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Change in beliefs of pre-service teachers about teaching and learning English as a foreign language throughout an undergraduate pre-service teacher training program

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study that investigated changes in the beliefs about teaching and learning English as a foreign language of three final-year undergraduate pre-service teachers throughout a nine-month pre-service training program in one of the universities in Northern Cyprus. Although a considerable amount of research has already been conducted about the development/change in pre-service teachers’ beliefs, most of these studies were carried out in native contexts and in short teacher training programs and this left us with minimal insights into non-native contexts and long teacher training programs (Borg, 2006). Considering the possible contextual differences that might exist between different contexts where English is used as first or second language (Calderhead & Shorrock, 1997) and the differences between different teacher training programs which vary in length, it is believed that exploring EFL pre-service teachers’ beliefs and the development/change in their beliefs’ during their teacher training over a longer period of time would contribute to our understanding of what actually happens in EFL teacher training programs. Such exploration is expected to reveal what sort of beliefs about learning and teaching EFL pre-service teachers have when they start teacher training programs and how their beliefs could develop/change throughout their training. Unlike the quantitative approaches adopted in the majority of the studies which investigated the similar phenomenon, qualitative approach was adopted to explore pre-service teachers’ belief development/change with the intention of revealing a more holistic picture of their belief structures. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews at three-month intervals and through contemporaneous diary writing activity throughout the training program. Changes in all three pre-service teachers’ beliefs were evidenced from the beginning to the end of the training programme. The theoretical and pedagogical implications of the study for the development of future teacher training programs are discussed.

Keywords: Pre-service teachers’ beliefs; teacher training; student teachers; EFL teacher beliefs; foreign language teaching

1. Introduction

There is a general consensus and a substantial body of evidence indicating that the beliefs teachers have are strongly influential in how they approach teaching and learning, and that they guide the way teachers act in
classrooms (Borg, 2006; Calderhead, 1996). Pajares’ es (1992:316) account of beliefs as an, “individual’s judgment of the truth or falsity of a proposition, a judgment that can only be inferred from a collective understanding of what human beings say, intend, and do” is adopted here to define beliefs.

More than two decades ago, Clark and Peterson (1986) stated that the beliefs teachers have about teaching and learning affect their decision-making and planning processes, and that the approaches they adopt when teaching, the tasks and the materials they choose to implement in classrooms, and their relationships with the students are, to a great extent, determined by their beliefs. Many researchers have also found that beliefs exert such an influence and they guide the way that teachers teach (Almarza, 1996; Erkmen, 2010; Nespor, 1987). To exemplify this, if a teacher believes that the languages could be best learnt by investing more time in teaching grammar, he/she is likely to invest more time in teaching grammar in his/her classroom. It is for this reason that the study of teacher beliefs has become an essential component in understanding teachers’ cognitive processes and in understanding the influence of teacher training programs, where teachers are believed to go through a challenge process and are expected to reshape their beliefs (Fenstermacher, 1979).

However, when it comes to pre-service teacher beliefs, the issue gains more importance as it is widely accepted that the pre-service teachers come to teacher training programs with well-established beliefs about learning and teaching (Freeman, 1992; Kagan, 1992; Tattro, 1998) that they have adopted during their previous schooling experiences as students (Lortie, 1975). The literature indicates that such beliefs persist as filters, and they guide the way that pre-service teachers perceive and interpret the new information presented to them (Borg, 2006; Farrell, 1999). Furthermore, there is evidence indicating that the early-established beliefs pre-service teachers have could become resistant to change over time and constant use even if their beliefs are proved to be incorrect or inappropriate during their teacher training (Pajares, 1992). It is further proposed that in order for a belief to be changed, it should prove unsatisfactory, and that in order for a belief to prove unsatisfactory, it should be challenged (ibid.). For this reason, the teacher training programs have been receiving a great deal of attention from the researchers aiming to understand the relationship between pre-service teachers’ beliefs and the teacher training programs, and whether the teacher training programs constitute a challenge in refining pre-service teachers’ beliefs.

To date, many studies have focused on the development/change in pre-service teachers’ beliefs by conducting empirical research in different contexts and training programs. The findings from these studies are contradictory. On the one hand, some of them indicate that pre-service teachers’ beliefs could develop/change throughout their training (Bramald, Hardman, & Leat, 1995; Cabaroglu & Roberts, 2000; Nettle, 1998) while on the other hand, others indicate that the developments/changes in beliefs are very limited, and they conclude that teacher training programs are neither effective nor influential enough in altering pre-service teachers’ beliefs (Mattheoudakis, 2007; Peacock, 2001). In addition to these findings, the studies of Brown and McGannon (1998) and Johnson (1994) indicate hardly any development/change in pre-service teachers’ beliefs throughout their training. Although all of these studies conducted and the findings reported are to some extent influential in our understanding of the conceptions different pre-service teachers participating in different training programs have, there is a huge gap in this matter which is usually underestimated. The crucial point among the studies stated above is that most of them were conducted in native contexts with native pre-service teachers and in various teacher-training programs that vary in length. For example, most of the studies on the development/change in the beliefs of pre-service teachers during their teacher training were carried out in short teacher training programs such as the Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA), and the issue now is whether the findings obtained from such short training programs are accurate representations of the longer teacher training programs. Moreover, although longitudinal studies exist on the development/change in pre-service teachers’ beliefs throughout their teacher training, there is a lack of such longitudinal research conducted in EFL teacher training programs. This issue also suggests further empirical investigation into the area of EFL, as EFL teaching is said to have different issues (Erkmen, 2010). Last but not least, the majority of the studies on the development/change in pre-service teachers’ beliefs adopted quantitative approaches to explore the phenomenon, and to a great extent, they employed questionnaires and the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) instrument, which was designed by Horwitz (1985). For example, even the limited number of studies conducted in EFL contexts (i.e. Altan, 2006; Mattheoudakis, 2007; Peacock, 2001) which
employed the BALLI instrument concluded their findings according to the clichéd themes of the BALLI, which, in a way, limited the beliefs pre-service teachers have to the statements that exist in the BALLI.

Despite the wide range of studies conducted on the development/change in pre-service teachers’ beliefs in various teacher training programs, there is a lack of research conducted in EFL contexts, and over longer period of EFL teacher training programs. The lack of employing qualitative approaches when exploring such issues seems to be another limitation that exists in the area. An investigation of this issue is necessary to gain more insights into the development/change in the beliefs of EFL pre-service teachers, and to understand the influence of longer EFL teacher training programs on development/change. Such research, by employing a qualitative methodology, is believed to enrich our understanding by revealing a detailed picture of the processes pre-service teachers undergo during their teacher training in relation to their beliefs about learning and teaching.

2. Method

2.1 Purpose of the study

The present study forms part of a doctoral research project which investigated several issues relating to pre-service teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning English as a foreign language throughout a pre-service training program in one of the universities in Northern Cyprus. This paper reports on some of the findings from the study, in particular:

1. What sort of beliefs do pre-service teachers have about teaching and learning English as a foreign language at the beginning of the teacher-training program?

2. Do pre-service teachers’ initial beliefs change during and after the teacher-training program? If at all, what kind of changes do pre-service teachers experience?

2.2 Participants

Three senior year pre-service teachers, two females and a male, from the English Language Teaching Department participated in the study. Their age range was between 19 and 21, and they were all Turkish Cypriots. In the final year of their study, the pre-service teachers were required to participate in the teacher-training program that continued for two terms. In the first term, the pre-service teachers attended the methodology courses within the department, and then, they were sent to public schools to observe different teachers teaching different learner groups. They were required to do six hours of observation. In the second term, the pre-service teachers were again sent to public schools, however, this time to teach different learner groups. They were required to teach a total of four hours in order to complete the program.

2.3 Data collection instruments

During the nine-month training program, three semi-structured interviews were conducted with the pre-service teachers at the beginning, at midpoint, and at the end of the training. In addition, data from a contemporaneous diary writing activity were collected throughout the training program.
2.4 Data analysis

This study followed an inductive approach when analyzing the data obtained, that is, rather than sequential analysis, cyclical analysis was followed by going back and forth in the data. Rather than testing the existing theories, it was intended to generate new theories; for this reason, none of the codes and categories developed during the analysis were previously anticipated, but they all emerged from the data obtained. The data were also coded by another researcher to ensure inter-rater reliability (Bryman, 2004). In this study, the measure of inter-rater reliability was 92 per cent.

3. Findings

This section covers some of the categories that emerged from the data. Some extracts from the interviews and the diaries are also provided as examples for the categories.

a. Beliefs about teaching

**Effective foreign language teaching**

At the beginning of the training, all of the pre-service teachers had similar beliefs about the issues related to what an effective foreign language teaching should be like. During the first interviews, for example, P-ST1 and P-ST3 stated the importance of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). They both stressed the necessity of communication and group-work activities as much as possible, and paying attention to students’ views such as how and what they want to learn. P-ST2 proposed that doing activities like games, singing and pair-work activities in the classroom is more likely to enhance students’ communication skills, thus, increase the quality of teaching. When they were asked why they thought this way, the pre-service teachers commented: “This is what we have been taught during the last three years” and “During my previous schooling experience, our teachers used to teach us in an opposite way... I think this is why I never liked English classes... I want to make a difference when teaching my own students.”

After achieving progress in the training program, and after teaching in real classrooms, the beliefs of the pre-service teachers about teaching seemed to be partially changing. For example, P-ST2 recorded in her diary: “I always believed that playing games when teaching something is the best and easiest way to teach something! But I think, I am quite wrong...in today’s class, I used a game activity and I totally lost control of the class. The activity was a long away from the topic of the lesson and it was definitely a failure...I am not sure if I will use such an activity again”. P-ST1 and P-ST3 also stated during the final interviews that although group-work activities could sometimes be effective, they were usually distracting and difficult to control, thus, they preferred not to use them frequently.

**Language skills**

When they started their training, P-ST2 and P-ST3 believed that grammar was the least important skill in a foreign language classroom. P-ST3 stated: “I view grammar as a complicated skill...which needs emphasis on correct use of words, sentences, tenses, etc...this bothers me a lot. I remember that the teacher (disliked previous teacher) was correcting us continuously during our writing and speaking activities. You do not like somebody to stop and correct you while you are speaking, do you? I do not want my students to feel like this...” However, in her later entries in her diary, P-ST3 stated that there were occasions when emphasis should be put on grammar. According to her, the wrong acquisition is an issue that negatively impacts students’ writing and speaking activities
and that the wrong acquisition of the grammar should be avoided by placing more emphasis on grammar skill. P-ST3’s strong belief seemed to be changing slightly after experiencing real teaching.

**Error correction**

All of the pre-service teachers shared the same belief at the beginning of the training that student errors should be corrected implicitly. Two of them also criticized the teachers they observed (in the public schools where they did their internship), as they used explicit correction techniques. P-ST2 believed that explicit correction should be completely removed from language classrooms. P-ST3 also had a similar belief. P-ST2 believed that it is better to use implicit correction as it encourages students to look for and discover their mistakes/errors by themselves. After his first teaching, P-ST2 recorded an incident that occurred in his classroom when he needed to correct a student explicitly. He suggested that some errors should be corrected right away, and hence, explicit correction can sometimes prove to be useful.

**b. Beliefs about learning**

**Language aptitude**

All of the pre-service teachers believed at the beginning of the training that learning a foreign language required a special ability. P-ST3 explained this as: “some people have the ability to learn a language but some do not...a teacher could be very good at teaching but if the students do not have the ability to learn, I believe successful learning does not occur”. At the end of the training, two of the pre-service teachers stated that they had opportunities to work with students who they considered “weak” or “without an ability to learn a foreign language”, and they stated that when they worked hard with these “weak” students, they were likely to show improvement in the foreign language learning process. When all of the pre-service teachers were asked if they confirmed what they said during the first interviews (foreign language learning requires a special ability), they all rejected it.

**Effective use of materials**

At the beginning of the training, P-ST1 and P-ST2 stated that successful language learning depended on the effective use of teaching materials. They both had strong beliefs about the availability and usability of the materials in the classroom; one of them further stated: “Lack of teaching materials means less involvement in the lesson...and an ineffective way of teaching...and minimized student understanding”. When she was asked why she thought in this way, she said: “This is just the way it should be...it sounds right...materials always increase the engagement and enjoyment...I always enjoy them...” In her final interview, after teaching at public schools (where there is not much opportunity to find teaching materials), the beliefs of this pre-service teacher were noted to be changing. According to her, establishing successful learning environment had nothing to do with the materials, but was linked to how creative the teacher was, and how he/she could encourage students to be involved in the lesson.

**4. Conclusions and implications**

The findings revealed in this study show that the pre-service teachers started the teacher training program with various beliefs about teaching and learning. These beliefs were mostly noted to be similar to today’s language teaching trend of the CLT approach, which also aligns with the philosophy of the present teacher training program.
These beliefs are also consistent with the beliefs investigated in Wong’s (2010) study with another group of EFL pre-service teachers. On most occasions, it is found that the pre-service teachers derived these beliefs as a result of their previous learning experiences during their school years (i.e., from their previous teachers and learning experiences) and their recent education within the ELT program. This finding is also similar to the findings of Altan (2006), Mattheoudakis (2007) and Peacock (2001). Throughout the first term of the teacher-training program, no significant changes were observed in the pre-service teachers’ beliefs. In addition, their beliefs, which align with the content and philosophy of the training program were confirmed, and became stronger as a result of the methodology courses they attended. However, during the second term of the training program when the pre-service teachers had opportunities to observe real classrooms and to teach in real classrooms, they developed more awareness of the beliefs they already had. For example, when all three of the pre-service teachers went into the real classrooms, they noticed that the theoretically gained beliefs they held about teaching and learning at the beginning of the training program were sometimes not applicable in real classrooms. This was clearly exemplified in P-ST1 and P-ST3’s statements as both pre-service teachers commented that although they believed in the effectiveness of activities such as group-works and games, they did not find such activities easy to implement in real classrooms. Throughout the nine-month training program, a major development/change in the pre-service teachers’ beliefs appeared during their practice teaching sessions, and even the limited number of sessions (four hours) they completed seemed to exert a powerful influence on the development/change in their beliefs. It is also important to note that at the end of their training, the pre-service teachers still had some of the beliefs about teaching and learning that they had at the beginning of the training program; however, they developed an awareness of the applicability of the theoretical issues they already knew, and they developed and modified their beliefs according to the personal teaching experiences they had within the training program. Such awareness gained by the pre-service teachers is believed to be the result of the observation and teaching practice components of the teacher training program. This finding is not consistent with other studies conducted in the area of EFL, which concluded that the teacher training is not influential enough (Mattheoudakis, 2007; Peacock, 2001). This paper suggests that the present teacher training program offered pre-service teachers the opportunities to put the beliefs they had when they started the training program, and also allowed them to put the theoretical knowledge gained within the ELT program into practice, and to test whether they worked. Although the time allocated for observations and teaching practice were very limited, in the present teacher training program, even this limited time seemed to influence the pre-service teachers’ beliefs. However, it is believed that extending the time for observations and teaching practice would help the pre-service teachers to develop more awareness about their own beliefs.

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