

Teacher Belief and Teacher Decision Making

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Abstract:

Teaching is an ethical act since teacher's act from a system of belief, which are either articulated or implicit. Teachers are also constantly making decision about subject matter and pedagogy, about "what" and "how" to teach. While many external and internal factors affect these academic and curricular decision, the single major factor influencing them is the system of beliefs they hold about the content and the context of their professional activity. This paper addresses issues with specific relevance to English Language teachers: Why English Language teachers want their students to learn English; what they believe about English and about their students; the choice they make in their language classes about curriculum, instructional strategies and assessment, and the belief in which these decisions are made.

Key Word: Teachers belief, decision making, pedagogy, curriculum

Introduction

Teaching is an ethical act since teachers act from a system of belief. They are constantly making decisions about students' subject matter and pedagogy about what and how they will teach. While many external and internal factors such as size of the class the amount of time available and the prescribed curriculum affect these decisions, the single major factor that influence these decisions is the system of beliefs they hold about the content and the context of their professional activity. It is therefore very important for the practitioners to know and articulate their beliefs, if these decisions are to be principled it is assumed that teachers can easily set aside their own belief about learners knowledge and learning and follow methods taught in teacher education programs. It may well be true if teachers know what their belief are! This aspect contributing to teachers' attitudes is the least understood, valued and researched. This paper offers an analysis of teacher decisions that are related to their belief, an initial description of Beliefs, Assumption and Knowledge (BAK) will highlight the similarities and differences among them. Finally the belief of English teachers and how their decisions and choices are influenced by their value system will be examined.

Belief, Assumptions and knowledge.

Definition and Description of BAK

The American Heritage Dictionary defines beliefs as 'mental acceptance or conviction in the truth or actuality of something' and as "something believed or accepted as true; especially, a particular tenet or a body of tenets accepted by a group of persons, "belief that most teachers hold is that education is best delivered in a school setting; from this springs their beliefs for example of the role and contribution a parents to a child's education and learning.

Assumption, on the other hand underlies what is inherent in the task or in the context and is necessary for the process of completing the task. It is implicit in the context related to stakeholders other than the teachers. Teachers assume for example that all students come into class ready to learn and that they are all in school because they want to be, without regard to what parents may have imposed on the children. Knowledge most clearly identified by academics and scholars, is objective fact (Davis, 2003).

A more recent, inclusive term posited by Borg (1999) is teacher cognition, knowledge and beliefs / assumption are acquired or learned differently, the acquisition of knowledge, through conscious, systematic approaches especially in formal learning context familiar to all teacher. The source of knowledge are vast and include printed and electronic media such as book, journals, films, videos and the internet. The format may be oral or written. Knowledge can therefore be articulated clearly since their impact is primarily verbalized (Nestor & Ross, 1987).

The process of the formation beliefs and assumptions and the characteristic they share are difficult to differentiate. From this point on, this paper will henceforth be allude to them as beliefs. Unlike knowledge, beliefs are a result of experience. Episodic incidents are stored and a scenario is constantly built and refined. These eventually changed into a beliefs system. Beliefs are thus unconsciously acquired without necessarily being verbalized.

Perhaps the most significant characteristics of the system of beliefs is that it forms a framework for our action, reaction, attitudes, Reponses, and decisions; in short, how we live our lives. Beliefs are both derived from the community and have a strongly personal element. Since input gained by experience is influenced by the society in which we live, It is not surprising that certain values and features of culture are taken for granted by the members of the group who share these beliefs.

Looking through a subjective lens. Beliefs are highly personalized. These almost contradictory elements are negotiated by a consciousness fact leading to and externalization of the belief within the cultural community (Borg, 2001).

Like attitude, beliefs may change slowly. Objective knowledge, information and personal encounters may challenge existing belief system, but do not guarantee and extensive modification of an individual's beliefs system, especially an adult whose beliefs have been accrued over a lifetime. The vast research available on effective teaching lays out in great detail the spheres in which teachers make decisions, and the conditions and factors that affect teacher decisions. Essentially teachers make decisions regarding their students the curriculum and its implementation all the time teachers supplement and improve the curriculum through planning and working with students, engaging in professional development, and sharing their classroom experience with other teachers (Kumar & Scuderi , 2000).

The following illustrated the areas in which teachers make decisions and the kinds of questions teachers consider in the process.

Teacher Decisions –Making

Students – who am I teaching?

- What do my students know? What is their threshold/ entry level knowledge?
- What is their learning style? How do they learn best?
- What kind of intelligence is their strength?
- Why do they learn English? Is it an instrumental or intrinsic purpose that motivates them?
- Which of them is likely to be more inclined to speak out in class and which of them will be more comfortable writing?
- Which of them is plateauing or fossilizing?
- Whose pronunciation is worth working on a little more and whose is not?

Curriculum- what should students learn?

- Do I teach vocabulary, grammar or a skill?
- Which spelling do I teach- American or British? (honour or honor?)
- Which textbook do use?
- Which language items are to be taught? In what order?

- Which errors do I accept and which not?
- Am I focusing on accuracy or fluency at a given stage?
- Do I teach grammar embedded or explicitly?
- Should I teach vocabulary in context or in isolation?
- How much time do I spend on the skill/ language item?
- Who should be called upon to answer?
- Should we do individual work or pair work?
- Should the output be oral or written?
- Should the reading and writing be done as homework or in class under my supervision?

Assessment- how do know the students know?

- Is this test for diagnostic, formative or summative purpose?
- What placement test do I use?
- How do is define students ability?
- What test do we use: teacher made or that provided be Examination boards?
- Should the output be oral or written?

Teacher decisions are based on both knowledge and experience (Breen, 2001). They draw on their understanding of research and theory such as when planning various activities aimed at students with different learning style. They base their curricular decision of what should be taught and when based on their knowledge of their students, they know the schema their students have and plan lessons that build on the pervious knowledge. Teachers define the essential knowledge their students should have and test them on this information what they deem integral to good learning. They know how much time they can spend on testing and plan either oral or written work depending on the amount of time and the facilities available to them. A teacher with 50 students who need to test vocabulary in 10 minutes is likely to give a written test while another teacher with 20 students may design a game to elicit the necessary information.

English Teachers Belief and Decision Making

The following illustrates the effect of teacher knowledge/ assumption/ beliefs on teacher decisions about the curriculum and their instructional strategies and the choices they make based on them that affect student learning and student achievement, while this example refers only to English teachers and has some beliefs that are specific to English teacher, the process can be extended to analyze all teachers of all content areas.

Teacher Knowledge

English teachers are aware of the fact that English is a world language, spoken 1/10th of human population (Ramannathan & Bruning, 2003). They are willing to provide it a prominent space in the curriculum and insist that all students should learn it well. Even in cases such as India where there is a lot of focus on mathematics and science, English is still valued, as seen by the rush for admissions into English medium schools and sections of the classes as against regional-language medium school section. The proliferation of English schools in Asian countries is another indication of the popularity of English world-wide.

The instrumental value of English is undeniable. Teachers know that it enable the speaker to exploit the various opportunities offered all around the globe and to keep pace with developments in science, technology and other field of study.

As the literature increasingly affirms, students learn with more ease and less stress from peers than from the teacher (Cruickshank, Jenkins & Metcalf, 2006). In response to this research finding, teachers allot more time form pair work in class.

Teachers know that during the silent period students receive more language items that they produce, to cater to this stage of learning teachers ensure numerous opportunities for language input for the students both orally and in writing,

Teacher Assumptions

Prompted by the knowledge that English in a world language teachers assume proficiency in English is essential for social mobility; teachers therefore expect students to be more focused on learning English than most of the other subjects. Two attitude result from this assumption. One is that teachers conflate social status and social mobility. The second point is that this assumption in turn contributes to the devaluation of the regional language. In their pursuit of excellence in English, such student may not place as much reliance on the local language. Teachers who are not aware of the place of errors in the language learning process often assume that they are the best models of the language. Assuming that language is best learnt by imitation, they provide a lot of time for teacher (Cruickshank, Jenkins & Metcalf, 2006).

Teacher's Beliefs

A widely-held belief, even in a predominantly monolingual society such as the US, is that polyglots are very intelligent (Davis, 2003). This belief along with the high value placed on the ability to converse has led some boards of education in India to emphasize the speaking skill by including it in the testing pattern. On the other hand, when teacher believes that English is a library language and is academically important, their classroom focuses on reading and writhing in the classroom to the exclusion of speaking and listening. However, it is true that teachers who do not reflect on their practice are not aware of the mismatch between their belief regarding the value they place on speaking English and their classroom practice of not providing adequate time for it. Curricular selection is influenced by various beliefs. When teachers firmly believe that English is necessary for academic success in school. It may result in lexical items form science and social studies explicitly taught in English classes to expand students' vocabulary and help them achieve success in these other content areas. A belief that language are closely associated with cultures and that languages are better and that language are better learnt at depth with knowledge of associated culture may influence the choice of material. Writing by native English speakers may find room in the anthology rather than those by writers of the host culture, without much regard to relevance of appropriateness. Teacher who avow 'I know my student and what they have learnt better than the authors of the textbooks do' create their own tests and do not use test questions provided in the textbook.

Most teacher express the belief that all students can learn. In many cases, this provides an argument to justify a lack of differentiation in both objective and approaches for differently abled students. Expecting the same performance form all students. Sometimes beliefs are influenced by research. For example, teachers know that language is learnt by imitation. English language teachers believe that native speakers identified as national of UK, US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, with all their dialects and variation are the best example of the language and that interaction with native speakers' increases language learning. Teachers holding these belief and who are not confident of their language ability adopt various strategies to bring in 'real English to their students. They use books and tapes that model native speakers and encourage students to have pen pals' from UK, US or Australia. When students share these beliefs, it results in a call for native speakers as teacher, with even untrained native speakers held to be better teachers than trained non-native speakers. This impact the professional image of English teachers, especially in language schools.

Teacher who believe in a cognitive approach to teaching, teach grammar explicitly rather than in context as research has suggested is more successfully and more effectively transferred into practice. New vocabulary may also be taught out of the context using the dictionary, with teachers justifying the approach with the part- to- whole argument, that students are more likely to comprehend the passage if they are familiar with the individual words. On the other hand, teacher who believe that grammar and vocabulary should be taught implicitly use very different approaches, with more authentic text and a greater focus on student work as the basis of analysis and learning.

In spite of research on error analysis, many teachers believe that, regardless of the relation of the dominant language to English, all errors are mainly due to L1 interference. As a result in English medium schools, students are explicitly forbidden to speak in any languages except English. Teachers who believe that errors are reinforced by peer teaching (Davis, 2003) plan a teacher-fronted class with little student-student interaction. On the other hand, teachers who believe that errors are a natural part of learning and should not be corrected, construct activities which provide for students to make errors and for teachers to model correct language items.

Example of teacher belief influencing teacher decisions

Decision about

Belief

Curriculum- what student should learn.

Culture

the language cannot be learnt without a target-language cultural component. Students are not just learning English; they are learning to think like people from another culture.

NS culture is different form/ better than ours.

Listening

what you cannot hear, you cannot reproduce/ speak.

Speaking

the ability to converse is the most socially valuable skill.

Reading

English is a library language and is academically important.

Writing

Critical thinking is clarified when students write.

Instruction- how students should learn.

Do we teach grammar

Grammar should not be taught....?

Embedded or explicitly?

Vocabulary in context or in isolation

inductive/ deductive – parts first whole next (or) whole first and then break into part. Multiple meaning of a word cannot be taught in isolation, only in context. Student need to know the vocabulary first if they are to understand the content.

How much time do we spend on language item?

the skill/
What value do I place on this skill/ language item?

Individual work

students learn errors from each other.

The teacher is the best model.

Pair work . student learn more form peers than from teacher.
 . students learn better with more time for practice, .
 provided by pair work

Assessment – how the students have learnt.

Using teacher-made test I know my student and what I have taught better .
 than the authors of the book do.

Written test students should be ready to take on academic work .
 in English-speaking countries.

Conclusion

The case of consistency among beliefs, knowledge of theory and classroom activities is not difficult to make. The lack of systematic reciprocal relationship between belief and involvement leads to tensions and dissonance, however, it is essential for all the available forums to help teachers challenge and uncover their beliefs and value, initial and continuing teacher education and all venues of professional development could provide opportunities for teachers to introspect.

Reflection is the key to a journey of such nature. The vast and growing literature on teacher reflection provides various formats and prompts for the necessary process. Action research is another activity that will help Teachers Bridge the gap between their actions and their belief framework. Neither may it be unreasonable to expect English teachers, whose coinage is language, to articulate and verbalize their beliefs!

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