
A Review of Research on EFL Pre-Service Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

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ABSTRACT: During the past thirty years or so, teacher education research has made significant contributions to the exploration of teachers' beliefs, and the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices, which has produced important findings for both pre-service and in-service teacher education. This article reviews the research on pre-service teachers' beliefs and practices in the field of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), extrapolating the complex relationship between EFL teachers' beliefs and practices. It begins with a discussion about the definition of belief, followed by an overview of the research history on teacher beliefs in general. After discussing the basic components of EFL teachers' beliefs, this article summarizes the empirical studies on pre-service teachers' beliefs and practices since 1990s, which reveals the diversity of the studies on EFL pre-service teachers' beliefs. Finally, the article outlines three perspectives from which EFL pre-service teacher education can be informed.

KEY WORDS: pre-service EFL teachers' beliefs, classroom practices, professional development

Teachers' beliefs are important concepts in understanding teachers' thought processes, instructional practices, and change and learning to teach. It was, however, not until the 1970s that research on teaching emphasized the significance of teachers' beliefs, which has generated a substantial body of research. Teacher beliefs, therefore, are important considerations in conducting teacher education designed to help pre-service and in-service teachers develop their thinking and practices. The growth of research in this area has instigated new ways of thinking about teaching and about professional and educational development, from which various implications can be drawn in teacher education.

Given the need for the improvement of teacher education and the importance of teacher beliefs in

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teacher education, the purpose of conducting this review is to investigate themes related to EFL pre-service teachers' beliefs, which helps to specify the role of these teachers' beliefs in promoting EFL pre-service teacher education.

I. DEFINITIONS OF TEACHER BELIEFS

'Belief' is a commonly seen concept in various research literatures from sociology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy and many other disciplines. Despite the diversity in using this term, the prior research and reviews on teacher beliefs and on teacher knowledge and beliefs (Fang, 1996; Kagan, 1992; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Woolfolk Hoy, Davis, & Pape, 2006) contribute to an agreement on some characteristics of teacher beliefs.

First, 'belief' is a subset of a group of constructs that name, define, and describe the structure and content of mental states that are thought to drive a person's actions. Teacher beliefs can be represented as a set of conceptual representations which store general knowledge of objects, people and events, and their characteristic relationships. Moreover, beliefs are often defined as psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions felt to be true. As a result, beliefs are the permeable and dynamic structures that act as a filter through which new knowledge and experience are screened for meaning. As Harvey says, 'a belief system is a set of conceptual representations which signify to its holder a reality or given state of affairs of sufficient validity, truth or trustworthiness to warrant reliance upon it as a guide to personal thought and action' (Harvey, 1986: 146). Belief systems therefore serve as a personal guide by helping individuals define and understand the world and themselves (Pajares, 1992).

Second, a substantial body of research suggests that both the professional development of teachers and their classroom practices are influenced by educational beliefs. According to Nespor (1987), beliefs reside in episodic memory of which the content is generated by earlier experiences, episodes, or from cultural sources of knowledge transmission. This rather affective and emotional aspect of beliefs plays an important part in storing, assimilating, and retrieving knowledge by evaluating and judging gathered information. This provides support for the assumption that teacher beliefs, as a substructure of one's general belief system and coloured by former experience, underlie planning, decision making, and behaviour of teachers in the classroom.

Thirdly, one of the greatest confusions about beliefs comes from its relationship to knowledge. In literature, knowledge is either taken as different from beliefs by nature, or used as a grouping term without distinguishing between what we know and what we believe. However, in many empirical studies on teacher beliefs, the distinction between knowledge and beliefs proves to be 'blurry' and 'inextricably intertwined', which makes it impossible to distinguish whether teachers refer to their knowledge or beliefs when they plan and make decisions and act in classroom (Verloop et al., 2001:446). Woods (1996) proposed an integrated network of foreign language teachers' beliefs, assumptions and knowledge (termed BAK), which is useful for defining the key construct under investigation. Because of the blurring differentiation between knowledge and beliefs, there is a trend not to treat these two concepts separately. In this article, therefore, I take the term teacher beliefs inclusively to embrace the complexity of teachers' mental lives underlying their practices.

II. THE DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCH ON TEACHER BELIEFS

As the research on teaching shifts its focus from products to processes, the research on teachers' cognition since the late 1970s has progressed through three distinct stages, each characterized by an emphasis on a particular domain of teachers' cognitive life: teachers' planning, teachers' interactive thoughts and decisions, and teachers' beliefs and implicit theories (Clark & Peterson, 1986: 257).

From the mid 1970s to early 1980s, studies typically focused on teachers' decision-making, concerning how teachers manage their classrooms, organize activities, allocate time, plan lessons, judge general student understandings and so on. Teachers' decision-making was thus seen as the link between thought and action. Based on Jackson's (1968) distinction between preactive (before teaching) and interactive (during teaching) teaching, research explored both the reflective decision-making that occurred in the teachers' planning and the spontaneous decision-making that occurred during classroom interactions. Nevertheless, the question is why, of all the possible choices, some are chosen and others not. Obviously, the focus of the research on the efficiency of decision-making did not take the knowledge upon which these decisions are based. The concept of decision-making, therefore, is so restricted that research diversified to include 'teachers' perceptions, attributions, thinking, judgments, reflections, evaluations and routines', which marked the second phase of research on teachers' thinking (Calderhead, 1996: 710).

Since the 1990s, the third phase of research has focused on the exploration of the knowledge and beliefs that lay behind the practice of teaching. Shulman (1986) started the research interest in the subject matter knowledge of teaching by suggesting that the ways teachers understood subject matter and the knowledge they developed that helped them foster students' learning of a subject was referred to as 'the missing paradigm'¹. Ever since then, several studies explored the knowledge that lay behind an individual teacher's classroom practice. Some focused on detailed case studies of teachers; others, ambitiously, tried to chart the development of knowledge base, which is potentially an endless task, taking the vast and idiosyncratic nature of human knowledge base. Research, however, indicates that given the complex and multidimensional nature of teaching, knowledge alone is not adequate in making sense of all teachers' behaviour and prioritizing problems to be tackled and actions to be undertaken, which necessitates the exploration of teacher beliefs. In this case, the role of teacher beliefs has been theoretically justified as the one which can help to complete 'the missing paradigm' to promote teacher education.

III. CATEGORIES OF EFL PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' BELIEFS

Despite a great amount of research done in the field, concerning the various roles of teacher beliefs in promoting learning to teach, little has been written on qualitative differences in types of teacher beliefs and relate the role of each of them to teacher education. Calderhead (1996) examined five main areas in teachers' beliefs: beliefs about learners and learning; about teaching; about subject; about learning to teach; about self and about teaching role, in which teachers have been found to hold significant beliefs. Such qualitative study of different areas of teacher beliefs can contribute to a fuller recognition of teacher beliefs and enhance our appreciation of how they

¹ The missing paradigm refers to the neglected domains as 'where do teacher explanations come from?', 'How do teachers decide what to teach, how to represent it, how to question students about it and how to deal with problems of misunderstanding?' (Shulman, 1986)

influence the process of learning to teach and how the quality of such processes might be improved. Drawing on Calderhead's categorization (*ibid.*), the following study relates these areas to EFL context, aiming to specify the role of teacher beliefs in EFL teacher education.

1) EFL pre-service teachers' beliefs about EFL learners and EFL learning

EFL learning is by no means an easy process, which involves a lot of issues to be fully understood². Teachers' assumptions about how the foreign language should be learned are likely to affect their way of teaching. One can envision many ways in which teachers' beliefs about language learning may influence their effectiveness in the classroom. A pre-service teacher, for example, who believes that learning a foreign language primarily involves learning vocabulary will spend most of his energy to teach vocabulary (Horwitz, 1988). If, for another example, a teacher believes that the learners' role in a language classroom is to listen and speak only when they are asked to answer questions, we may find that the students are left little time to talk in class. Some have thus argued that EFL pre-service teachers should go through a process of 'deconditioning' to rid themselves of preconceived prejudices which would likely interfere with their language teaching (Holec, 1987: 27).

2) EFL pre-service teachers' beliefs about EFL teaching

In a study for a proper form of education and training to university teachers, McLean and Bullard (2000: 83) reviewed that 'one branch identifying stages of development from an initial focus on presentation of self as knowledge expert to a focus on facilitating student learning and the other seeing the continuum from teaching as imparting information to teaching as a supporting learning'. It is true, as mentioned above, that people hold different conceptual orientations towards teaching and the role of teachers. Some teachers may regard language teaching as a process of information transmission while others think of the teacher as facilitator of language learning. Several studies suggest that student teachers frequently start professional training with views of teaching as telling and learning as remembering, which poses difficulties when they are encouraged to conduct communicative language teaching (Peacock, 2001).

3) EFL pre-service teachers' beliefs about EFL subject matter, pedagogical knowledge

It is necessary to know how student teachers view the importance of English subject matter as opposed to pedagogical knowledge. Students who major in English spend much more time on the course studying the language than on how to teach it. EFL students with four years' education in normal universities in China, for example, spend majority of their time learning language, with only two courses of teaching pedagogy and educational psychology two hours a week for 18 weeks (a term) respectively and another eight weeks' teaching practice. The 'inferior status' of pedagogical knowledge among foreign language students' courses will doubtlessly influence pre-service teachers' belief towards pedagogical knowledge, which will also affect their teaching practice. Some studies of teacher beliefs about subject have also argued that teachers can have very different views of their subject under different contexts (Freeman, 1991).

4) EFL pre-service teachers' beliefs about self

² The key concepts of EFL learning includes the understanding of the nature of language (e.g. competence and performance), the language learning process (e.g. nature and nurture, modularity and second language learning, creativity and routines in Second Language Learning) (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). As to teachers' views about language learners, teachers need to know the differences between individual learners both from cognitive (e.g. language aptitude and language learning strategies) and affective (e.g. language attitudes, motivation) perspectives (*ibid.*).

Pre-service teachers are in the beginning stage of being teachers, and therefore have potential for change. They are likely to match what they actually do with what they think they should do. Several studies have identified how teachers' belief about self shapes their classroom practice. The study conducted by Richards et al. (1996) on foreign language teachers focus more on their image in the students' minds than on pedagogical issues. Several studies have identified that beliefs teachers have of themselves are significant factors in affecting the teaching roles and practices that teachers adopt (e.g. Borich, 1999).

5) EFL pre-service teachers' beliefs about professional development

Like in-service teachers, pre-service teachers have also been found to hold beliefs about their own professional development but with very restricted accounts that teaching is largely a matter of personality together with a few managerial tactics that can be learned from observing other teachers. A teacher who considers teaching as a life-long learning process would see oneself reflecting and trying out one's theories constantly while a teacher who does not realize the importance of professional development would regard teaching as merely a task. Pre-service teachers' beliefs about their professional development can affect how they develop professionally. Sprinthall, et al. (1996) claimed that professional development, in a sense, is personal development, and 'getting satisfaction in professional development would guarantee personal development in general' (p.667).

From the above discussion, it is obvious that pre-service teachers hold certain beliefs while learning to teach, some of which may be 'detrimental' to their own language learning or to their future students' learning (Peacock, 2001: 183). In this case, such exploration of EFL pre-service teachers' beliefs can inform teacher education of these detrimental beliefs so that teacher education programme can try to eliminate them before the pre-service teachers start to teach and to ensure that these beliefs do not influence their teaching.

Moreover, it is undeniable that these different areas of beliefs are interconnected in that beliefs about teaching, for instance, may be closely related to beliefs about learning. If a teacher believes language teaching should focus on communicative teaching, this might imply certain beliefs about how the language is most appropriately taught and learned and what the role of the teacher should play.

One should also note that the above-mentioned five areas of teacher beliefs do not necessarily have the same impact on teachers' behaviour. These areas usually interact dynamically. As Pittard (2003) argued, pre-service teachers' classroom practice in teaching practicum is the first experience that pre-service teachers have of classroom teaching, and therefore the first opportunities for them to test self perceptions of their developing identity as a teacher. When identity emerged as a dominant force in their beliefs, the others may be subsumed under it. Early in 1968, Rokeach (1968) identified that some beliefs are more central than others. This, however, did not lead to any further study on the dynamic interaction of these beliefs, which may partly due to the implicit features of teacher beliefs. In this case, it is important to make explicit to pre-service teachers the dominant beliefs influencing their behaviour so as to reconstruct them if necessary. An important aspect of teachers' professional development, according to Freeman (1991), is the process of making implicit belief systems explicit and thereby developing a language for talking and thinking about the teachers' own practice, questioning the sometimes contradictory beliefs underpinning their practice, and taking greater control over their own professional growth.

IV. EMPIRICAL STUDIES ON EFL PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' BELIEFS

As to foreign language teacher education, there is a general consensus that their beliefs have a very close relationship with three practical themes in foreign language education concerning foreign language teacher education, teachers' prior language learning experience and their classroom practice, which makes it possible to view the development of teacher beliefs in the process of teachers' learning to teach.

In this section, I shall examine these three relationships from an overview of empirical studies on EFL pre-service teachers' beliefs conducted in recent years. Based on the summary of language teacher cognition research by Borg (2003), the online search from ERIC and British Education Index, I summarize the studies on pre-service EFL teacher beliefs since the 1990s. The summarized themes reveal the diversity of the studies on their beliefs in terms of focus and context. Collectively, twelve empirical studies³ present a multidimensional concept of teacher beliefs, highlighting the role of experience in the development of these beliefs, and the way in which instructional practice and beliefs are mutually informing.

4.1 Relationship between EFL pre-service teacher beliefs and their prior language learning experience

Teachers learn a lot about teaching through their experience as learners, which is called their 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie, 1975). Some findings from the above studies echo the result from mainstream studies in that teachers' prior language learning experience influence teachers' beliefs about learning, which forms the basis of their initial conceptualizations of EFL teaching during teacher education, and which may continue to be influential throughout their professional lives. Some studies (e.g. Johnson, 1994; Numrich, 1996) revealed how pre-service ESL teachers' beliefs are based on prior experience and how such experience relates to classroom practice. Johnson (1994) found that pre-service teachers' instructional decisions during a practicum were based on images of teachers, materials, activities and classroom organization generated by their own L2 learning experience. Numrich (1996) also found that teachers decided to promote or to avoid specific instructional strategies on the basis of their positive or negative experiences of these respective strategies as learners.

The above discussion suggests that teacher beliefs are influenced by EFL pre-service teachers' prior language learning experience. These experiences may have positive or negative impact on teacher beliefs. A contestable issue, however, has been raised on whether such beliefs established early in life are resistant to change even in the face of contradictory evidence.

4.2 Relationship between EFL pre-service teacher beliefs and teacher education programme

Mainstream educational research has shown that students, at the beginning stage of teacher education programme, may hold 'inappropriate, unrealistic or naïve' understandings of teaching and learning, which has been proved to be true in the field of language teaching. Whether teacher education programme has any impact on teacher beliefs, however, remains unsettled. An

³ They are the studies by Johnson (1994, 1996), Almarza (1996), Richards, Ho & Giblin (1996), Numrich (1996), Knudson (1998), Farrell (1999), Cabaroglu & Roberts (2000), Tercanlioglu (2001), MacDonald *et al* (2001), Jones (2002), Mattheoudakis (2007). They are studies on both EFL and ESL pre-service teachers. Here ESL (English as a second language) are not differentiated in over-viewing these empirical studies.

influential review by Kagan (1992) suggested that the relationship was not significant. Almarza (1996)'s study revealed the differences between one's cognitive and behavioural changes by concluding that although teacher education played a powerful role in shaping the student teachers' behaviour during teaching practice, it did not alter significantly the cognitions the students brought to the course.

Richards, Ho & Giblin (1996), however, in their study of five student teachers on an introductory teacher training course in Hong Kong, found that beliefs change in relation to such factors as their conception of their role in the classroom, their professional knowledge, and so on. They concluded that the trainees did not change in a homogeneous way, and such changes relate closely to their experiences, and 'assumptions about themselves, teachers, teaching and learning' (p.258). Cabaroglu & Robert (2000) used naturalistic inquiry to explore the development of student teachers' beliefs on language teaching and learning. In their study, eleven established categories of belief development processes (listed with distinctive features and examples) are regarded as 'a more realistic picture of the changes that can occur during teacher education in student teachers' belief systems' (Borg, 2003: 90).

Although there is no agreed statement on the relationship between teacher beliefs and teacher education programme, various studies do reflect the eclectic feature of teachers' beliefs under certain teacher education programme, which may well elicit some pedagogical implication. Moreover, although pedagogical knowledge is seen by Richardson (1996) as the least powerful factor affecting beliefs of teaching in teacher education programme, studies indicate considerable differences between pedagogically and non-pedagogically educated teachers in terms of their classroom behaviour. In this case, EFL pre-service teacher beliefs should be surfaced and acknowledged during the teacher education programme if the programme is to make a difference in the deep structure of beliefs held by the student teachers.

4.3 Relationship between EFL pre-service teacher beliefs and classroom practices

During the past 25 years or so, teacher education research has made significant stride in studying the complex relationship between teacher beliefs and classroom practices, acknowledging the interactive relationship between them. The issue of consistency and inconsistency of these two, however, is recurring in literature (Fang, 1996). In Knudson's (1998) study, students' practices are very consistent with their theoretical beliefs (see Borg, 2003). Almarza's (1996) study showed that during teaching practice, student teachers drew on different sources of knowledge, which had its origin in the teacher education programme. Although all student teachers in his study implemented learned behaviour during teaching practice, this may only be some superficial behaviour, which may not result from changes in beliefs. Findings from the above studies correspond to other studies in language teaching in that they all show that 'language teachers' classroom practices are shaped by a wide range of interacting and often conflicting factors' (Borg, 2003: 91).

The elaboration of the above empirical studies unravels that many factors can be attributed to the development of EFL pre-service teacher beliefs, among which previous experiences about language teaching and learning are of great importance while the influence of the teacher education programme is arguable. Moreover, the relationship between teacher beliefs and classroom practices is an inconclusive issue. Despite many studies in the field, the lack in the exploration of the dynamics of different areas of teachers' beliefs and in the revelation of which kind of beliefs is more prone to change and which not are in great need for further understanding

of the nature of teacher beliefs, which will be theoretically and pedagogically important.

V. CONCLUSION

Research on EFL pre-service teachers' beliefs has highlighted the complex array of factors that interact in the processes of learning and teaching. As discussed above, EFL pre-service teacher beliefs inform teacher education from the following three perspectives. First, EFL pre-service teachers bring beliefs acquired from many years' learning experience to a teacher education programme that strongly influences what and how they learn to teach. Secondly, EFL pre-service teacher beliefs are the focus of change in the process of education. That is, one goal in teacher education should be oriented towards the formation of beliefs. Thirdly, EFL pre-service teachers' beliefs influence what they say and do in classroom, which, in turn, shapes their beliefs. Overall, when their unexamined and tacit beliefs turn into explicit beliefs, EFL pre-service teachers can thus identify and assess their beliefs in relation to their classroom practices, from which EFL pre-service teacher education can be informed.

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