

Language Teaching and Researching: Principled Practice or Webs of Beliefs?

Andrew Finch

Kyungpook National University

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The topic of student beliefs and perceptions has been the subject of significant research. However, there has been less attention to the important topic of teacher and researcher beliefs, perhaps due to practical and ethical problems involved in researching these beliefs and the efficacy of the language teachers and researchers who hold them. This study therefore attempts to describe the ‘webs of beliefs’ that determine the thoughts and actions of human beings in general and discusses how teacher-held webs of beliefs can affect the learning environment of their students and how researcher-held beliefs can affect the objectivity of their findings. The relationship between beliefs and actions is not always straightforward however, and the second focus of attention is on the conscious and unconscious gaps between beliefs, teaching theory, and classroom practice which can occur, despite the fact that courses on teaching philosophy, psychology and methodology are standard in teacher training institutions. In conclusion, it is suggested that teachers need to be aware of their own webs of beliefs and the ‘dispositions’ of their students and that ELT researchers need to clearly state their philosophical standpoint before presenting research findings, so that the reader might be informed of their webs of beliefs and make appropriate conclusions.

[teacher training/ELT research/교사교육/영어교육연구]

I. INTRODUCTION

HAMLET: Denmark’s a prison. [...]

ROSENCRANTZ: We think not so, my lord.

HAMLET: Why, then, ‘tis none to you; for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so. To me it is a prison.

(Shakespeare, 2011, 2.2.244, 249-252)

Applied Linguistics is a problem-driven, socially accountable profession, aiming to

provide solutions to language-related problems in the real world. However, a number of fundamental problems in language teaching rarely get asked in the professional literature. These issues, many of which concern the belief systems of the teachers, have largely been sidetracked by the focus on linguistics, teaching methodology and quantitative intervention which has characterized second language research since its inception, though these issues continue to raise their heads at 'ground floor level' in the language classroom.

From the interventionist standpoint, language learning is quantifiable, predictable and measurable and can be described in terms of constituent units such as vocabulary, grammar, phonology, and structure. This mechanistic, impersonal view of what is seen by qualitative researchers as a social event (Nauert, 2009) allows the blame to be placed on teachers or students if a given methodology does not produce quantifiable language learning,¹ despite the innumerable personal and institutional variables involved.² This lack of attention to teacher/student belief systems is to some extent shared by the recent student-centered focus in language teaching, which has avoided looking into the 'hidden agendas' of teachers, encouraging them instead to promote student autonomy, to teach learning strategies, and to facilitate learning. While such goals are admirable in themselves, an implication that arises is that self-directed language learners are able to determine their own learning paths and can thereby escape possible restrictions and impediments resulting from the teacher's interpretation of the syllabus – an interpretation that will inevitably be controlled by his/her web of beliefs. Publishers and educators have also tried to evade the problem of teacher-variables by producing 'teacher-proof' textbooks (Murray & Christison, 2010). These treat the teacher not as a well-qualified professional in need of student-centered, facilitative learning materials, but as a technician, leading the students on a predictable, linear learning path in a manner which (if followed 'correctly' and without omission or adaptation) will result in success. Failure in this situation is seen as a result of disregarding the prescribed process, rather than the inadequacy of the process itself.

Such approaches assume that there is a 'Royal Road' to language learning and that progress along this road can be dictated in a logical and rational manner. However, this view of learning ignores issues of affect (student confidence, self-esteem, identity,

¹ Such standpoints are represented by the behaviorist school and training institutions which continue to adhere to a linear, product-oriented view of language learning as in the presentation-practice-perform (PPP) approach and the 'Type A' syllabi as described by White (1988), which concentrate on the 'what' rather than the 'how' of language learning.

² Just as a tree in a forest ceases to be a 'tree' once it is isolated from its environment (weather, soil, insects, birds, animals, other trees, bacteria, etc.) by placing it in a laboratory, so teachers and learners cannot be researched without taking their entire surroundings and the innumerable variables of their surroundings into account. Such variables or 'connectivities' are interactive and co-dependent.

motivation, attitudes, anxiety, stress, etc.), utility (reasons for studying), learning styles, the learning environment (its conduciveness for learning in terms of the teacher, the curriculum, the state of the room, the level of competitiveness, and other variables) (Fraser, 1984), and the subjective interpretation of the syllabus by the teacher (Breen, 1987). It is also rare to find a teacher-training program or a Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) text that acknowledges the multiplicity and complexity of variables involved in language teaching, the essentially human nature of language teachers, their subjectivity (and even confusion) in terms of the teaching philosophies they subscribe to, and the way in which they apply these principles in the classroom. As Karavas-Doukas (1996) points out:

Courses designed to train teachers in the new approach focus on transmitting information about the new approach and persuading teachers of its effectiveness. When the teachers return to their classrooms, they misinterpret the new ideas and translate them to conform to their existing classroom routines - at the same time believing that they are doing exactly what the new approach calls for (p. 194).

This is not to say that research has not been carried out in investigating affect, beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions (Arnold, 1999; Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005; Horwitz, 1988, 1990; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Orton, 1996; Raths, 2001; Richards, Gallo & Renandya, 2001). However, this has mainly been targeted at students rather than teachers, since research into teaching competence and effectiveness quickly falls into ethical problems. There is little danger of offending research participants (assuming that consent has been obtained) when examining the traits of 'good' and 'poor' learners (Naiman, Frohlich, Stern & Todesco, 1978; Porte, 1988) for example. However, if we were to attempt to find out what it is that makes some teachers extremely effective in terms of the learning and positive attitude change that occurs in their classes (Haberman, 2005), along with corresponding factors in the classes of teachers with 'poor' results, it would be impossible to find 'poor' teachers willing to take part in the research and impossible to publish the findings. This is because the classification of teachers as 'good' or 'poor' would rely upon questionable criteria (i.e. the researcher's own web of beliefs) as well as being professionally suspect. It is not surprising, therefore, that the very people who are at the heart of language learning have been largely excluded from research into that process:

In our quest for the improvement of language teaching, we have overlooked the language teacher. Exploration (...) of teachers' perceptions of what they do and why they do it, holds promise for understanding the frequently noted discrepancies between theoretical understanding of second/foreign language acquisition and

classroom practice (Kleinsasser & Savignon, 1991, p. 299).

Sarason makes a similar point when she states, “Educational change depends on what teachers do and think – it’s as simple and as complex as that. It would be easy if we could legislate changes in thinking (Sarason, 1971, p. 193). Just as the study of language can only be examined through language, so the concept of training language teachers and training the teacher-trainers runs into self-referential problems (teachers are ‘taught’ how to teach; teacher-trainers are usually ex-teachers). Meanwhile, the process of teaching teachers is obfuscated by the fact that just as every language learner has different beliefs, perceptions, learning styles, learning preferences, and learning backgrounds, every pre/in-service teacher has his/her own web of beliefs, which determines what happens in the classroom, but which remains largely unresearched. This paper therefore aims to examine this sidestepping of issues by addressing two dilemmas at the heart of English Language Teaching (ELT) and research:

1. Given that teachers are central agents in the learning processes of their students and that their webs of beliefs (conscious and unconscious) control what and how they teach, how can these beliefs be researched and positively modified to ensure that they conform to pedagogically sound teaching and learning theories?
2. In view of the individual webs of beliefs that determine what and how researchers focus on in their studies and how they interpret their results, how can research into language learning be objective?

In view of the complexity of these questions and the danger of falling into circular arguments, the manner of examining the issues in this paper is exploratory, taking into account the subjective nature of the realities involved. For this reason the author wishes to state that his own (conscious) web of beliefs views language teaching and learning from a sociocultural and psychosocial perspective. According to this approach, language learning is a social event, in which “written language develops, as speech does, in the context of its use (Goodman & Goodman, 1992, p. 223) and is driven by affective factors such as self-esteem, motivation, and attitudes to learning (Mantle-Bromley, 1995) on the part of the teachers as well as the students. These beliefs have prompted the exploration of ideas in this study, which takes a philosophical stance rather than a data-driven one. This is because any data offered at this stage would be presented through the author’s own web of beliefs and would tend to be self-confirming. Before carrying out studies in this area, it is necessary to examine the social and psychological factors involved.

II. BELIEFS

It is normal for pre-service teachers to learn about teaching philosophy, psychology and methodology during their studies, the assumption being that knowledge of sound theory will lead to informed practice in the classroom. Teaching practicums also give aspiring teachers the opportunity to put the theory they have learned into practice, and to hone their teaching skills under the guiding supervision of their mentors and experienced practitioners.³ At this stage it can be expected that the pre-service teachers would come into contact with the practical and administrative aspects of their chosen profession and would learn how to put theory into practice. However, it is also possible that while interacting with teachers in their practicum schools they might meet some who express a defeatist attitude, claiming that working conditions are such that they are not allowed to follow what they 'know' to be effective teaching practice. Such 'old hands' often advise the newcomers to forget everything they learned in training college in favor of the 'realities' of managing large classes, completing unimaginable amounts of administrative tasks and sacrificing their professional principles to the demands of test-preparation (Personal communications with students, 2005-2012).

The implications of such 'practical' attitudes for the teacher-trainer suggest that in-service professional development in TEFL must focus on modifying beliefs in a manner that results in more effective and principled teaching. In this context, it is interesting that Richards et al. (2001) focus on modification of beliefs without mentioning the enhancement of teaching skills, perhaps on the assumption that these will be positively affected once unsupported beliefs have been identified, examined, and modified.

This logic takes us onto stony ground however, since we need to agree on a sound definition of beliefs before looking into their origins, their nature, and their outcomes. We also need to understand that perceptions of beliefs are relative; whatever 'objective' research instrument is used to discover the beliefs held by a teacher, the results (derived from questionnaires, interviews, classroom observations, teacher journals, etc.) will be analyzed through the filter of the beliefs of the researcher, so that we find ourselves once more in a circular argument. This can be illustrated by performing a language learning thought experiment (Thomason, 1991). Let us imagine an action research project in which the teacher wishes to discover why certain students keep falling asleep in his/her lessons. This endeavor conforms with the goal of action research – to investigate problems that occur in the classroom and to carry out that investigation from the point of view of the

³ Teaching practicums in National Universities in Korea last for 4 or 5 weeks, in contrast to countries such as Finland, where they range from 1 to 2 years, functioning as full professional apprenticeships (Finch, 2009).

teacher-as-researcher, rather than an 'objective' observer who knows nothing of (and is not concerned with) the affective, social and administrative factors involved (Finch, 2005). However, it can be seen that a web of beliefs is already in operation, in that the researcher subscribes to a psychosocial view of language learning and a qualitative view of language learning research. This set of beliefs is well supported in the research literature, but it is in conflict with the quantitative approach, which attempts to isolate and measure variables that are often defined by the researcher for the purpose of the research. Such determinist webs of beliefs, which see language learning as the sum of quantifiable parts, often originate from the researchers' student days, when they were taught and supervised by adherents of behaviorism or of the audio-visual school of thought.

This last point is important, for if we define beliefs as personal descriptions of reality, their relative nature becomes apparent and it is possible to examine them non-judgmentally. This approach accords with the 'hard' sciences (e.g. physics), in which theories represent descriptions of reality based on the knowledge (data) and the apparatus (technology) available at any given time in history. Thus, Aristotle's view of the universe – one that predominated for two thousand years and was accepted by the Church of Rome – was based upon observations with the naked eye, set in the context of 'unquestionable' (i.e. universally accepted in that society) religious 'truths'. To say that Aristotle was wrong in the light of subsequent developments (e.g. the telescope) is to ignore the fact that beliefs are formed in a social context and are the result of interactions with peers, family members, media, and cultural truths. When Einstein offered a construction of reality that differed with that of Newton, it was because the instruments of observation had become more sophisticated, the Church's monopoly on 'truth' was no longer taken for granted, and science had moved on from a mechanistic, absolutist description of the universe. However, it must be stressed that Aristotle, Galileo, Newton, Einstein, and even spiritual and philosophical⁴ leaders formed webs of beliefs that were in accordance with reality as it was experienced by them.

Returning to the teacher who is qualitatively investigating an issue in his/her classroom, the collection and analysis of data reveals another level that must be explored in this discussion. The qualitative approach that is being taken is not occurring in a belief-vacuum, for data does not stand by itself; it is interpreted through various lenses of perception. Even the analysis of the problem and the choice of data to be collected are subject to the beliefs of the researcher. Thus, a feminist, a Marxist, a behaviorist, a constructivist, a socio-culturalist, a psychologist and a nutritionist,⁵ will all analyze the problem in different ways,

⁴ It is interesting to note that the advent of string theory and other developments has brought physics closer to philosophy and to oriental concepts of energy fields (Capra, 1975).

⁵ The nutritionist is mentioned here in view of extensive research showing that nutrition

collect different data, and come to different conclusions. In fact it is probable that they would make different deductions even from the same data. These ‘results’ would all be justifiable in terms of the respective webs of beliefs, built up over years of professional experience and conforming to their differing views of reality.

At this point it is relevant to consider the nature of beliefs in greater detail.

1. Definitions

1) Beliefs

Definition in itself indicates a modernist, empirical view of reality, so that in attempting to define beliefs the author must accept the modernist approach. This self-referencing situation illustrates the dilemma of those who attempt to investigate the webs of beliefs of language teachers. Just as these teachers use language to teach language, so the investigator must investigate beliefs through his/her own belief system. In this context, it is interesting that the advent of the language corpus (e.g. the British National Corpus, with its 100 million word collection of samples of spoken and written language) has alleviated the situation for the non-determinist researcher, since lexis appears in context in the corpus, without ‘objective’ interpretation⁶. Rather than meaning being specified and generalized as in a dictionary, the search-item (e.g. ‘beliefs’) can be examined in relation to the collocations, word orders, and associations that appear in academic, literary, tabloid, and common-speech sources. The researcher can explore this data in the light of the subjectivity and relativity of the living language and can then chart the ways in which the search item means different things to different people.

There is insufficient space to perform such an extensive investigation about the term ‘beliefs’ in this paper. Instead, a number of relevant definitions are offered in an attempt to indicate the general field in which beliefs about language teaching and learning operate. The first of these comes from *A Dictionary of Philosophical Terms and Names* (Kemmerling, 2011).

Belief: Affirmation of, or conviction regarding, the truth of a proposition, whether or not one is in possession of evidence adequate to justify a claim that the proposition is known with certainty.

(e.g. ‘brain food’) has significant effects on cognition and on the ability of children to concentrate and focus attention for any length of time (*Society for Neuroscience*, 2003).

⁶ It is inevitable that the webs of beliefs of those who write dictionaries influence their ‘objective’ definitions.

The *Commens Dictionary of Pierce Terms* (Bergman & Paavola, 2003) gives a definition of belief as formulated by Charles Sanders Pierce, the American philosopher, logician, mathematician, and scientist, who is generally regarded as the father of pragmatism.

Belief is not a momentary mode of consciousness; it is a habit of mind essentially enduring for some time, and mostly (at least) unconscious; and like other habits, it is (until it meets with some surprise that begins its dissolution) perfectly self-satisfied.

The *Merriam Webster Dictionary* (2012) provides a traditional, multi-faceted definition.

- 1: a state or habit of mind in which trust or confidence is placed in some person or thing
- 2: something believed; especially: a tenet or body of tenets held by a group
- 3: conviction of the truth of some statement or the reality of some being or phenomenon especially when based on examination of evidence

In terms of language teaching and learning, beliefs consist of “general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning and about the nature of language learning and teaching (Victori & Lockhart, 1995, p. 224), and reflection on these beliefs has been termed ‘metacognition’ by cognitive psychologists.

Finally, *Wikipedia* (2012) offers a succinct description, which can be taken as the starting point for further discussion:

Belief is the psychological state in which an individual holds a proposition or premise to be true.

As with all definitions, the ones offered above assume that the readers share a common perception of the words that are used to define the concept in question. However, this is not the case with ‘truth’, which is mentioned in three of these definitions. Rather, the believer’s perception of the meaning of this abstract term differs according to context, upbringing, education, society, and culture. As *Wikipedia* points out, “Truth has a variety of meanings, such as the state of being in accord with fact or reality. It can also mean having fidelity to an original or to a standard or ideal. Theories of truth present continuing topics of debate for scholars and philosophers and differ according to perceptions regarding the absoluteness or relativity of knowledge, experience, objectivity, and reality. Thus, truth for the determinist 18th century scientist is completely different from the truths faced by the 21st century quantum scientist.

Truth for the language teacher is also a relative concept, varying with and interacting with his/her web of beliefs. If we return to the hypothetical action-research teacher who is investigating his/her students who are sleeping in class, it is possible that he/she will take a counseling approach. This will produce different outcomes from those of other teachers with different webs of beliefs, who might let the students sleep or might wake them and punish them for not paying attention in class⁷. Furthermore, if we extend our thought experiment to consider a quantitative researcher looking at the same phenomenon, it is possible that his/her approach might come up with some strange results if he/she were (for example) to measure the test scores of students who sleep in class. It might well be that these test scores would be higher than those of their classmates, since the students in question would have spent a great deal of time studying in private institutes. In this case the researcher would be able to claim that sleeping in class improves test scores. Such a statement would be justified in view of the researcher's adherence to 'objective,' quantitative statistical analysis, and would reflect his/her distrust of non-quantifiable affective, psychological, and social factors.

2) Web of beliefs

Put briefly, a web of beliefs, or worldview, defines who we are and controls the way in which we react to events and ideas. It forms over time, being influenced by family, friends, schooling, experiences, opinions, culture, religion, and society, and provides a lens through which we view subsequent happenings in our lives. Thus, it is not only a result of everything that happens to us, but it also controls the way in which we perceive our lives and the things around us. The 'web' metaphor of Quine and Ullian (1978) indicates that the beliefs that rule our lives are not straight forward, but can form a tangled web of intricacies, emanating from the center and ensnaring new ideas as they come along. Thus we often use established beliefs to justify new beliefs. One might state, for example, "I believe that William Shakespere of Stratford wrote all the pays attributed to William Shakespeare, so I therefore believe that he received an education in the grammar school in Stratford, despite the fact that there is no evidence to support this belief"⁸. The core beliefs that reside at the

⁷ In the current Korean educational system it would probably not be possible to require these students to stay behind after school to do extra work, since one of the factors that induce students to sleep in class is their tiring schedule of visiting private learning institutes in the evenings. Another is the 'school collapse' phenomenon (Jae-Hoon Lim, 2001) that is causing parents and students to lose confidence in the state school system.

⁸ Pointon (2011) provides some excellent examples of this form of circular reasoning in relation to 'the man who was never Shakespeare.'

center of the web need little or no justification and are the ones that we least like to modify, even if they are shown to be unfounded, or simply false. This is called ‘belief perseverance’ by psychologists: “If the issues go to the heart of people’s deeply held world views, they become more entrenched in their opinions if you try to update their thinking (communication between Lewandowsky and Arnold in 2012, quoted in Arnold, 2012). A historical example of such unshakeable beliefs was that the world was flat and the sun travelled around the world, while more contemporary beliefs might be the existence of gravity and the validity of multiple-choice, high stakes tests. Such beliefs are deeply entrenched and therefore exhibit a great deal of inertia, even in the face of contrary evidence. As we move towards the edge of the web, however, the beliefs become less fixed, so that it is possible to modify them by new experiences, ideas and influences. Webs of beliefs are thus context-dependent, dynamic, complex, and unique to every individual.

3. Summary of research

While a great deal of research has been carried out on the relationship between students’ attitudes to learning and second language achievement (Horwitz, 1988, 1990; Littlewood, 2000; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Peacock, 1998; Schumann, 1975) it was Sauvignon who first pointed out that teachers also have attitudes and beliefs about language learning, and that these affect their teaching:

Not until we have taken a hard critical look at the attitudes and motivation of teachers, both individually and as a profession, will we be ready to determine what obstacles lie in the way of creating the kinds of learning environments which would be most helpful to our students (Sauvignon, 1976, p. 296).

More recently, Zheng (2009) has provided a comprehensive review of research into teachers’ beliefs and of pre-service teacher’s beliefs in particular. This research has successively focused on teachers’ planning (mid 1970s to early 1980s), teachers’ interactive thoughts and decisions (mid 1980s to early 1990s), and teachers’ beliefs and implicit theories (since the 1990s) (Clark & Peterson, 1986). This progression from investigation of practical aspects of teaching to more theoretical aspects occurred because early work into decision-making, classroom management, and organization failed to examine the rationales or the thinking processes behind the decisions and choices made by teachers, so that research in the 1990s began to look at “teachers’ perceptions, attributions, thinking, judgments, reflections, evaluations and routines (Calderhead, 1996, p. 710). This shift was initiated by Shulman (1986), who explored the different ways in which teachers understood the subject matter that they taught, and coined the phrase “the missing

paradigm to describe the “neglected domains (Zheng, 2009, p. 77) responsible for decisions regarding “what to teach, how to represent it, how to question students about it and how to deal with problems of misunderstanding (Shulman, 1986). The current study suggests that these domains are in fact the teachers’ webs of beliefs, which are responsible for the different ways of dealing with the complex issues of day-to-day teaching.

Garton (2010, p. 10) points out that research into teacher beliefs “is a relatively new field, which dates back more or less to the mid-seventies (...) in mainstream education but is even more recent in TESOL and she quotes Johnson, who identifies three assumptions underlying this research:

4. Teachers’ beliefs have an effect on what teachers do in the classroom insofar as beliefs affect perception and judgment.
5. Teachers’ beliefs are fundamental in learning to teach in that they influence how new information about learning and teaching is interpreted and how it becomes classroom practice.
6. Understanding teachers’ beliefs has an important role to play in improving teacher education (Johnson, 1994, p. 439).

Richards et al. (2001) also describe three assumptions that underlie current approaches to teacher development:

1. Teachers’ beliefs play a central role in the process of teacher development;
2. Changes in teachers’ practices are the result of changes in teachers’ beliefs;
3. The notion of teacher change is multidimensional and is triggered both by personal factors as well as by the professional contexts in which teachers work (Richards et al., 2001, p. 1).

Taking a different perspective, Rath (2001) states that ‘Teacher education programs are largely ineffective in improving the current practice of teaching (p. 385), because “the prior beliefs of teacher candidates can hinder learning about teaching. This statement follows on from Zeichner and Tabachnick (1981) who found that the thousands of hours spent in secondary education shape the core beliefs about learning of prospective teachers. Kennedy (1997) also identified the beliefs that students bring to teacher training as responsible for an inability to take on new ideas about teaching, asserting that methodologies that challenge their belief systems are simply disregarded by the students, being labeled as theoretical, impractical, or ‘wrong.’ Another problem identified by Kennedy was that many students believe that they have little to learn from a teacher-training program (an attitude that can arise in the case of native speakers who believe their

L1 qualifies them as language teachers). Instead, they believe “they already have what it takes to be a good teacher, and that therefore they have little to learn from the formal study of teaching (p. 14). In view of these problems, the task of the teacher-trainer can seem daunting, if not impossible, for as Raths points out:

So even if we had the technology available to us for changing beliefs, and even if we agreed that it was ethical to change the beliefs of our candidates, deciding on which particular beliefs to advance in our program would be difficult. In sum, (...) changing candidates’ beliefs looks like a hopeless task (Raths, 2001, p. 389).

Raths (2001) suggests therefore, that instead of taking on the value-laden task of modifying teachers’ attitudes and beliefs (and prescribing which beliefs are more acceptable or ‘better’ than others), beliefs can be considered as ‘pre-dispositions.’ Teacher-trainers should therefore attempt to strengthen dispositions such as knowledge, collegueship, and advocacy (along with the associated skills) in their students. In this case, teachers could be asked to “behave in ways consonant with these dispositions or others we might select, regardless of what they ‘believed’ about them (p. 389). Raths (p. 389) claims that this approach would solve many of the technical, theoretical, and ethical problems faced by teacher trainers, and he proposes four dispositions that might be strengthened:

1. Making setting attributions and not trait attributions.
2. Making efforts to meet children’s needs.
3. Working to clarify children’s ideas instead of judging them.
4. Rewarding approximations (Raths, 2001, p. 389).

In like manner, Orton (1996) proposes a Hippocratic Oath for teachers: “the teacher is required to act in such a way that always promotes whatever conception of student learning that the teacher believes in (p. 322). While this might seem to echo Polonius’ “to thy own self be true (Shakespeare, 2011,1.3.78), it is very relevant to the test-driven high school classroom and other situations in which one often hears the comment “I would love to teach according to my beliefs, but I am unable to do this because of parental pressure, the principal, student refusal to learn anything that is not on the test, ... (etc.) (personal communications between the author and in-service teachers, 2005-2012).It would appear that such teachers are sacrificing their beliefs and educational principles to practical considerations and therefore acting hypocritically, and the logical inference would be that they cannot be good teachers, particularly in view of Johnson’s (1994) three assumptions mentioned earlier. However, if we re-examine the first of these assumptions (“Teachers’ beliefs have an effect on what teachers do in the classroom insofar as beliefs affect

perception and judgment), it becomes evident that there is a deeper level of belief in action. At this level, the dissatisfaction of the teachers is less important than the belief that parental pressures must be acquiesced to, principals must be obeyed without question, and students must be given test-preparation in a way that they find acceptable.

Even deeper are the core beliefs (originating in the learning experience of the teachers themselves) that high-stakes tests are necessary, that they are an effective means of assessing meaningful learning, and that in-class test-preparation (mostly using the grammar-translation method) is an effective method of preparing for such tests, despite all the evidence to the contrary (Engel, 2007; Nicols & Berliner, 2005; Strauss, 2012) and irrespective of one’s professional philosophy. One might even identify a (perhaps culturally-based) core belief that remaining in a job is of the utmost importance regardless of one’s ineffectiveness and dissatisfaction, in contrast to the many thousands of teachers (good teachers in particular (Farber, 2010)) in other cultures who decide to take their skills and principles elsewhere (BBC News, 2007; The Japan Times, 2011; TNTP, 2012). In fact, according to the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) results of 2009 (OECD, 2009), teachers in Korea are the most dissatisfied with their effectiveness as teachers, compared with those in the other participating countries (Figure 1).

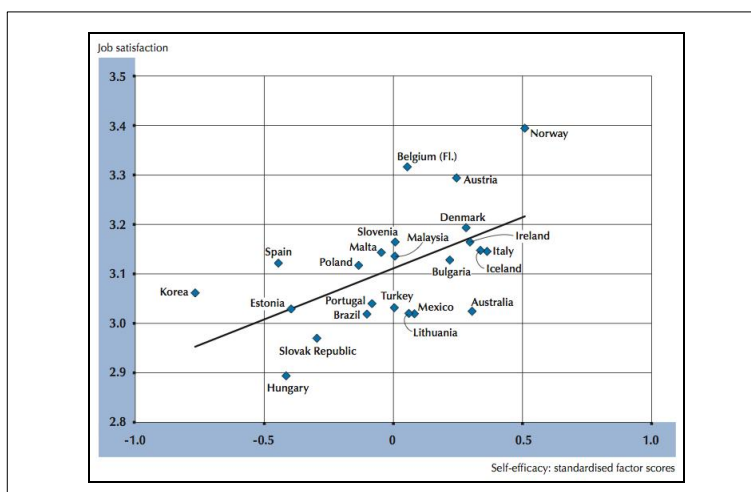


FIGURE 1 Country Means of Teacher Self-Efficacy and Job Satisfaction (2007-08) (OECD, 2009, p. 112)

Such data of course reflects the subjective perceptions of the participants, but it is significant that the perceived inability to teach according to pedagogic standards can be placed alongside a feeling of ineffectiveness and dissatisfaction. It would seem logical to

assume that this conflict between professional beliefs and practical necessities would result in ineffective learning on the part of the students. However, Suttle finds a weakness in this conclusion, pointing out that “hypocrites (can) be good teachers (...) just as (...) those who devoutly follow their conception of learning can be poor teachers (1996, p. 328).

Returning to the belief system of teachers who feel that they have no option but to carry out test-preparation, it is important to question the core belief that Korean students wish to blindly follow the ‘test-preparation’ factory-model paradigm. On the contrary, as Willing (1988) showed, learners have informed views on the learning process and can articulate them. The 5th APEC Education Ministerial Meeting (AEMM) in Gyeongju, Korea (2012) identified “how changes to the natures of work, instruction, and program implementation are driving regional economies toward future skills, ICT use and teacher quality, and global partnerships (APEC, 2012) and called for innovation in teaching, focusing on “creativity and character education (Jeong-ju Na, 2012). Learners are also aware of these changes and the official policy on education reform (the APEC statement was aired on national television) and are increasingly critical of what they see as outmoded methods of instruction, based on outdated conceptions of work. Widdows and Voller (1991) also reported that university students in Japan have views on learning that (contrary to popular wisdom) generally conflict with the ‘official’ curriculum of the university and this finding was corroborated by Littlewood, in Hong Kong (Littlewood, 2000).

Major research into language learning beliefs was carried out by Horwitz (1985, 1988, 1999), who developed the “Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) as a means of discovering teacher and student opinions on a variety of issues related to language learning (1985, p. 383). This was used in three quite large-scale American studies (Horwitz, 1988; Kern, 1995; Mantle-Bromley, 1995), with similar results. Learner/teacher beliefs differed on only a few items: i) learners underestimated the difficulty of language learning; ii) they held misconceptions about how to learn foreign languages; and iii) they gave more value to accent than teachers did. Horwitz proposed that gaps between teacher and learner beliefs probably result in “negative [language-learning] outcomes (1988, p. 292) and others have given theoretical support to this idea (Cotterall, 1995; Littlewood, Liu & Yu, 1996; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985). Kern concluded that learner beliefs are “quite well entrenched (1995, p. 76) and do not automatically change when learners are merely exposed to new methods, while Mantle-Bromley (1995) found that learners with realistic and informed beliefs are more likely to behave productively in class, work harder outside class, and persist longer with study.

Peacock’s research on the BALLI produced reports similar results to those of Horwitz, Kern and Mantle-Bromley, with learner/teacher differences on the same items. Peacock’s findings also provide some evidence (previously lacking) to support Horwitz’s, Kern’s and Mantle-Bromley’s suggestions that incorrect beliefs are detrimental to language learning:

“[a] statistically significant association was found between learner beliefs and proficiency (Peacock, 1998, p. 150). Oxford (1999) and Young (1991) draw a link between unrealistic learner/teacher beliefs and language anxiety, and Peacock (1998) describes how mistaken beliefs can result in a lack of student confidence. Peacock and others (Gevers-Schmitt, 1992; Gremmo, 1995; Riley, 1988) also conclude that teachers should work on and with students’ representations in the classroom, and that methodological advances in learning can only be limited without a change in conceptualization.

In all the above research, as well as in that of Bassano (1986) and Horwitz (1988), who showed that clashes can occur between teacher and student beliefs, the assumption is that when a mismatch occurs, it is the student’s web of beliefs that needs to be corrected or positively modified. However, this assumption, which lies at the core of the teaching profession and of much research, requires investigation. Robinson (Robinson, 2010) tells of a student who wanted to become a fireman despite all the advice of his teachers. In the end he became a fireman and saved his teacher’s life. Zenhui(2001) also describes the types of mismatch that can occur between teachers and students when the teacher’s beliefs conflict with the local culture or the personality of the students: “I am an introverted, analytic and reflective student. I don’t know how to cope with your extroverted, global and impulsive teaching style (Zenhui, 2001). Further such problems can be envisaged, particularly when the teacher is inexperienced, unfamiliar with the culture, unqualified, or as Suttle (1996) points out, inflexibly determined to teach according to a strong version of some ideological or metanarrative approach.

Reflective teaching (Richards et al., 2001) attempts to deal with these problems by inviting teachers to reflect on their practices and to be aware of their beliefs, habits, preferred methods, etc., in order to modify them positively. However, this process is still in danger of being circular and reflexive, since teachers inevitably reflect through the lenses of their pre-existing belief systems. A behaviorist(for example) will reflect on his/her teaching according to the beliefs associated with behaviorism; a teacher who believes that the Grammar-Translation Method is the correct approach for his/her pupils will reflect on his/her teaching practice from the perspective of these principles, while a student-centered teacher who believes in a social-cultural approach would come to completely different conclusions. At this point the question becomes one of how teachers (and researchers) might be invited to objectively examine and modify their core beliefs, without being subjectively influenced by them.

III. DISCUSSION

1. Dilemma 1 (How can teacher beliefs be positively modified?)

If learning is about changing attitudes and behavior in a positive direction (Rogers, 1951), then it is evident that even the term ‘positive’ is relative, depending upon the stakeholder’s school of thought. A view commonly expressed to the author in teacher-training seminars and frequently reported by students as representing the views of their teacher supervisors on teaching practicum is that new teachers often begin with positive attitudes to teaching in terms of holistic, student-centered principles, but these attitudes are quickly modified by the situations in which they find themselves – large classes, mountains of paperwork, and parents and principals who demand that they teach to the test. For these particular stakeholders (parents, principals, etc.), the rejection of pedagogic theory in favor of test-preparation might be seen as positive and practical attitude change, whereas for the teacher trainers, who have taught teaching methodology based on extensive research, such modification will be seen as negative and detrimental to the growth of their students’ students as human beings.

Effectiveness is a great modifier of belief systems, in that the most effective beliefs will tend to win out in an evolutionary, ‘survival of the fittest’ manner. It is to be expected, therefore, that as teachers reflect on their practices, their approaches, methods, and techniques will gradually become more effective. This would seem to be the case in the subjects of reading, math and science, since Korean students have consistently been at or near the top or the world rankings in these subjects as measured by the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA, 2009) and it can be claimed by their teachers that their webs of beliefs have produced the desired results.

However, when we consider the effectiveness of the test-driven English teaching approach (Wan-gee Choi, 2006), we find a different reality: “Koreans Ranked Bottom in English Proficiency Test (Shin-woo Kang, 2009a) and “Korea Ranks Bottom in British English Test (Shin-woo Kang, 2009b)⁹. While these two articles cite test officials who state that Korea has the greatest number of test takers in the world and that results are lowered by the number of elementary and secondary students taking the test, the fact remains that despite the enormous amount of money spent privately on English education¹⁰, and despite the excellent PISA results in other subjects, Korean students were ranked 136th out of 161 nations in speaking skills on the TOEFL of 2008, and 81st overall. In 2011, their average score of 81 (the score in 2008 was 78) placed them 7th in Asia, after Singapore (98), the Philippines (88), Pakistan (88), Malaysia (88), Bangladesh (83) and Bhutan (82). There

⁹ These two articles do not refer to the same test. Kang 2009a refers to the Educational Testing Service’s (ETS) Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and Kang 2009 b to the International English Language Testing System (IELTS).

¹⁰ Shin-woo Kang (2009a) quotes a Ministry of Education statistic that puts private spending on English education at 15 trillion Korean Won (c. 13 billion USD) in 2008.

can be few advocates on the ‘nature’ side of the nature-nurture debate who would claim that these figures indicate that Korean students have innate abilities in reading, math, and science, and that they have innate inabilities to learn English. Rather, in view of the frequently expressed rationale and goal of the test-driven classroom (to get students to pass high stakes, national tests), these figures support the general consensus of English Language Teaching(ELT) research, that a linear, grammar-translation approach is not effective in teaching a second language. However, a student-centered, task-based approach (including acquisition of learning strategies and a focus on learning autonomy) as in Singapore (Cheah, 2003) and Flanders(Van den Branden, 2006) has been shown to be effective in terms of passing national exams, in addition to the linguistic and holistic results that accrue from such an approach. In view of these results, it is evident that the argument “I must prepare my students for the test even though I disagree with the methods and practices involved” indicates an ineffective belief system and an unwillingness to persist with teaching approaches that have been found to be pedagogically, culturally, and holistically effective.

This discussion has been from the perspective of effectiveness in high-stakes language tests. However, it is significant that the goals of education in Korea, as presented on the UNESCO World Data on Education site (UNESCO, 2010/11) give priority to the humanistic goals of ‘HongikIngan’:

... the objectives of Korea’s education are to: assist all people in perfecting their individual character, develop the ability to achieve an independent life and acquire the qualifications of democratic citizens, and be able to participate in the building of a democratic state and promoting the prosperity of all humankind.

The fact that these goals are not being promoted in the competitive, test-driven classroom is attested to by the recent increase in student suicides and bullying in high schools in Korea (Hancocks, 2012). Autilitarian definition of ‘effectiveness’ over recent years has led to social problems that conflict severely with the concept of *HongikIngan*. It is suggested, therefore, that reflective teachers must examine all aspects of their webs of beliefs, being ready to modify ineffective practices and to prioritize humanistic learning, even if this involves considerable negotiation, discussion, and even education of parents and principals.

2. Dilemma 2 (How can research into language learning be objective?)

The study of the entrenched nature of beliefs and belief perseverance has shown that perceptions about English teaching are largely dependent upon the perceiver’s learning

history. Furthermore, these webs of beliefs are extremely difficult to dislodge once they have been formed, and researchers generally find themselves associating with a particular research approach, to the exclusion of other perspectives. In this situation, it would be unrealistic to ask researchers to present their research from every standpoint, asking the determinists to include qualitative analysis, and asking qualitative researchers to include quantitative analysis. Indeed, these approaches are to a large extent mutually exclusive.

The assumption behind this ‘dilemma’ is one that is at the heart of a great deal of research and arises from an absolutist, modernist perception of reality. If we accept, however that learning is not quantifiable and that research and even ‘truth’ are inherently subjective, then the problem dissolves. Rather than searching for methods of language learning that can be ‘objectively’ measured and rejecting those that cannot, it is more productive to acknowledge that we are now in a postmodern society (Finch, 2008), in which there are no absolutes and reality is a personal construct. From this perspective, it can be appreciated that even the ‘hard’ sciences are taking a philosophical view of reality. Chaos Theory and Complexity Theory tell us that ‘objectivity’ is an impractical concept, in view of the innumerable variables that exist in every learner, every classroom and every research study.

In this situation, there is no need to label particular research-based webs of beliefs as correct or incorrect. Instead, it is possible to take a broader view and to respect all research approaches for what they are, taking into account the well-founded rationales that lie behind them, and the webs of beliefs that have led to their formation. This paper therefore suggests that research studies should include a section in which the researcher(s) explicitly outline their research philosophy and the pedagogical lenses through which they are examining the issue in question (as at the end of the Introduction section of this paper). This would provide the reader with adequate information for understanding and contextualizing the findings, given that this process would itself be driven by the reader’s own web of beliefs. Objectivity, in this case, would consist in an honest acknowledgment of the meaning of the term from the researcher’s point of view.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Having examined the relative nature of truth in terms of beliefs, it becomes apparent that in-service and pre-service teachers are influenced first of all by their learning histories and then by the webs of beliefs of their trainers, just as their trainers were influenced by their learning histories and previous generations of teacher trainers. Unless the webs of beliefs of these trainers include a need to be abreast of the latest theoretical and technological developments, then it is inevitable that they will tend to dispense ‘truths’ that were valid 10,

20 or 30 years ago, but which resemble Aristotle's version of the universe when applied to postmodern classrooms. In this situation, it is not unreasonable to expect a lack of awareness of the implications and possibilities offered by smart technology, task-based teaching and learning, the socio-cultural approach, project learning, and inquiry-based learning. However, if it is argued that awareness of educational change is a state of mind, and that teacher-trainers must continually be open to new practices, then we must ask how one acquires such an open mind, given the closed nature of information-transmission that has characterized education to date.

Williams and Burden (1997) propose ten basic propositions "crucial for language teachers", of which number 7 states that: "What teachers do in the classroom will reflect their own beliefs and attitudes" (1997, p. 204). However, it appears either that the teaching practices of many teachers do not conform to their beliefs, or else their core beliefs allow them to act against their professed beliefs. Remembering that reality is a relative construct, and that each web of beliefs represents a personal definition of reality, it is interesting that teachers who have grown up in traditional, teacher-centered, test-driven learning environments feel dissatisfied with that environment and voice both a desire and an inability to modify it in a positive direction. Such 'cognitive dissonance,' or the feeling of discomfort that results from holding two conflicting beliefs (Festinger, 1957), indicates a discrepancy between beliefs and behaviors, and a consequent need for change. It is to be hoped that educational reform in Korea, such as the National English Ability TEST, will allow teachers to teach according to well-researched and pedagogically sound teaching theory. It is also to be hoped that researchers who investigate the teaching/learning environment will be aware of their webs of beliefs and will state them clearly at the beginning of their research, so that readers might know the type of lenses through which the data is being collected, selected, analyzed, and reported.

Finally, this overview of professional and personal webs of beliefs has identified suggestions by researchers in terms of getting students and teachers to modify their beliefs in a positive direction, so that they can become more effective learners and teachers, 'effective' being defined in an humanistic and holistic manner rather than a quantitative test-score. These suggestions include awareness raising, examination of mismatches between student/teacher beliefs, attention to student 'dispositions,' and reflective teaching.

There is no data offered in this investigation, since such data and its analysis would reflect the web of beliefs of the author. Instead, this paper calls for increased open-mindedness on the part of teachers and researchers, in the pursuit of maximum awareness of the factors leading to and comprising their webs of beliefs. If it is impossible to work outside of these webs, then the least that can be done is to be aware of them and to seek to modify beliefs at all levels, according to an informed reading of research literature and informed analysis of the classroom. Above all, it is necessary to examine core beliefs, to

state them openly when attempting to improve the language-learning environment, and to be ready to modify them if they do not produce ethically, socially, and pedagogically acceptable results.

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Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Levels: Elementary, Secondary, Tertiary

Andrew Finch
Department of English Education, Teachers' College
Kyungpook National University
80 Daehakro, Bukgu,
Daegu, 702-701, Korea
Tel: (053) 950-5832
Email: aef@knu.ac.kr

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