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## **Teachers' Beliefs and Practice in the Linguistics Classroom<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

Teaching refers to all the activities that are intended to bring about language learning. Teaching does not only include teacher's skills and knowledge, rather it includes even their beliefs. It has been argued that teachers' beliefs are stronger than their knowledge. Teachers' beliefs include their beliefs about their learners, learning and about themselves as persons. But do teachers preach what they teach? in other words, "Do teachers' practice what they believe in?" and "Is there a discrepancy between what teachers do and what they think they do in their classrooms? A study has been conducted with teachers of first year linguistics in the department of English-Badji Mokhtar University- Annaba. First year linguistics aims at developing learners' background knowledge and awareness of certain terminology related to this field of study. The questionnaire revealed that for the majority of teachers what they believe in is not reflected in how they teach.

**Keywords:** Teachers' beliefs, Learning, Teaching, Reflective teaching cycle.

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## **Introduction**

Efficient teachers believe that their main concern is their students and how to make them successful. However, the actual learning outcome in our university in Annaba- Algeria is not promising and this developed an urgent need that teachers consider their teaching approaches and methods. Certain teachers believe in the traditional way of teaching, in which learners depend totally on their teachers' knowledge; others believe in learner centred classrooms, where learners are responsible for their learning. Teachers' beliefs have strong impact on how they teach. Hence, for an efficient teaching/learning situation, teachers need to constantly reflect on whether their beliefs are in parallel with their actions or are they in opposition? In fact, reflection on one's teaching is based on considering one's beliefs and practice in an attempt to move away from the teacher centered learning situation. Reflective teaching refers to the deep consideration of one's knowledge, skills and actions as teachers. Consequently, the reflective teaching cycle goes through certain phases and leads teachers to play most efficiently the role of facilitators in their classrooms.

### **1. Teaching**

According to Cowan (2006, p. 100), teaching is the purposeful creation of situations from which motivated learners should not escape without learning or developing. Richards, Ho & Giblin (1996) see teaching as a cognitive as well as behavioural activity which is concerned with knowledge, awareness, beliefs and skills. Williams & Burden see teaching similar to learning, "Teaching, like learning, must be concerned with teachers making sense of, or meaning from, the situations in which they find themselves"(1997, p. 51). Moran & Dallat (1995, p. 24) explain that teaching involves considerable interchange between thought and action as teachers' understanding of teaching is not complete, but is continuous with every new experience,

For instance, Bartlett (1997) defines teaching as "an interactive process that needs to develop shared understandings in a community of knowledge users and developers" (p. 204). He advocates that teaching becomes pedagogy when teachers involve learners in learning inside and outside the classroom. Tudor (1996) highlights that in a pedagogy emphasizing learner centredness, teachers' and learners' role should be redefined.

Moreover, Hyatt & Beigy (1999) draw attention to the impact of teaching and the teacher on the learning process. Stern (2001, p. 21) explains that a theory of language teaching always implies concepts of language learning; teaching refers to all the activities

which are intended to bring about language learning. He admits that a good language teaching theory would meet learners' conditions and needs in the best possible way. For Arnold (1999, p. 25), "Learning is a goal; teaching is but a tool", then, she adds, "after all as teachers we should make their (learners') progress our main concern". Robles (1998, p. 46) clarifies, "Fostering our students' awareness of the learning process is clearly in their own interest; however, making them more active, responsible, autonomous and positive has to be in the teacher's interest, too".

## **2. Teachers' Beliefs**

Richards (2000) considers teachers' belief system as the primary source of teachers' classroom practice. Teachers' beliefs include their assumptions about teaching and learning. Freeman & Richards (1996) pinpoint that teachers' previous learning, knowledge and beliefs about teaching serve as a powerful determinant of teachers' perceptions and practices; they are often resistant to change. Ferraro (2000) adds that teacher's beliefs affect their student's lives. Similarly, Xu (2012, p. 1397) Explains,

Teachers' beliefs are important for understanding and improving educational process. They closely guide language teachers to adopt their teaching strategies for coping with their daily language teaching challenges, influence their general well-being, and in turn, shape language learners' learning environment, their motivation and their language achievement and ability.

Likewise, Williams & Burden(1997, p. 56) recognize teacher's beliefs as central in the construction of reflective teachers; "...teachers are highly influenced by their beliefs, which in turn are closely linked to their values, to their views of the world and to their conceptions of their place within it". They advance that beliefs are influential in how teachers organize and define tasks. For them, teachers' beliefs include beliefs about learners, learning and themselves. Teacher's beliefs about learners include teacher-learner power relationship, awareness of learners' differences and motivation strength. Next, teachers' beliefs about learning refer to learning as a means to an end, to pass examinations or as a life-long process. They advance; "We can only be really effective teachers if we are clear in our minds what we mean by learning because only then we can know what kinds of learning outcomes we want our learners to achieve" (ibid, p. 60). Xu (2012, p. 1400) explains further that "establishing correct beliefs about learning is to learn that we [teachers] must be clear about what the language is and how to study it"(Idem). Finally, teachers' beliefs about themselves is

concerned with teacher's conception of themselves as persons and what kind of social interaction they believe is the most appropriate for their learners.

Besides, teachers should be aware that the conscious effort is required to bring their behaviour into line with their current beliefs about teaching and learning (Woods, 1996). He further pinpoints that there are certain teachers who are aware of the discrepancies and the conflicts between their beliefs and their actions and they reflect on the possibilities, trying out new alternatives via reflection. Elbaz (1988) shows that teacher's ability to act to change a situation is enhanced while this last analyzes the situation in depth and perceives its current contradictions. Therefore, teachers should be aware that there is no progress if what they believe in is not reflected in what they do.

### **3. Reflective Teaching**

Reflective practice is an important concept in the literature on teaching and learning in Higher Education. Blàzquez pinpoints reflection as a powerful instrument that brings about change in the classroom; it enables teachers to overcome the teacher-centered style of teaching, personal traits and the experiences by allowing teachers to give their students appropriate control over their learning (2007, p. 33). Knezevic & Scholl (1996:, p.79) argue, "Reflection has the power to help the teacher connect experience and theoretical knowledge in order to use the area of expertise more effectively".

Bartlett (1997) mentions double meaning related to the term reflection. The first involves the relationship between one's thought and action. The second refers to the relationship between teaching actions and the purposes of education in society. Farrell (2003) reveals that reflective teaching frees teachers from impulse and routine actions; it allows teachers to act in an intentional manner. He explains that reflective teaching is a sign of intelligent actions and it embodies the need to grow beyond one's level; "Reflection enables teachers to experience and enjoy a new level of self-articulated professionalism" (p. 14).

Dewey (1938) refers to certain attitudes as essential components of what he refers to as readiness to engage in reflection: whole-heartedness, directness, open-mindedness and responsibility. Whole-heartedness refers to the interest in the subject matter; directness indicates the absence of anxiety and the development of self-awareness and self-confidence. Open mindedness refers to learners' readiness to acquire new ways of learning, while responsibility relates the three previous attitudes in order to take decisions and actions. Rodgers (2002, p.863) adds to Dewey's four attitudes curiosity and the desire for growth.

Walkington (2005, p. 53) asserts, “Reflective practice is promoted as crucial and its development is the responsibility of all teacher educators- both at university and schools”. Then, reflection is a process of continual intellectual, experimental and attitudinal growth (Hedge & Whitney, 1996).

#### **4. The Reflective Teacher**

For an effective teaching environment, Underhill (1999, p. 125/6) makes a distinction between three roles the educators undertake in the classroom: the lecturer, the teacher and the facilitator. The first, lecturer, refers to the teacher as source of knowledge in his/her subject but has no methodology to teach it. The second, the teacher, implies that the teacher has knowledge about the subject matter in addition to certain methodology to teach it. The last, facilitator, refers to teachers’ knowledge, methodology and interest in developing autonomous learners. The facilitator teacher actively studies and pays attention to the psychological atmosphere and the inner processes of learning and a moment by moment basis, with the aim of enabling learners to take much responsibility for their learning. Arnold (1999, p.107/8) clarifies further that learner autonomy is a decision taken by the teacher to share power and enable the learner to become self-directed.

Freeman & Richards (1996, p. 1) view that “in order to better understand language teaching, it is necessary to know more about language teachers: what they do, how they think, what they know and how they learn”. Hinett (2002) emphasizes that the teacher should be reflective in order to be effective. She adds, “to bring change and model good reflective practice for students, teachers need to engage in and model the ideas, practices and processes that are conducive to such learning” (p. 50).

Wallace (1996) sees that reflective teachers are pro-active rather than reactive; they are continually engaged in developing their professional expertise via solving problems, deepening their understanding of their subject-matters, of themselves as teachers and of the nature of their teaching (Schön, 1983). Fatemipour (2007) points out that reflective teaching can only occur when teachers are willing to endure the trouble of searching. However, some teachers are impatient and may choose the first given solution; others may avoid the state of doubt by stopping reflection, and for others this state is a sign of their mental inferiority. He asserts, “one can think reflectively only when one is willing to endure suspense and undergo the trouble of searching (2007, p. 40). Rodgers explains,

....a reflective teacher does not merely seek solutions, nor does he or she do things the same way every day without an awareness of both the source and the impact of his or her actions. Rather, from his or her practice and the students learning, the teacher seeks meaning and creates from this a theory to live by, a story that provides structure for the growth of the students and the teacher (2002, p. 849).

In addition, Scales (2008) pinpoints that reflective teachers are more capable of developing reflective learners, “if we practice reflection we can more effectively encourage learners to reflect on, analyze, evaluate and improve their own learning” (p. 14). In fact, Sprenger reveals, “there is a consensus that reflection can be and must be taught” (2005, p. 47). Furthermore, Lyons (2010, p. 118) pinpoints that reflective teachers ask questions rather than give answers; hence, developing learners’ questioning minds is part of teacher’s effective teaching.

## **5. The Reflective Teaching Cycle**

Bartlett (1997) suggests a five- phase model representing the reflective cycle: mapping, informing, contesting, appraising and acting. First, mapping involves the observation and the collection of information about one’s own teaching considering “What do I do as a teacher?” It can occur through audio/visual means or journal/diary writing.

Second, informing refers to “what is the meaning of my teaching? What did I intend?” It deals with the consideration of the first record in order to make meaning out of it. Informing may occur after a teaching sequence or a lesson; besides, it can be accomplished individually or in discussion with others. This supports the idea of teaching as interaction since teaching cannot be separated from one’s students, culture, expectations and participation in the society. The outcome of this phase of informing is the distinction between teaching as a routine and teaching as reflection which searches for the best possible solution based on informed choice.

Third, contesting deals with “how did I come to be this way? How was it possible for my present view of teaching to have emerged?” This phase considers the ideas and the reasons that uncover one’s teaching assumptions. The phases of mapping and informing consider one’s theories about teaching, while the contesting phase confronts the reasons for one’s teaching actions; “Contestation involves a search for inconsistencies and contradictions in what we do and how we think” (p: 212).

Fourth, appraisal deals with “how might I teach differently? or what would be the consequences to learning if I changed...?” This phase leads to a search for alternative paths of

action, in which a link is established between the thinking dimension of reflection and the search for teaching ways with one's new understanding. Acting, the last phase in the cycle deals with "what and how shall I now teach?" There is continuity between the preceding phases and the phase of putting in action new ideas about one's teaching.

Lange (1990) highlights that reflective practice allows teachers to examine their relations with their learners, beliefs, capabilities, successes and failure. Indeed, Gebhard sees that an awareness of these aspects of one's teaching benefits teachers in understanding the effect of their teaching practice on their learners, "The more aware they become of the consequences of their teaching, the more control they have over how to teach" (1992, p. 5). Reed & Koliba (2000) draw attention that the depth of reflection determines the quality of attitude and the subsequent action.

## **6. The Study**

The main reason behind this research is teachers' disappointment of the deterioration of learners' level in learning English as a foreign language, and more precisely in learning linguistics in the department of English- Badji Mokhtar university-Annaba- Algeria. Linguistics teachers' believe that they are working hard with their students who should play more active role in their learning; however, the results are not promising and students keep being dependent on their teachers with low rate of success every year in this module. This raised our curiosity to answer the following research questions: "Are teachers' beliefs in accordance with their practice in teaching first year linguistics or are they in opposition?", "Is learners' dependence on their teachers the result of a teaching method that did not provide any opportunity to value learners' contribution in their learning? And have teachers unconsciously developed this dependence? We hypothesize that if teachers' beliefs are in accordance with their practice, then they will constantly reflect on how to develop first year students' active in the linguistics session".

First year linguistics session is entirely introductory in nature; the emphasis is on basic concepts in addition to the necessary terminology to get students into the circle of linguistics. This module aims at achieving the following objectives: 1) Familiarizing students with basic terms related to the field of linguistics, 2) Involving students in the scientific study of language dealing with the analysis of sound system, word formation, syntax and meaning, 3) Raising students' awareness of some areas related to the field of linguistics such as language change, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics, 4) Developing learners' background knowledge in the field of linguistics.

We relied on a questionnaire as a research tool to investigate first year teachers' beliefs and practice in the module of linguistics in the department of English, Badji Mokhtar University-Annaba. The questionnaire was answered by all the first year teachers of linguistics; they are four female teachers; three have the magister degree while one teacher has the doctorate. Their teaching experiences of linguistics differ as follows: T1: 15 years, T2 :12 years, T3: 6 years, T4: Less than one year.

### **Questionnaire results**

In teachers' beliefs section, three teachers see learning as "*Dispensing knowledge*", "*the transmission of knowledge*", and "*giving information*". These answers refer to the behaviourist theories which visualize the learner as the passive receiver of a readymade body of knowledge. However, T4 believes that teaching is not a mere transmission of knowledge; it is a mission of transformation of lives that accounts for both cognition and affect. This view reminds us the humanistic and the constructivist views.

Besides, T1 and T3 see learning as the acquisition of knowledge but they have not clarified how? For T2, this acquisition needs learners to play an active role in the construction of their knowledge; that is the constructivist view of learning- a fact which contradicts with her beliefs about teaching. Conversely, T4 does not restrict learning only to the acquisition of knowledge but also of skills that enable the learner to develop a critical mind; for her learning is the process of inner transformations.

In answering the question about the characteristics of a good teacher, teachers' answers were too vague: ". *The ability to care about learning, learners, the material and the teaching, flexibility;*" *motivation, enthusiasm, patience and pedagogy*", "*who succeeds to achieve his goal, that is to make sure the learner gets the information and understands it*", "*have a good command of the content he's teaching, and then should be good at explaining this content*". However, none of them have referred to the role the effective teacher plays in involving themselves and their learners in reflection about their practice. All the four teachers agree that the teacher has a role in affecting learners' progress.

In dealing with teaching linguistics, all the four teachers affirm that they like teaching this module; though three of them find it demanding and one teacher (T4) finds it demanding and difficult since it is her first year of teaching it. For T1, T2 and T3, teaching linguistics is demanding because of the nature of the subject-scientific, theoretical and technical, it needs deep research and simple language with clear ideas; in addition, it deals with more than one language.

Considering their roles during the linguistics session, two teachers (T1+T4) affirm that they are the source of knowledge, (T2) facilitator, while T3 affirm that she is a facilitator and the source of knowledge? Which is totally contradictory! They clarify further:

T2: *I do my best to help learners understand and like linguistics, explain and repeat if needed.*

T3: “*by explaining and clarifying complex notions?*”

However, neither T2 nor T3 have referred to the learners’ active role through certain learning activities in the linguistics session. Moreover, “explaining, repeating, clarifying” are the qualities of the teacher who is the source of knowledge; they are there to provide information and not to facilitate it. Then, even T2 and T3 are the source of knowledge in the linguistics session. These two teachers have equated “ facilitation” with “helping”.

Furthermore, T1 affirms that their learners rely 50% on her to learn linguistics; for the other teachers, learning linguistics is teachers’ responsibility since T2 and T3 affirm that their learners rely on them more than 50% while T4 opted for 100%- a complete reliance on her to learn linguistics. Considering the learning tasks and activities in the classroom, two teachers (T1+ T3) affirm that they do involve their learners in some activities during the linguistics session whereas the other two teachers (T2+T4) do not. T1 clarifies that she involves her learners in pair and group work in order to help them think together. It is clear that T1 is interested in developing interaction and motivation during her session. T3 explains that she asks them to make some research on the lesson and present it in the class; however, the question is how do they present their work in the classroom, just hand it to the teacher, expose it in front of the whole class, use it in class discussion? The kinds of activities the learners are involved in are not clear!

Concerning checking learners’ comprehension, only T1 was very clear since she includes individual, pair and group work. The other three teachers do either ask questions or answer learners’ questions; but the question is: are they checking every learner’s comprehension? Or at least are they involving every learner in checking his/her own comprehension? Or, even, do learners check each other’s comprehension? Learners need to be involved in assessing their own comprehension and even each other’s comprehension in every session. The fact of asking questions or answering questions for some learners does not reflect the comprehension of the whole group members!

In analyzing the questionnaire, the results shown different degrees of discrepancies between teachers’ beliefs and actions. T1 has the behaviorist beliefs with certain constructivist

actions. T2 is constructivist in some beliefs but totally behaviorist in her actions. T3 behaviourist beliefs and actions; however, T4 has strong constructivist beliefs but totally behaviourist actions. In fact, all the teachers need to consider their beliefs and their actions through the reflective cycle for the best of their practice. Moreover, some teachers lack awareness of the effect learners' groupings, involvement, peer review and self/peer assessment might have on the linguistics session.

Therefore, we - teachers- are not aware that through such practice in our classrooms, we are unconsciously determined to develop passive reluctant learners because we feel more secure by having the total control of our classrooms through the traditional teacher centered teaching/learning situations; we have not left any room for our learners to be responsible on their learning. However, in the road towards promoting learner autonomy, reflective teaching is a basic condition to make our beliefs in accordance with our practice. "We cannot promote reflection in our classrooms if we ignore what reflection is? Or more precisely" what the reflective cycle is?" If the situation is so, the Ministry of Higher Education needs to plan for teachers' awareness rising through periodical teacher training insisting on reflective teaching and its importance in promoting reflective learning. To achieve successful learning, teachers should be constantly conscious of their beliefs and actions; teachers should move from the unconscious incompetence to the conscious competence following Bartlett's (1997) stages.

## **Conclusion**

Teachers' beliefs are strong determinants of how teachers teach and what type of learners they seek to develop. However, not all teachers are attentive to their beliefs and how this last affects their teaching. For the majority of teachers, teaching equals knowledge and skills but not beliefs! Nevertheless, it has been found that teachers' beliefs are stronger than their knowledge. First year teachers of linguistics showed different degrees of inconsistency between their beliefs and their practice in their classroom, but none of them showed accordance between their beliefs and their actions! To bring these teachers' beliefs in accordance with their practice, Bartlett (1997) reflective teaching cycle is of a great profit. Teachers should be aware of the differences between what they believe in and what they do in order to decide how to make it better. Teachers need to move away from the routine teaching to the reflective innovative teaching where every session represents a new learning experience for both the teachers and the learners; hence, "the key of how you teach is what you believe in".

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