

What do student-teachers believe about language learning?

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Abstract

The strong impact that beliefs about language learning have in the language classroom has been discussed widely over the previous years. The importance it has on planning courses and lessons and the considerations that a teacher must have regarding different cultural groups have also been addressed. While all these discussions are of much use, a new topic seems to be naturally emerging in the Mexican context with the growing number of BAs and MAs in language teaching being created. This paper seeks to begin a conversation among academics on the beliefs students of BAs have about language learning, the implications these beliefs have on their own learning and on their future teaching. All this by starting with an investigation of the student-teachers' beliefs at the BA in ELT - UJED in the hope of getting data that would help creating syllabuses and lessons better adapted to their cultural reality.

Introduction

Teacher's beliefs have been a research topic for decades, but what is a belief?

Teacher cognition is a term that has gained importance in the past years; according to Borg (2006:163) teacher cognition is related to "what teachers think, know and believe". Its relevance in Language Teaching and Second Language Teacher Education seems obvious nowadays, but it has not always been such.

In the 1980s, research on teacher cognition was found to be useful and necessary because it could impact Teacher Education and educational innovations. Shavelson and Stern (1981) recognized a dynamic two-way process happening in the classroom in which not only what

happens during class affects teacher cognition, but also teacher cognition affects what happens in the classroom. Later in the decade a group of researchers at Stanford University focused their studies on the origins of teacher knowledge, how it is gained, developed and used in the classroom and conducted a study in which they investigated how college graduates processed the subject-matter knowledge and translated it into the classroom (Shulman, 1986).

In the 1990's the concept of teachers' beliefs was analyzed more in depth and therefore, more clearly defined. Pajares (1992) suggested that the concept of educational beliefs was very extensive and difficult to handle and apply and suggested a set of educational beliefs that could help describe the general concept: beliefs about teacher efficacy, beliefs about the character of knowledge (epistemological) about origins of teachers' or students' actions, about self perception and self confidence.

Beliefs are defined in different ways: for example, according to Pajares *"is the individual judgment of the truth or falsity of a proposition, a judgment that can only be inferred from a collective understanding of what human beings say, intend and do"*. (1992:306)

Borg defines it as: *"a proposition consciously or unconsciously held, it is evaluative in that it is to be true to the individual, and it is a guide to thought or behavior"*.(Borg, 2001)

Beliefs are developed through time and experience and they are not easily eradicated. This complex system helps teachers understand and interpret what they experience and are useful to make decisions and decide what actions to take when teaching. Beliefs are taken into the classroom and affect the outcomes. For example, if a teacher thinks that as adults native like pronunciation cannot be acquired, then definitely, it will not happen (Horwitz, 1988). Borg has mentioned that teachers have a strong influence in the classroom and their preconceived notions about language learning can be seen once and again (2006). Many teachers of English believe students cannot understand if they speak in English, therefore they speak to them in Spanish. It is clear how beliefs are a central matter in teacher cognition and, therefore in teacher education as well as the need of exploring those beliefs both in experienced teachers and in student-teachers.

Bassano (1986), Morgan (1993) and Dornyei (2001) have made some suggestions as to rectify learners' erroneous beliefs; for the purpose of this study a selection will be considered:

- 1 Becoming aware of students' past classroom experiences and their assumptions about language learning;
- 2 Building students' confidence;
- 3 Involving learners actively in learning content;
- 4 Making learners aware of their attitudes toward language and culture;
- 5 Helping learners develop an informed understanding of the nature of second language acquisition and reasonable criteria for progress;
- 6 Helping students be aware of the fact that the mastery of a second or foreign language can be achieved in a number of different ways, using diverse strategies; and
- 7 Helping students discover for themselves the methods and techniques by which they learn best.

There is much work to do in this area in our context but it is considered of great value and importance to implement some of these suggestions and obtain more information from student-teachers beliefs.

Methodology

- Research question

This study was carried out with the purpose of answering the following research question:

What do student-teachers studying the last year of a BA in ELT program believe about language learning?

Exploring student-teachers' beliefs would be useful to analyze the impact that studying the BA has had on them as well as to produce data to evaluate the efficacy of the program.

- Method

For this study it was decided to use the mixed method approach using a quantitative instrument in order to collect punctual information about the student-teachers' beliefs and a qualitative one to deepen in some topics of interest.

- Participants

Students taking 7th semester of the BA in ELT were invited to take part in this study; from a total of 20, 12 agreed to participate.

- Instruments

The data collection for this investigation was made through the application of the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) designed by Elaine Horwitz (1988) by means of the software Surveyconsole. The BALLI consists of 34 multiple choice questions most of them using a Likert-type scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

Once the instrument was answered, the participants were asked to participate in a group discussion where the answers they had given to each of the BALLI items were presented. Participants reviewed each of the questions and then expressed their points of view about the ones they considered to be more relevant. The discussion was recorded and then transcribed to obtain qualitative information to complement the quantitative data.

Results and Discussion

While all of the items in the BALLI and the participants’ responses are of interest, only the most salient responses will be discussed. The results will be discussed item per item, contrasting the information that the questionnaire showed, with the data gathered through the group discussion.

It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.

Upon responding to this item, the vast majority of the participants answered “partially agree” or “agree” with a total of 75% of the answers falling on the agreement side of the scale. In this particular case, there seems to be direct influence from what they have learnt through their career, given that one of the participants mentions that:

“There’s a theory that states that there’s an age where people are more apt to acquire the language”. (I1S2)

While the participant does not specify which is the theory that is being referred to, there is enough security in him to verbalize the fact that such a theory exist, which means his belief is strongly settled.

I believe that I will learn to speak English very well.

The way the participants answered this particular item was very interesting. The total of the answers fell on the side of agreement, 41% partially agree, 33% agree and 25% totally agree. During the group discussion this variety on the levels of agreement is shown. While it was mentioned that to speak a language very well would be speaking it like a native speaker, it was also mentioned that:

“if you are a Mexican and you have a Mexican accent, that’s ok”. (I4S2)

This can lead us to believe that some of them consider “very well” to be possible for a non-native as well.

The comments provoked by this item could be complemented with the ones produced when the item *People from my country are good at learning languages* was discussed; in this case more than 60% of the participants agreed to an extent with the statement and the comments such as “I believe that language learning does not depend on a country, everyone can learn a language” (I5S1) reflected the shared belief about everybody being able to learn a language. This idea might be the result of the participants’ experience as language learners and the changes in their own proficiency in the language during the BA.

It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.

For this item, while the majority of the answers were “partially agree” (41%) the rest of the answers fall evenly within the rest of the options on the agreement scale, with the exception of “totally disagree”. In the group discussion this was one of the topics that provided more data. Two students made similar points mentioning that there was no need to have a perfect pronunciation as long as you were understood; this particular participation is valuable given that it makes us see the participants have a clear understanding of the concept of communicative competence. This however led to a discussion over having a “nice pronunciation” and how it is important to pronounce the words the way they “are” or else

there might be a misunderstanding, concluding with the idea that listening to the word in context would help the interlocutor understand even if the word is not well pronounced.

A rather alarming contribution however was one in which there is a mention on how:

“It depends; if you are talking to a native speaker I think it is quite important to have a good pronunciation. If you are talking to a native speaker you should be more careful about your pronunciation.” (I6S3)

Followed by another one in which it is mentioned that

“we as Mexicans are not proficient to correct others because none of the Mexicans will ever have a perfect pronunciation, the ones that should correct us are the ones who speak native English, but they don’t perhaps because they don’t want to make us feel bad”. (I6S8)

These contributions leads us to believe that there may be some students in the BA that still feel strongly about ownership of the language and believe they do not have some rights because the language is not their own.

It is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures in order to speak English.

For this item, the option that was selected by the participants the most was “partially agree” (33.33%). The results in general lean towards the agreement side of the scale, however only slightly which doesn’t allow for a safe interpretation of the data. On the group discussion however the participants expressed the need of knowledge of the target language’s culture in order to be able to be appropriate in many situations when speaking the language, and also to better understand culture related phrases such as idioms.

The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar.

In this item, 58.3% of the subjects’ answers fall between partially agree and partially disagree, suggesting that even though the respondents give some importance to the learning of grammar, they do not believe it to be the most important part of learning, which could mean that in the future, as teachers, they would pay attention to other areas of learning, such as vocabulary, pronunciation, discourse management, etc. This was confirmed through the group discussion, where the participants mentioned in several occasions that vocabulary was also an important area to be highlighted when teaching.

There was cause for concern in one case, where one of the participants mentions that he thinks grammar is for those who want to speak politely, making us reflect on where that belief comes from and why it has not been changed yet.

A contrast can be made between what the participants answered for this item and for item *The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary words*, where the majority of the answers fell between partially agree and agree (more than 70% in total which makes us infer that when the participants start teaching they will pay special attention to vocabulary).

Learning a foreign language is different than learning other academic subjects.

The vast majority of the subjects' answers (75%) fell on the agreement side of the scale, suggesting that students believe there is a difference between learning any given subject and learning a foreign language. This could be an advantage for the student-teachers, since they will most likely be more open to different ways of facilitating learning, and current trends regarding teaching and learning.

Conclusion

Beliefs have been confirmed to play a major role in teachers' actions in the classroom, from the influence they have on what a teacher does during the course of the class, to the influence his beliefs have on his students' beliefs (Borg 2006). This study has given some light into whether there has been an influence from the contents of the program of BA in ELT in the beliefs of its student-teachers. Some of the data does evidence that there are student-teachers that have beliefs that are correspondent to the paradigms that guide the BA. However, there is also evidence showing that some of them are still carrying previously conceived beliefs which somehow the BA contents have not been able to eradicate.

One of the main weaknesses of this study is that it cannot safely establish a cause-effect relationship between the beliefs the students had when they took part of this investigation and what they have been exposed to through their studies. While this has been a good

approach towards starting to understand what the participants' beliefs are, it would be necessary to perform a longitudinal study. What this study does do is confirm, as the literature states, that beliefs are not easily eradicated and that the studies of a BA are not enough to shape a student's beliefs. Thus, it would be of paramount importance to offer these students a program of continuous professional development with which they can stay in contact throughout their professional life.

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