience but also as a result of attending seminars. Similarly, trainees claim that they have changed as a result of attending the training courses, which indicates that input from studies or seminars can be influential.

Research question 1c

As for the expectations experienced teachers have from training, both state and private school teachers have the same expectations from training seminars, although the reality they face is different. Private school teachers have the chance to attend such seminars more often and they find that these are helpful. They admit that they have implemented new ideas in their teaching as a result of attending seminars. State school teachers, on the other hand, although they value training, explain that the focus of the seminars most of the times does not match their needs, as there is a tendency for such seminars to focus on preparing students for exams. One of the state schoolteachers said in the interview that too many seminars focus on learning difficulties and dyslexia. She stresses that although the topic is interesting, foreign language teachers in state schools also have other needs, like some advice on classroom management, motivation, and on implementing learner friendly methods (e.g. group and pairwork).

Research Question 2

Comparing the beliefs held by experienced teachers and inexperienced trainee teachers about language, language learning and language teaching, differences have been identified:

Beliefs about language: Student teachers provide a broader view of language and define it not only as a system of communication, but also as culture and civilization.

Beliefs about language learning: Experienced teachers describe learning through the students' ability to use the foreign language, whereas student teachers focus more on acquiring knowledge. Another difference is that student teachers sometimes use jargon, whereas experienced teachers give actual examples of what happens in the classroom. This could be because student teachers are working with unanalysed received knowledge rather than knowledge internalised and integrated into their beliefs and practice.

Beliefs about language teaching: One of the differences between experienced and inexperienced teachers is that when the second describe a teacher's qualities they seem to possess a more humanistic view of the teacher's role (e.g. they describe a teacher as caring, sensitive, tolerant) and this seems to be in contrast with the more learner-centred views of experienced teachers discussed earlier. In addition, regarding the

role of the lesson plan, the experienced teachers are more flexible and not afraid to deviate from their plan, whereas the trainees express the belief that a teacher should stick to a plan. Another difference has to do with the teachers' approach to classroom management. Trainees believe that the teacher should be friendly and flexible and minimize teacher talking time, whereas their experienced colleagues mention specific techniques they use to bring the class back to order.

Research Question 3

Concerning the effects of pre-service training on the beliefs of inexperienced teachers, only few changes have been identified. But the trainees say that as a result of attending the training course they have become more aware of what learning and teaching are.

Beliefs about language and language learning: Little change has been identified, which regards the aspects they consider as easy/ difficult when learning a foreign language. Speaking has been added to the list of difficult aspects and reading to the list of easy aspects. One possible explanation for this might be that this change has to do with the content of the training courses they attended. The trainees also seem to realise the need for encouraging learners to become independent. In the majority of their beliefs no change has been identified but they seem to be more aware of the need to motivate learners, to use authentic material, and to place the learner in the centre.

Beliefs about language teaching: No dramatic change has been identified, just evidence of increased awareness. They seem to realise the need to adopt communicative practices and to use a variety of materials and methods when teaching. Also, concerning classroom management most trainees now believe that the teacher should be friendly and flexible, a belief I think will be challenged once they enter the classroom if we take into consideration the views expressed by experienced teachers, especially by state school teachers.

A final point I would like to make, is that although small changes have been identified, when the trainees were asked directly whether they think their views have changed they all answered positively.

To conclude, more research needs to be done especially with experienced teachers, because they are a group with specific needs and interests. Particularly in the Greek context, state and private school teachers should be further researched, as a clearer understanding of the challenges they face will help trainers to offer more helpful seminars and provide them with the support they need.

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