

EXAMINING THE BELIEF CHANGE OF LIBYAN TEACHERS

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EXAMINING THE BELIEF CHANGE OF LIBYAN TEACHERS OF ENGLISH WHO UNDERTAKE POSTGRADUATE STUDIES ABROAD

مخلص

تناولت الدراسة معتقدات تدريس اللغة الانجليزية لعشرة من المعلمين الليبيين، طلبة ماجستير و دكتوراه في الخارج، ذوي خبره في تدريس اللغة الانجليزية، ولقد تم جمع بيانات الدراسة من مصدرين: مقابلات مع المشتركين في الدراسة وتحليل جانب من يومياتهم. وفي كلا الحالتين تم تحليل البيانات كما وكيفا. وبناءا علي نتائج الراسة ، تبين ان الدراسة في الخارج لها تأثير في تغير أنماط ومصادر بعض معتقدات المشتركين في الدراسة، بينما ظل بعضها بدون تغير. بالإضافة الي تنوع مصادر هذه المعتقدات والتي بدورها لها تأثيرها علي ممارستهم ونظرتهم التعليمية.

Abstract

Recent research has made a significant contribution to the exploration of teachers' beliefs and the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices. This paper reports on a study in which I investigated the beliefs about English Language Teaching of ten experienced Libyan teachers of English who were engaged in MA and PhD studies abroad. Diaries and interviews were used in the data collection. Two aspects of their beliefs were examined: whether, and how, their beliefs changed as a result of

studying abroad, and the sources of these beliefs. In this study, it was found that while some of the teachers' previously held beliefs changed and others remained the same, in every case awareness of alternative beliefs had been raised. In addition, the results also showed that the beliefs held by this group of Libyan teachers were derived from a variety of sources, and had been influenced by more than one source, with consequent effects on their teaching perceptions and practices.

Key words: Teacher Believes, Belief Change, Professional Development, Libya.

1. Introduction

An important area of research on teaching highlights the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices. This is because, as Johnson (1994: 439) says, "understanding teachers' beliefs is essential to improving teaching practices". This paper reports on an investigation into the belief change of ten Libyan teachers of English who undertook postgraduate study in the UK. The reason for carrying out this study was to discover what beliefs Libyan teachers held about teaching English, how they approached their work when they were in Libya, and whether their beliefs were influenced by their experience of doing higher studies in English Language Teaching abroad.

2. The influence of beliefs on teachers' behavior and on their teaching

Teachers' behavior is a reflection of what they believe about teaching and learning. These beliefs provide an underlying framework for the teacher's classroom actions (Johnson, 1994; Fang, 1996; Richards and Lockhart, 1996). There are different views about the influence of the beliefs teachers hold on their perceptions and judgement, and how these in turn affect their

behavior in the classroom (Johnson, 1994; Borg, 2006; Riley, 2009), and ultimately, students' academic performance (Brophy and Good, 1986, cited in Fang, 1996). However, it is generally agreed that improvement in teaching professionalism and teaching practices needs a full understanding of the belief structure of teachers. (Pajares, 1996; Williams and Burden, 1997).

Horwitz (1988) highlights the effect of teachers' beliefs on their students' beliefs and performance. She pointed out that students always consider their teacher as the expert and source of knowledge. The students' ideas about learning will therefore be influenced by the teacher's implementation of certain types of activities and application of certain types of teaching methods, which reflect the teacher's beliefs about how to help learners learn. For instance, beliefs in the effectiveness of Communicative Language Teaching will be reflected in the teacher's use of interactive classroom activities and lots of learner participation.

Bandura (1997, cited in Eccles and Wigfield, 2002) examines the role of a belief in self- efficacy on one's behavior. Self-efficacy, according to Bandura (1997, cited in Eccles and Wigfield, 2002:110) refers to an "individual's confidence in their ability to organize and execute a given course of action to solve a problem or accomplish a task". This theory, as Eccles and Wigfield (2002:111) explain, focuses on "expectancy of success". Bandura distinguishes two kinds of expectation: *outcome expectation* which is the belief that a certain performance will be the outcome of practising a certain behavior, and *efficacy expectation*, which refers to "beliefs about whether one can effectively perform the behaviors necessary to produce the outcome" (Bandura 1997, cited in Eccles and

Wigfield, 2002:111). In addition, Kagan (1992) points out that teachers' sense of self-efficacy is associated with a number of classroom behaviors, as in the case of the tendency to use praise rather than criticism.

Brown and McGonnon (1998, cited in Tercanlioglu, 2005) and Breen (1991, cited in Tercanlioglu, 2005) claim that teachers hold many incorrect beliefs about how languages are best learned, which affect their teaching practice. Johnson (1994) suggests that any change occurring in a teacher's practice shows evidence that their beliefs and the theories that underline their behaviors may have changed. These claims are matters of argument in the literature. In the traditional classroom, teachers are seen as "tellers of truth who inculcate knowledge in students" (Cohen, 1988, cited in Prawat, 1992: 356) where the students are simply receptive of information that the teacher transmits during the class. In other words, students just do what the teacher asks them to do. These approaches, as Prawat (1992) claims, are an obstacle to any attempt at change relating to a classroom pattern and behavior.

Horwitz (1987) also suggests that a gap between teacher and learner beliefs can lead to a reduction of learners' confidence in and satisfaction with the class, and to unwillingness to participate in communicative activities. That is why the teacher's role is seen as crucial in developing students' confidence to learn successfully by which their autonomous feeling is developed (Wenden, 1991, cited in Cotterall, 1995). Littlewood (1996, cited in Cotterall, 1999) highlights the importance of learners being willing to be responsible for their learning, which is an indication of their success in their autonomous learning. He refers to learners' willingness to

learn and work independently as "the core of the notion of autonomy". (cited in Cotterall, 1999: 507)

3. Sources of teachers' beliefs

Based on the findings of research conducted in the field of teacher education, it is reported that teachers' beliefs are derived from various sources. Richards and Lockhart (1996) classify these sources as follows:

1. Teachers' own experience as language learners.
2. Experience of what works best.
3. Established practice.
4. Personality factors.
5. Educationally based or research-based principles
6. Principles derived from an approach or method.

The type of investigation and classification reported by Richards and Lockhart (1996) motivated me to examine the sources from which Libyan teachers' beliefs are derived and whether their beliefs result from more than one source.

Empirical studies show that each individual has specific factors that they can be affected by, which may not be true for others. Research conducted in this area points out that various assumptions made by teachers can also be studied. (Richards and Lockhart, 1996; Woods, 1996)

1. Assumptions about language. How people view language is influenced by their contact with the language. Teachers vary in terms of their views of language. Woods (1996) points out that the perceptions that a language teacher holds about the subject matter of teaching will differ from those of a mathematics teacher, for example.

2. Assumptions about language learning. It has been shown that teachers' ideas about how to teach a language are largely based on their own experience as learners. This experience is reflected in teachers' behavior through their classroom practice (Woods, 1996). Johnson (1994) and Numrich (1996) found that pre-service teachers' instructional decisions during teaching, such as the choice of activities, and their images of who teachers are and what they do, had been influenced by their own L2 learning experience.

3. Assumptions about language teaching. Teaching is approached differently from one teacher to another, and this reflects the theories they hold about teaching. In their study, conducted with Hong Kong teachers of English, Richards and Lockhart (1996:37) found that these teachers believed that their role in the classroom was to: " 1. Provide useful learning experiences, 2. Provide a model of correct language use, 3. Answer learners' questions, and correct learners' errors". Such assumptions about their role will unconsciously be reflected in their real practice with students.

4. Assumptions about language teaching as a profession. Interesting findings have been presented by Richards and Lockhart (1996) on how teachers view teaching English. They demonstrate the fact that not all teachers think of teaching as a profession. For example, while one teacher who "sees himself as a professional, and has a well-articulated view that teaching should be seen as a profession", another has the belief that "teaching is rather more like a skilled trade than a learned profession". (Richards and Lockhart, 1996: 40)

5. Assumptions about the program and the curriculum. The approach to building language teaching programs as well as implementing certain curricula reflects the culture of the institution in which it takes place (Richards and Lockhart 1996). An individual teacher's beliefs are influenced by the program they work in and the curriculum they use for their teaching.

5. Research methodology

Based on the importance of teachers' beliefs about language teaching behavior and performance, the study reported here attempted to explore the belief change of Libyan teachers as a consequence of doing postgraduate studies abroad. Key questions addressed in this study were:

1. What core beliefs do Libyan teachers of English hold about the process of teaching and learning before studying abroad?
2. What are the sources of their beliefs?
3. Does studying abroad affect teachers' beliefs?
4. What changes in beliefs about teaching proficiency occur during the study abroad? Which is a greater contributor to change: the teaching methodologies they have been exposed to during their study, or the knowledge they have acquired as a result of their study?

5.1.Participants

The participants were ten Libyan teachers who spent from six to twenty-two months in the UK. They were doing postgraduate studies in different universities across the UK. These teachers were chosen based on their previous teaching experience in Libya. Some were doing PhDs and the others were doing MAs in English Language Teaching. Four of them were males, and six females. They were aged between 25 and 43. Just the

initial letters of their first name and surname are used below to protect the identity of the participants. Quotes from data provided by the participants are presented as given, without language correction.

5.2. Data collection and analysis

Diaries and interviews were used in the data collection. I felt that using a diary as a preliminary research tool would provide me with content on which to base the questions I should ask in the follow-up interviews. Diaries can generate lots of ideas and awareness about ourselves as teachers and about our teaching (Nunan, 1989; Thornbury, 1991; Gebhard and Oprandy, 1999; Davies and Pearse, 2000). In addition, writing a diary gave the teachers (Libyan participants) the opportunity to reflect freely on their beliefs and perspectives about teaching over a period of time.

Interviews were the primary research tool used to obtain information about teachers' beliefs about English teaching. The interviews were guided by questions that were suggested by the entries in individual participants' diaries. The goal of the interviews was to investigate individual variables that may have influenced teachers' thinking. It is vital to have teachers' perspectives when trying to identify the process involved in their thinking and assumptions about why they do what they do in their teaching.

Each participant was asked to keep a diary for two to three weeks to reflect on their teaching and learning experiences. Each diary was then analyzed individually to identify recurrent themes. These themes suggested the questions that were used in the interviews (see Appendix 1). I conducted one-to-one interviews, lasting maximum 45 minutes each, and transcribed them from audio recordings. The interviews were conducted in

a mix of English and Arabic. The interview data was then analyzed according to the themes identified earlier.

6. Findings and analysis

The main themes which emerged from the diaries were as follows:

1. Teaching methods and methodology
2. The teacher's role
3. Learner autonomy
4. The teacher student relationship
5. Teacher feedback
6. Internet technology
7. Materials and resources
8. Tasks, tests and assessment

My analysis of the diary entries suggests that the diarists' belief systems are highly evaluative because they expressed their beliefs about teaching and learning language in terms of what being 'good' or 'bad' was for them as teachers and for their teaching context . The following are two quotes from two different diaries:

In the UK there is a strong belief towards applying learner autonomy. In Libya, on the other hand this is unacceptable. In my opinion, this style of learning will only work with adult learners. I believe that such strategy will help learners to be independent and confident in their own abilities. I really found autonomy beneficial for me; I now feel comfortable, more confident and even creative in my thinking. (HA)

Another issue is the relationship between teachers and students. I observed the freedom and flexibility that students have in their communication and approaching to their teachers. This, I believe, provides more suitable and appropriate atmosphere for learning and reduces the burden on teachers. It also has further implications of preparing and allowing students to depend on themselves and do learning on their own. Thus they become capable of persisting learning outside educational institute. (AM)

Another, perhaps unsurprising finding, is that the diaries contain much episodic material, in other words they are highly anecdotal. This means that some entries are simply a reflection that the participants have made on their personal experience, either of learning or teaching. Examples of this are shown in the following quotes:

As a previous teacher I did not make students do much work, because I used to prepare nearly everything for them. Students have to study and do their homework. After studying here in the UK, I realised how much important it is to make students do some work or activities by themselves. Students can do many things if they use their imagination and trying to create different activities or tasks, which would help them in their future job as teachers. Involving students in the teaching process would help them to understand the lesson more, and for teacher which helps him/her to evaluate and assess students' ability and understanding (SK)

I believed that students could not find the suitable research or books for their study. I should give them all things as their main sources. Now I totally believe in that students should be more autonomous about their study and as I see I can do it as a student. (FB)

6.1. Interview findings and analysis

6.1.1. Assumptions about teaching a language

All the participants emphasized the importance of learning and teaching English. They pointed out the fact that English is an international language. It is the language of science and computing. The participants view language as a living thing, which develops over time. That is why it needs a great effort from teachers to teach it properly. Participant H, for instance, said "English should be taught properly because it will affect on students' beliefs when they become teachers in the future".

All the participants raised the importance of teaching English because it can expand people's knowledge. By using English, people can easily deal with the technology as well as be aware of what is happening around the world.

6.1.2. Assumptions about language learning

All the participants hold quite similar beliefs about the best way to learn English. Most of them commented that students need to be motivated to practise the language. For example, Participant F stated that the best way to learn English is to use it in the classroom. She also commented that the methods that British teachers use in their teaching, such as preparing presentations and group discussions, help students to learn better. This is completely different from Libyan teachers who do not pay much attention to the development of oral and communicative skills. For this reason, Participant F has started strongly believing that class time should always be used mainly to practise using English.

Participant SK claimed that "to learn English properly, we need a good teacher, to learn the basic grammar as well as have a good book. Watching TV programmes is a good way to learn English". Participant AM agreed that English should be practised. Nevertheless, she added "it is difficult for Libyan learners since there is little exposure to English in daily life." This is quite similar to the viewpoint of participant AK.

Living in the country where the language is spoken is viewed as significant for language learners, as understanding the culture is an important aspect of learning a language. Furthermore, while three of the participants emphasized that English should be taught in schools,

Participant SA was critical of the approach used in schools, stating that “in the classroom they are learning about language not language itself”.

6.1.3. Assumptions about language teaching as profession

Some very different views of what a "professional teacher" is were expressed by the participants. According to Participant ES, "professional teacher is the one who teaches English well by using different techniques and uses the methods that are modern". He also stated that "I need to focus on communicative skill and trying to use language inductively rather than deductively".

Participant SA argued that "teachers don't need PhDs or MAs to be professionals. It is instinct itself and a good teacher is the one who can motivate students to learn". Four participants said that as teachers of English, they should read more and be aware of changes in the language as it is not rigid, rather it is changing all the time.

Participant SK sees professional teachers as people who love their job and make students love them. "Teacher needs to be able to adapt materials and work harder on themselves to expand their knowledge about the language". Another participant said that teachers should ask their students for feedback, in order to know how students like to approach their learning and the reasons why students sometimes have difficulty. She said "to be professional teacher, I need to be flexible. I also need to do reflection from time to time and discuss things with more experienced teachers to take their advice". The majority highlighted that professionalism develops through teaching experience as well.

6.1.4. Assumptions about language teaching

All the participants saw themselves as having used a traditional approach in their past teaching. Eight of them admitted that they had been too controlling and they had allowed the students to be too passive. However they pointed out that there are a lot of regulations for the teaching of English in Libyan schools, which the teacher has to follow. In the Libyan culture people are used to regarding the teacher as an expert and source of information, and learners are expected to be quiet and listening. This changes a little at the university where there is more encouragement for students to be active and independent. However, even there, the students' role is still largely passive as the teachers focus on transferring ideas and preparing the students for exams. The participants pointed out that this is not necessarily because teachers believe these practices to be right, but because external factors such as the regulations, the exams system, and the class times push them to play this kind of role.

SK saw her role as "an explainer". She said that she had had no idea about the importance of group or pair work till she joined the MA in English Language Teaching. She said "I thought we were playing as we were talking to each other, discussing and answering together most of class time. I thought at that time the class was in a mess, but then I realised its effectiveness. This technique is useful to change ideas together". Participant H believed that she benefitted from being involved in group and pair work activities during MA sessions in terms of changing and clarifying her ideas. She suggested that "this will be a good way for pushing Libyan students to practise English together."

SK, MK, AK, AM and FB said that they had no understanding of how to modify and adapt material before joining the MA ELT programme. One of them said that in Libya "we were just teaching things that were given in the course book". They also had no idea of the significance of student-to-student interaction. Their previous belief was that students should only sit and listen to what teachers teach them. Allowing students to interact with each other might lead to loss of teacher control. Yet, AK changed her belief when she saw that her teachers in the UK were generally flexible in terms of allowing students opportunities to express their opinions and participate actively, but they were still the decision makers and managers of the class. Interestingly, AK observed that she had started holding a positive belief about letting students interact with each other since she herself found it useful during her study.

The majority of participants agreed that a good teacher is one who has the skill to deal with students and make them feel confident and centered in the class. Participant AM said; "the good teacher is the one who should be well dressed and honest and not to keep a straight face with their students and listen to their problems. They should read a lot and be ready to deal with anything in class. They should be skillful to avoid any problem in the class." Participant BA answered this question by referring to issues specific to the Libyan context. He said "in Libya, the good teacher is the one who is flexible and able to adapt with the changes occurred in Libyan education system. This is because the classes may be canceled and there are holidays, however, the time for exams is fixed."

The importance of good rapport was mentioned by most of the participants. They said a teacher should get to know their students and

create a good relationship with them, like they saw teachers in the UK doing. The importance of creating a collaborative environment for learning was highly emphasized by all the participants. One of the participants, comparing her experiences of learning in Libya and the UK, said "in Libya I was more stressed, and less worried in the UK because the teachers at the UK always try to lessen students' worries. They always praise students and encourage them to improve. They also help students to create and use their imagination and think critically".

The participants appreciated the fact that many different types of assessment are used to evaluate students' progress in most British education institutions. They felt that this was fairer as it allowed students to demonstrate different strengths and weaknesses. In Libya, there is only one method of assessment which is tests.

Another aspect of teaching that the participants valued was the individual feedback given by the teacher, both written and oral. It is reported that this group of teachers had not given detailed feedback to their own students before. For instance, AK said she had no idea about the types of feedback that were possible before joining the MA programme. She was just correcting or, as she said, "marking students' work to provide them the score and that is all". Now she is starting to consider the value of providing suitable feedback through which students can develop and improve themselves.

Participant SK explained her experience of teaching methodology as follows: "in Libya I was as observer and learn only what teachers teach me. Teachers feed students everything, but here I learned to be dependent

on myself and look for sources and read as much as I can. It was hard first for me because I do not have this before".

Being an MA student, participant B said, made him aware of teaching process. He said "I have some beliefs and I usually do what I believe without realizing that should be like that. This could be because we as Libyan teachers have never done any reflection during our teaching". He also pointed out that the Libyan and British education systems are different, which causes difference in their learning experience. Moreover, the amount of reading students are required to do in the UK received much attention by the participants.

All the participants were motivated to apply their new beliefs when they return to Libya. This was demonstrated in the fact that when they were asked to explain one lesson chosen from the coursebook English for Libya, Secondary 3, all the respondents focused on the opportunities for using pair and group work to teach this lesson.

However, not all of the participants agreed on how grammatical structure and expression should be taught. MK, for example, said: "I will explain the rule first then give them examples. I believe this is the best way to learn and the way I had been taught". FB said "I had no idea about inductive and deductive teaching before and my way of teaching was simply explaining the rule and then doing an exercise... I have quoted this way of teaching from my previous teachers and I thought this is the only way to teach grammar. But now I have started to distinguish between the two approaches and I let my students figure out the rules from the text".

Participant SA said, "I will familiarize students with the structures first and then let students work out the problem through using grammar". He

added "teaching grammar inductively takes time. For this reason, we need to teach it deductive as well as use a native language during teaching it".

6.2. Brief summary of the interview data

Regarding teaching methods and the role of the teacher, some participants changed their previous beliefs and became more positive. Their beliefs about learner autonomy, teacher feedback, internet technology and using a variety of materials in teaching were all influenced by positive change according to the majority of interviewees' perspectives.

It is noticeable that beliefs regarding the teacher-student relationship varied from one participant to another. Some said "the teacher is always the teacher wherever s/he is." However, there could be a better kind of relationship in terms of being a good listener to their students and respecting their opinions. And this was mostly observed from the teachers' behavior inside the British classrooms.

The majority of participants had a positive view about how their teaching practice might change when they went back to Libya. However, they still worried about the other factors that could become obstacles in applying what they believed to be good for the learning system. All the participants mentioned that in Libya they are controlled by certain regulations. For example, they are given a certain textbook and asked to finish it in a certain period of time because the students are going to be tested on it in the final test. Moreover, the time specified for each class is not enough to cover the material. There are also no facilities available in the schools such as language laboratories and libraries.

7. Summary and implications

My data showed that the beliefs of some of the participants changed more than others. The main area of change was beliefs about the learners' role, especially with reference to learner autonomy and encouraging students to be independent. Those participants who had been teaching in local schools in Libya were less likely to believe that change was possible, due to the fact that these schools have so many regulations creating obstacles for teachers who want to develop new approaches to teaching. There was considerable similarity in the kind of beliefs that had changed, such as teaching methods in terms of group work, learner autonomy, teacher feedback and the student-teacher relationship.

It is important to point out that, although some of my participants changed their beliefs, it is by no means certain that their raised awareness has had any practical outcomes in their classrooms since they have returned home to Libya. Indeed, one of the participants said they certainly would not change their methodology because they thought it was more suitable to the Libyan context; however another said they would definitely introduce more pair work and discussion in their classes. Others admitted that constraints in their curriculum and resources would make it difficult to change their practice. Freeman's findings (2007, cited Wyatt, 2010:85) tend to confirm that belief change does not always lead to change in a teacher's practice, when he says; "input on communicative language teaching was popularly received but not always acted upon". Phipps and Borg (2007: 17) also highlight this fact when they say that "beliefs may seem to change without having an effect on classroom practice". Therefore, it would be interesting to do further research to find out

whether those teachers who participated in my research continued to maintain their changed beliefs and apply them after they returned to their home country.

8. Conclusion

Libyan teachers of English have a set of beliefs about how to learn and teach English. These beliefs are largely based on their previous learning experiences and cultural background, as well as other contextual factors in their teaching situation. The belief change reported in this study indicates that Libyan teachers are capable of becoming more aware of alternatives to their existing beliefs and classroom practices when they have opportunities for ongoing professional development, and of recognizing the importance of such professional development (see Gebhard and Oprandy, 1999). However, six impediments have been identified which can create barriers to professional development; these are the limited allocation of education training courses, the lack of resources, the lack of time, the large numbers of students to be taught, the constraints of the curriculum and the existence of unified exams. As Fang (1996:53) says; "[such] contextual factors can have powerful influences on teachers' beliefs and, in effect, affect their classroom practice."

This study has examined teachers' own perceptions and judgements about teaching and learning, and has shown how awareness of their underlying beliefs can help them to change and improve their teaching. My conclusion is that in order to improve the quality of the Libyan education system, more attention needs to be given to teachers because, as Huggett (1986: ix) says, "if we do not understand teachers and their viewpoints, it is impossible to come to any balanced judgements about education..."

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Appendix 1

Interview Schedule

Topic: *Examining the belief change of Libyan Experienced Teachers of English who undertake postgraduate study abroad.*

Interview Guide	
Interviewee	
Date	
Start	
End	
Place	
Questions	
<p>What are your beliefs about teaching English language? I mean in particular</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. What does 'language' mean to you? b. Why should languages be taught? c. What do you think is the best way to learn a language d. What does the teaching profession mean to you and what you need to be a professional teacher? <p>2. How do you see your role as a teacher of English language?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. What roles are students expected to take in your class? b. How do you see the good teacher? c. Do you think that your personality has an effect on your teaching: behavior, choice of methodology ...etc <p>3. Have you noticed yourself that your beliefs about teaching have been changed during being exposed to a new learning context in your higher studies?</p>	

- a. Can you tell me more about your experience as a learner in the UK?
- b. How is it different from being a learner in Libya?
- 4. To what extent do you believe you will be able to apply what you believe when you go back to Libya?**

Personal Details

Name:.....

Age.....

Years of teaching

experiences:.....

Type of teaching experiences:.....

Degree studied in the UK

Length of time spent in UK:...

Thank You