Exploring Teachers' Pedagogical Beliefs as a Way to Help Teachers Develop a Critical Reflective Attitude

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Introduction

Recent pedagogical research findings seem to confirm the view that investigating the issues of language teaching and learning only on the basis of observable features of teacher behaviour leaves a lot of questions unanswered. As a result of the apparent limitations of such an approach, recent research focuses not only on what teachers do but also on the cognitive processes that underlie teachers' classroom behaviour. How teachers behave in the classroom is always in relation to what they think and believe, so there's no point in separating the two. According to Clark and Peterson, "the process of teaching will be fully understood only when these two domains are brought together and examined in relation to one another" (1986:256). The judgements and decisions that teachers make in and out of the classroom are always influenced by cognitive theories that teachers construct for themselves.

István Nahalka (1997) argues that there is no practice without inner theoretical models. The cognitive dimension was not so important for behaviorists, but by the end of the 20th century a new approach has emerged in educational research. This new constructivist approach emphasizes the construction of knowledge as the basis of the learning process, and views learning as an active, dynamic process in which learners actively construct their knowledge by integrating it in an already existsing mental system, which helps them understand and interpret new information. In case of dissonance, learners might even reformulate their inner cognitive structures. These active processes occur not only in learners' but also in teachers' minds: they construct their own theories and beliefs that consciously or subconsciously control their behaviour. Teachers are all participants of a lifelong learning process. Williams and Burden – based on von Glaserfeld's (1995) approach to learning – say that teachers should present learners with

problems to be explored rather than facts to be accepted without thinking (1997:48)

In ELT the concept of pedagogical 'belief' – a key idea in constructivist learning theory – has come into favour in recent years. Calderhead (1996) identifies the types of teacher beliefs which are most commonly explored. These are beliefs about teaching, learning and learners, subject matter, self as a teacher or the role of the teacher. A lot of educational research has revealed that teacher training courses do not prepare students to be able to cope with all the problems arising in real-world teaching situations. In constructivist theories of teacher development the keyword is construction and re-construction of personal theories related to teaching. In fact, the real learning process for teachers starts when they leave formal teacher training institutions. According to Nahalka (1997) the real learning process means that as a result of several factors, all the conscious or subconscious constructions and beliefs which teachers operate from undergo a change.

It is easy to see the importance of research concerned with the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their teaching practice. It would be ideal if teachers were aware of these constructs and had the ability of self-reflection, which could establish a basis for professional development. Bartlett argues that instead of 'how to' questions teachers should move to 'what' and 'why' questions. He says:

> Asking 'what' and 'why' questions gives us a certain power over our teaching. We could claim that the degree of autonomy and responsibility we have in our work as teachers is determined by the level of control that we can exercise over our actions. In reflecting on 'what' and 'why' questions, we begin to exercise control and open up the possibility of transforming our everyday classroom life. The process of control is called *critical reflective teaching*. (1990:205)

It is also important for teachers to consider the historical, social and cultural context in which their teaching is embedded. Willams and Burden later argue that a key element of the constructivist approach is that 'teachers become aware of what their own beliefs and views of the world are, which leads us into the notion of the reflective practitioner (1997:53). In the first part of this paper I will examine the concept of 'belief', then I will try to identify the possible sources of teacher beliefs, and finally I will present some models which can be used to elicit teachers' pedagogical beliefs.

The concept of teachers' beliefs

People's behaviour is always influenced by their beliefs. If we think someone is lying to us, we will act accordingly, irrespective of whether this

belief is true or not. Before considering the sources of beliefs I think it is important to clarify what this concept really means. In spite of the increasing popularity of the concept of belief, there are many definitions of it, and researchers often use different terms interchangeably, which results in a terminological ambiguity. For example, Pajares (1992) collects more than twenty terms defining the same concept. Therefore, it is very important to clear the meaning of the underlying notion. According to Borg there are four common features of the definitions of 'belief'. First, as opposed to 'knowledge' – which is true in an external sense – 'belief' is a mental state, a proposition accepted as true by the individual holding the belief. Second, beliefs guide people's thinking and behaviour. Next, some beliefs are conscious although individuals are more often unconscious of their beliefs. Finally, beliefs are value commitments and therefore have an emotional aspect (2001:186).

Nespor also mentions four main features which distinguish beliefs from knowledge. He says that beliefs are existential presumptions, which means that they are 'propositions or assumptions about the existence or non-existence of entities'. For example, a teacher might assume that a student is lazy. The danger in that is that a temporary feature might be considered as absolute, which has serious pedagogical consequences. The second feature, alternativity means that beliefs often represent an ideal reality for the teacher. In this respect beliefs help teachers define pedagogical goals and tasks. Perhaps the most important criterion identifying beliefs is the affective aspect. Beliefs are personal evaluations and feelings about something or somebody. Finally, whereas knowledge is stored semantically, beliefs are 'composed mainly of episodically stored material derived from personal experience or from cultural or institutional sources of knowledge transmission' (1987:318–320).

However, it is not always easy to distinguish between knowledge and belief. It may happen that someone believes he knows something, or says he believes something but does not act accordingly. Pajares (1992) tries to clear up the ambiguity surrounding this term, and concludes that the difference between knowledge and beliefs is more in degree than in kind. Woods comes to the same conclusion and introduces a more general concept: 'BAK', which stands for 'beliefs, assumptions and knowledge (1996:195).

Before examining the sources of beliefs, it is important to mention their functions. What are these mental constructions used for? Nespor (1987:320) claims that teachers fall back on their beliefs in case of ambiguous or difficult situations, when their knowledge is not available or not sufficient to understand and deal with a situation. According to Pajares, in teaching there are no complete begginers since everyone has some preconceptions (beliefs

or knowledge) about the teaching and learning process. These preconceptions can help teachers establish their identity and form social relationships. Pajares sees beliefs as the most important tools to interpret, plan and make decisions regarding new approaches, techniques or activities used in the classroom (1992:325).

Sources of teachers' beliefs

In his book *Socialization of teachers* (1977) Lacey investigates the process of how teachers' beliefs develop, and he sees this process as a process of socialization, which refers to "the development of sets of behaviours and perspectives by an individual as he confronts social situations" (1977:30). This process of socialization has many stages, from which teachers' beliefs and knowledge originate. Pajares points out that it is crucial when beliefs are formed because early experiences have a very strong influence on the formation of beliefs later. He writes that "the earlier a belief is incorporated into the belief structure, the more difficult it is to alter, for these beliefs subsequently affect perception and strongly influence the processing of new information" (1992:317). The first beliefs develop from personal experiences at primary school or to use Lortie's term "apprenticeship of observation". These early childhood memories are connected to a person or a significant situation. Even very young students can tell the difference between good and bad teachers who serve as models for the child. Lortie remarks that young students are not guided by pedagogic principles; their learning is intuitive and affected by the students' individual personalities (1975:62). Johnson says that early experiences sometimes have a controversial effect on students. He reports that students who are exposed to a certain approach or method in early childhood find it very hard not to use at least some elements of it no matter how critical of it they are. After the actual teaching experience, one student even admits: "It's like I just fall into the trap of teaching like I was taught and I don't know how to get myself out of that mode" (1994:450). This is a very interesting statement confirming the powerful influence of early school memories; a process which often happens subconsciously.

Teachers' beliefs can derive not only from early school experiences but also from outside the school. The role of family, friends, their values, or significant events cannot be overlooked. After reviewing earlier research Zeichner és Gore (1990:335) comes to the conslusion that in the classroom teachers often relate to students in a way that mirrors their early parent-child relationships. Beliefs formed in early childhood are very deep-rooted and are difficult to change.

The third stage in the development of teachers' beliefs is connected to formal teacher training. Some early researchers such as Lortie (1975) or Lacey (1977) mention that very often there is no continuity between what students learn about teaching and how they actually teach. He found that teacher training courses have little influence on the development of prospective teachers' beliefs as they usually reinforce already existing theories. One explanation could be the strong effect of early school experiences mentioned previously. Zeichner and Gore write that most teacher training courses are segmented, with a confusing message to prospective teachers. The authors claim that in many teacher training institutions there is a 'hidden curriculum' which contradicts the message of the actual methodology courses (1990:344). Therefore, it is of utmost importance to coordinate all courses in formal teacher training so that they are based on the same or similar principles. Peacock (2001:193) suggests that a reflective element incorporated into the syllabus will lead to changes in prospective teachers' beliefs. Deep-rooted beliefs need to be brought to the surface and critically examined if the aim of teacher training is real professional development, which is a key concept in construcivist pedagogy.

Certainly, the last stage of teachers' socialization is when they start working as a teacher and have first-hand experiences. According to Lortie (1975), this is the period when beginning teachers can test their implicit or explicit theories and beliefs in a real environment when dealing with everyday problems. In this stage, there are two factors that can contribute to changes in beginning teachers' theories: experienced colleagues and the students themselves. As many researchers claim, by becoming critically reflective teachers can achieve an improvement of teaching. Bartlett writes that the idea of reflection means that there is constant interaction between the teacher and the context in which teaching is embedded (1990:204). Beginning teachers form their identity and adopt a certain approach as a result of this dynamic process. They try to meet the expectations of society, the school, the colleagues and the students. However, this can only be achieved if they constantly challenge, evaluate and test their beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning.

Instruments to elicit teachers' beliefs

As I have previously mentioned, it is not easy to explore beliefs, as some of them may be unconscious. Donaghue points to another factor: the issue of self-image. Consciously or unconsciously, teachers project a certain image of themselves, so they may not always be honest if they have to speak about their own beliefs (2003:345). Furthermore, theory and practice, that is what

teachers think and what they do is not always congruent. To elicit beliefs Doff suggests an activity in which teachers have to give five important characteristics of good and bad teaching (1988:122). However, Donaghue (2003) argues that these questions are too general and familiar to teachers, so the answers may not be sincere. According to Edge (1992), the key word in professional development is co-operation between teachers. Roberts suggests a visualization activity, in which participants have to give a metaphor to discuss the roles of teachers and learners (1998:310-311). Again, the responses do not necessarily mirror what participants think. The technique that I would like to discuss now is based on Kelly's personal construct theory (1955). George Kelly was a humanistic psychologist who attached importance to the cognitive elements in human personality. He viewed individuals as intuitive scientists trying to make sense of the world around them. People have anticipations and expectations, just like scientists have hypotheses. People constantly formulate and test their hypotheses, and then form their own personal constructs. With the help of these constructs people try to understand and control events and situations. Personal constructs are continuously tested against reality and will change or be adapted with experience (Szakács and Kulcsár, 2001). Kelly says that personal constructs can be viewed as attributes which are always bipolar – we can never believe in something without denying something else. For example, if we claim that someone is clever, we implicitly deny that this person is unintelligent. Constructs are formed by recognizing a pattern in the events – similarities or differences – happening to the person. Therefore, at least three situations or things are necessary to the formation of a personal construct: two of these are perceived as similar and the third one is different from them (Carver and Scheirer, 2003). Kelly's theory seems to mirror the idea of reflection in the teaching process as teachers have to be aware of their beliefs and consciously reflect on them if they want to develop. As Pope and Keen say:

> ...individuals, students and teachers alike, [have] to be adaptive, personally viable and self-directive. Such self-direction or self-organization can only come about if the individual makes an effort to explore his viewpoints, purposes, means for obtaining ends and keeps these under constant review (1981:118).

In order to elicit personal constructs, Kelly devised a special technique called the Repertory Grid Technique (RGT), which can be used not only in clinical psychology, but also in pedagogy. It is not a traditional test, it is a scientific, self-discovery research tool. Pope and Keen write that RGT is a 'psychological mirror, which should help the individual, rather than the investigator, to understand his world' (1981:155). It is important to

emphasize that using the RGT, the investigator cannot influence a teacher's thinking by naming his own constructs. When using the RGT, the subjects have to compare three elements (for example, three people known to the subject). They have to decide which two elements are similar and which one is different and how. The result is the subjects' personal constructs, which is recorded on a grid, and they can analyze the next triad. The result is a grid showing the subjects' personal constructs. In 2000 the RGT technique was piloted with English teachers coming to the UK from different European countries for a development course in teaching methodology. 83% of the people answering an end-of-course questionnaire about the repertory grid instrument found that the RGT activity helped them reflect on their beliefs about teaching. Trainers reported that the activity generated discussion and provided an insight into participants' beliefs (Donaghue 2003:350). Therefore, I believe this activity can prove to be useful not only on in-service teacher development courses but also in teacher training.

Conclusion

I this paper I have given an overview of the current research trends concerned with teachers' beliefs. The practical aim of research is to raise teachers' self awareness and to encourage them to adopt a critical and reflective attitude to teaching, which is a key to real learning and professional development. In the first part of my paper I have examined the definition of the term 'belief', then I have discussed the possible sources of pedagogical beliefs. Finally, I have outlined a theory and a practical device, which can be used in teacher training courses to achieve the goal of independent, conscious self-reflection.

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