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Teachers' Beliefs in Language Teaching: Focus on the Japanese Teachers of English in Several Contexts

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To our knowledge, there are studies on learners' beliefs about language learning, but little has been investigated on teachers'. In this paper, we report teachers' beliefs about both teaching and learning languages. Four Japanese teachers of English working in different contexts in Japan participated in our study. Their beliefs were extracted through written journals and informal interviews. Finally, we discussed how the teachers struggle with their beliefs concerning the realities they face in their classrooms, and how the beliefs change in the course of teaching.

私達の知る限り、言語学習者の学習観に関する研究はあるものの、語学教師の学習観についての研究はほとんどなされていない。本稿では、語学教師の学習観と教育観の両方について、異なる教育現場で働く日本人の英語教師を対象にジャーナル(日記)とインタビューを通して、探索的に、どのような学習観や教育観を持っているのか調査し、語学教師が教室で起きている現実とどのように向き合い、そして学習観と教育観を変化、または維持していくのか議論した。

Introduction

Why do teachers teach a particular school subject the way they do? What is the foundation of teaching behavior? What makes teachers do so? Attitudes and beliefs toward teaching are important concepts in understanding teachers' thought processes, classroom practices, changes, and learning to teach (Richardson, 1996; see Clark and Peterson, 1986, for a review).

Recently, studies on the roles of teachers' beliefs have appeared in the fields of second and foreign language teaching (e.g., Gorsuch, 2000; Matsuura et al., 2001). As far as we know, however, few qualitative studies exist on teachers' beliefs in Japanese contexts. The purpose of this study was to investigate the kinds of beliefs held by Japanese teachers of English and how they can change in the course of English teaching practices.

Literature review: Previous language teachers' beliefs studies

Teacher cognition

In a broad sense, the study of teachers' beliefs can be categorized within teacher cognition research. Borg (1999) defines teacher cognition as; "the store of beliefs, knowledge, assumptions, theories, and attitudes about all aspects of their work which teachers hold" (p.19). The impetus for the study of teacher cognition is an assumption that what happens in the classroom would be affected by what the teacher and the students perceive is happening within that particular context (Woods, 1996). In our study, we shed light on teachers' beliefs in English teaching in several different schools and institutions in Japan.

Teachers' beliefs

In the field of psychology, beliefs are defined as "psychologically held understanding, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true" (Richardson, 1996, p. 103). Though they are thought to be inflexible, less open to critical examination, and based on one's evaluation and judgment (Pajares, 1992), the instability of teacher beliefs has been reported in several studies (e.g., Okazaki, 1996). In our study, teachers' beliefs are defined as the possible predictors of teacher behavior, and they shown

to be changeable in the course of teaching the target language. Understanding the process of how such beliefs can change is important not only for researchers but also for teachers to improve the practice of English teaching.

Studies on language teachers' beliefs

Previous studies on teachers' beliefs vary in different fields such as psychology, education, sociolinguistics, cognitive sciences, and so forth. In this study, we focus only on the studies in the field of language teaching.

Investigation into the relationship between teachers' beliefs and classroom behavior has been conducted in various second language contexts (e.g., Breen et al., 2001; Burns, 1996; Johnson, 1994). In this line of research, some studies have reported discrepancies between teachers' beliefs and their behaviors in the classroom (e.g., Johnson, 1996; Woods, 1996). For instance, Johnson (1994) elicited preservice ESL teachers' beliefs about second language teachers and second language teaching from participant teachers' narrative, classroom observations, and interviews. She inferred participant teachers' beliefs from their teaching behavior and the intentions behind the behavior. The analyses revealed critical incidents where teachers perceived their actions as conflicting with their beliefs. For example, one preservice teacher noted that there is a dilemma between managing class time for quality discussions and maintaining the flow of the whole lesson. The findings suggested that teachers' beliefs affect what teachers actually say and do in the classroom.

In order to understand the cause of these discrepancies and the process of how teachers deal with dilemmas or tensions, it seems crucial to investigate teachers' beliefs and how they change in the course of teaching.

Table 1. The characteristics of the participants

Teachers' ID No.	Age	Previous Teaching Experience	Current Teaching Experience (From April, 2003)	Educational Background
JET001	25	None.	Teaches in a private junior and senior high school.	B.A. (English) M.A.(Education)
JET002	24	From May 2002 to February 2003, she taught part-time in a public junior high school. It was an entrance exam preparatory class, and the class met two times a month.	Teaches part-time in a private junior and senior high school three days a week.	B.A. (English) M.A. (Education) Doctoral student (Education)
JET003	35	From 1994 to 1999, he taught full time in a private high school in Osaka.	Teaches part-time in a private junior and senior high school.	B.A. (Psychology) B. A. (English) M.A. (Education)
JET004	25	From May 2002 to February 2003, she taught the same course as JET 002.	Teaches in a public high school.	B.A. (English & American Literature) M.A. (Education) Doctoral student (Education)

Study

Method

Purpose

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to investigate teachers' beliefs about English teaching and how they change in the course of time through teachers' narrative data collected by journal keeping and informal interviews. In terms of the change in beliefs, we focused on the cause, and when and how it changed in the course of teaching English in Japan.

Participants

Four Japanese teachers of English participated in our study. Their participation was completely voluntary and their attitude toward this study was favorable. The characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 1. All of the participants finished the same English teaching methodology program in a graduate school and each obtained an M.A. in education. They therefore shared the same general knowledge about English teaching methodology. On the other hand, the participants differed from one to another with regard to the educational background and teaching experiences before and after the program. These similarities and differences might help us understand whether beliefs held by teachers are different according to past experience, educational background, or their present teaching situation. Figure 1 shows the difference in teaching contexts of each participant in terms of three respects: public or private, religious or non-religious, and college preparatory or vocational.

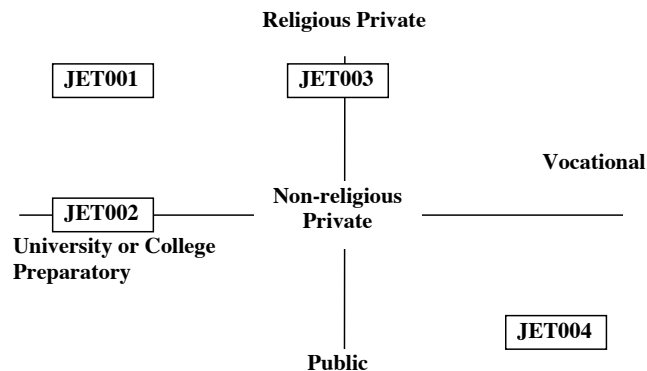


Figure 1. Teaching contexts (i.e., school ethos) of each participant

Procedures

In order to investigate the participants' beliefs about teaching English, we adopted two different data collection techniques: journal keeping and informal interviews. The participants were requested to keep written journals in which they articulated open-ended reactions and observations about teaching. For example, they articulated their beliefs about foreign language learning and teaching, their students, teaching contexts, and so forth. In addition to the written-form reports, informal interviews were conducted with the participants by the authors to follow up the journal entries. In order to reduce the tension of, the interview it was held in a cafeteria outside the classroom, and the interviewer, who was one of the authors and an acquaintance of the interviewee, did not adopt question-and-answer-style but just talked about the English teaching in the present situation with the interviewee.

The interview was digitally recorded as a voice file with the interviewee's permission. The aim of the interview was to confirm the interpretation of written reports and to check the appropriateness of the analysis. Therefore, the interviewer read the journals beforehand. After the interview, the interviewer underlined the words and phrases that the interviewee stressed and repeated during the interview, listening to the recorded voice file. Both journal keeping and interviews were done in Japanese, the participants' native language.

Results

Journal keeping & informal interviews

The descriptions related to participants' beliefs have been extracted, with some words underlined, and are included in the Appendix at the end of this paper. The words and phrases underlined might be keywords for understanding their beliefs.

Analysis & discussion

Limitation of this study

This is just a case study. We need to be careful about generalizing as each case may be unique. However, these statements are authentic and true, and we can gain an understanding of what really happens in the course of teaching English.

Case 1 (JET001)

In her (JET001's) case, two primal ideas were found in her journal (see, Appendix 1). One is the gap between her students' impression of her and her own self-image (e.g., "*I appear different...*" "*I didn't want to disclose myself,*" etc...). The other is the gap between beliefs about leaning strategy and

teaching strategy (e.g., "*Pattern practice is a meaningless task,*" "*My students are trained to do so,*" etc...). She recognized that her learning style and strategy were different from that of her student's. Without changing her beliefs about language learning, she compromised on adopting teaching styles that suited her students, although she thought it neither effective nor significant.

Case 2 (JET002)

In her (JET002's) case, four primal ideas can be found in her journal (see, Appendix 2). The first concerns the skills needed in teaching English to high school students. The Second is the lesson content and the Third is about the ideal goals of learning English. The last is about the exam as a personalized feedback tool. She recognized what her students needed and what she had to teach in order to accomplish the course objectives. Even though it turned out to be necessary for her to utilize skills that were different from what she had learned, including her own knowledge about English and English grammar, she was able to deal with the discrepancies.

Case 3 (JET003)

In his (JET003's) case, three primal ideas can be found in his journal (see, Appendix 3). They are methodological issues in English teaching in Japanese context, motivation, and the importance of understanding students. Compared to other participant teachers, he seems to have a rather clear image of what he should do in his teaching context. His beliefs were confirmed in the course of teaching, rather than changed. It seems that his teaching experience made him maintain the beliefs about them, which means that his beliefs are stable.

Case 4 (JET004)

In her (JET004's) case, two primal ideas can be found in her journal (see, Appendix 4). One is about how to teach English, and the other is about what an English teacher is like in Japan. At first, she was not sure how she should teach English, but by observing and coming to know what her students want, she seems to have confidence in teaching English. On the other hand, she has an image of what an ideal English teacher is. She wants to introduce another world through learning English.

Conclusion

In this study, we made an attempt to explore the process of how teachers' beliefs can change in the course of teaching English in several contexts in Japanese high schools through journal keeping (i.e., diary). Two main ideas were found in the teachers' beliefs extracted: teacher's role in class and student's reaction to his or her teaching style. All of the teachers who participated in this study, except for JET002, mentioned these topics. Though they have been trained to be teachers, they didn't know how to behave or how to teach English in class. On the other hand, JET003, who had had more than five years of teaching experience, had rather stable beliefs about teaching English including his own teaching style. It seems that the degree to which their beliefs were stable is to be determined by the amount of his or her teaching experience. For novice English teachers, the first year of practical teaching experience may be important for them to establish the fundamental scheme for teaching English in a particular context. This seems to be part of the reasons why participants with less teaching experience changed their beliefs, at least to some extent. It might be difficult for novice teachers to realize that an effective learning strategy for one teacher is not always effective for his or her students.

Some participants changed his or her beliefs and others did not. Why? The participant teachers have tried to find out what their students want and how they learn English. In order to help their students to learn English effectively, the participant teachers have kept up with the present teaching situations and students' beliefs about language learning. Findings in this study might enable us to understand teacher development or progression processes. Investigation into how teachers change their beliefs, or how teachers "keep current" in their teaching career, might give us significant insights for teacher education.

As implications for further research, in order to understand the teachers' beliefs and their behavior we need more participants from different teaching contexts in future studies, and we need to revise the research design to contribute to teacher education fields. Gaining an understanding of teachers' thought processes in dealing with classroom reality can have some insights for English teaching in Japan.

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Appendix 1

JET001's journal entries with keywords underlined (English translation)

JET 001

I appear different to my students.
My students' impression on me is different from what I think.
I didn't want to disclose myself.

To correct students' essay (in English composition tasks and class) is very tough.

Especially in English composition tests, I found it possible to be a generous marker.

I didn't know anything about the educational system in my school; what I should do? I didn't know how to behave as a teacher. So I'm just working uncomplainingly.

As for me, pattern practice is a meaningless task. I found that I don't have my own teaching style.

I found that I need to be strict in order to urge my students to study hard. At first, I didn't know how I should be strict. Repetition (To practice again and again) is necessary for my students.

My students simply memorize what they have learned in class. It doesn't make sense. I am thinking of how I intervene their ways of studying.

My students are trained to do so. They can do as they are said to do so. They don't understand the fundamentals of English language as well as the preparation for the English class.

Appendix 2

JET002's journal entries with keywords underlined (English translation)

JET 002

The skills that I need in teaching high school students are completely different from what I frequently used at the undergraduate / graduate program.

I realized that high proficiency in English is essential in teaching, not to mention knowledge about how to teach English. I think you need training in reading and understanding the material thoroughly in order to satisfy the course requirements.

(Reading course at high school) I don't know exactly what the course objective is. I don't know how I should teach reading to my students.

Concerning students' motivation, it would be better to give students the impression that, "I will be able to speak English," or "English is easy," than to make them hate English by teaching grammar.

I think what is important in reading rapidly is vocabulary (and guessing the word meaning). I want students to improve their ability to understand or use the words and phrases that they learn in the class even when they are to read new materials. Being able

to do translating and rewriting sentences are not enough. What is important in exams is not the score. I want students to utilize exams as a help to understand and remember what they have learned in the class.

Exams would also be an opportunity to give personalized feedback to students.

I think regular lessons and exams can lead to the improvement of student's ability if students can get detailed feedback.

It seems important for the students to get into the habit of studying on their own.

For me it seems ideal that students learn general learning skills through English lessons, including learning strategies etc.

Since the class size is too big (48 people in one class), giving feedback in a sheet of mini quiz etc. would be very important as one of the communication tools.

I guess I couldn't manage the classroom very well. If the management went well, I might have been able to do more during the lessons.

I guess I should spend more time on emphasizing the important points and reviewing the lessons.

I think students need to understand English grammar, concerning the whole English program of this school.

Appendix 3

JET003's journal entries with keywords underlined (English translation)

JET 003

Lecture-style teaching without student-teacher interactions is suitable for a large class. For English teachers in such classroom environment, grammar-translation method is easy to conduct. In fact, I want to try to put other teaching methods into practice but I imagine it will not work well in my class.

English should be regarded as a practical subject such as music or PE. English teaching is like instructing musical instruments or training athletes. English skills cannot be taught effectively in a large class including more than forty students through lecture-style instruction.

For teachers at junior and senior high schools, it is necessary to understand how mature their students are. The basic knowledge of what teenagers are like and their attitudes toward parents or teachers is very useful when they teach at secondary schools. The interns for teaching practice should have these kinds of knowledge before they start teaching.

To have a good relationship with students is critical for school teachers.

I find some students in my class studying very hard only because there are end-term or entrance examinations ahead of them. These external motivations can easily encourage students to work hard.

In the first term, I found difficulty in teaching the third grade class because they are so immature, but I do not feel so now (November). One of the reasons is that I can make them get involved in classroom activities or quizzes by utilizing their “childlike” attitudes (it is so easy to make them compete each other!).

The main objective of my English class is to make the students have basic command of English. I hope all the students in my class will be able to improve their English skills in later years based on what they learn now.

To show teachers' individual character or private life can create a good atmosphere in their classes. By doing so, they can get more attentions from their students, particularly if they have low academic achievement and motivation for studying English.

Teachers are responsible for providing the students with good learning environment where they can improve their scholastic abilities. Primarily students are to blame for their poor grades, but teachers should take measures to prevent them from dropping out of academic works (sometimes it is necessary for students to be compelled to study).

Appendix 4

JET004's journal entries with keywords underlined (English translation)

JET 004

It was tougher for me to make exams than I had expected (the number of questions, the degree of difficulty, the organization...).

I think I have to study a lot more about how to explain English grammar without using technical terms. I also think that I need to make my explanation easier for the students to understand. I guess there are some ways to do that.

I realized that I didn't do any preparations for qualifying examinations both in and out of the class. Maybe I can do something for the students.

When I made final exams, I clarified the questions and explanations and carefully allocated the points so that it would be easier to mark, reflecting on the making of mid-term exams.

A lot of students haven't got used to speaking in English. I think I need to change the content of the oral communication class.

It may be nice if you can let the students think over about their goals or hopes they want to achieve in studying English. I guess that kind of awareness would also be good for me.

Now that September has come, I feel I can take a more careful look at the whole class and the whole students in each grade.

Although the content of lessons is the same, a lot of things are different according to the class; for instance, the way how I give example sentences, how I explain grammar, and the degree of students' understanding.

I'm still wondering how to teach. Students can use their own words in translating the sentences into Japanese if they don't miss the important points in grammar or word meaning. But they don't seem to be satisfied until I give them the "right" answer.

I decided to do listening activities at the beginning of each lesson. This will work as a preparation for qualifying examinations in English.

I want to teach the basic elements of English that I think are absolutely necessary for the students.

Teaching students how to behave is really tough. I hope I can introduce another world to students through English.

I want to help students keep up the hard work, especially students who study English hard.