Chapter 12

Language Teachers’ Beliefs and Practices:
Lessons to Be Learnt for Facilitating Professional Development in Northern Cyprus

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ABSTRACT

The impact of professional development programs on teachers’ beliefs is still an exploratory field, with existing research finding both positive and weak impacts of teacher education on teachers’ beliefs. Building upon these findings, it is acknowledged that many challenges remain in designing focused professional development programs. This chapter addresses the problem by drawing on a study conducted with Higher Education teachers in North Cyprus. The study aimed to unveil teachers’ beliefs about in-class code-switching in teaching a foreign language. Using a qualitative methodology, data in the form of classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, course documents and field notes were collected and analyzed thematically. Findings suggest that cultures of learning, that is teachers’ frameworks of expectations about successful teaching and learning, have a significant impact on teachers’ beliefs. The authors suggest that an acknowledgement of cultural frames will facilitate appropriate professional development.

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INTRODUCTION

‘Cultures of learning’ is still a relatively new concept in teacher education and existing assumptions about research on teacher education neglect the possible role cultures of learning play in shaping teachers’ beliefs (e.g. Hobbs, Matsuo & Payne, 2010). This chapter explores this issue in the context of the code-switching (CS) practices of language teachers in a higher education institution in the north of Cyprus.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter is divided accordingly: first definitions of the key concepts in this study, including, teachers’ beliefs, cultures of learning and CS are offered. Then, the context and the methodology of this study with a description of the research framework, participants, and context are detailed. Next, the methods used in this study are set out and the data analysis is detailed. Later, the findings are presented and discussed critically. Finally, the conclusions drawn from the findings are presented. This part also includes the implications of the study and possible recommendations for teacher development programs.

Teachers’ Beliefs

Teachers’ beliefs have been defined from different perspectives. Taking Woods (1996) and Pajares’ (1992) lead, this work suggests that beliefs are opinions of the appropriate pedagogical practices in class based on teachers’ experiences or statements.

Though research analyzing the connection between teachers’ beliefs and classroom practices is widespread (e.g. Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver & Thwaite, 2001), more research is required to gain an understanding towards the underlying factors responsible for the often match or mismatch between beliefs and practices.

One standpoint is to explore the factors influencing beliefs systems (e.g. Aldemir & Sezer, 2009) which can be considered from two perspectives: external, e.g. language and institutional policies (Levis & Farrell, 2007), and internal, e.g. personal language learning experiences (Ellis, 2006) or personal histories (i.e. culture, upbringing and experiences) (Aldemir & Sezer, 2009).

The idea that prior learning experience and prior teachers’ personal histories contribute to teachers shaping their belief systems would suggest that the construction of beliefs is personal (Woods, 2003). Taking this argument one step further, when considered from a cultural perspective, teachers with shared cultural backgrounds exert similar behaviors and have similar expectations of their students (see Hobbs & Matsuo & Payne, 2010) which may further imply that belief construction relates to a broader, overarching approach; the theory of cultures of learning.

Cultures of Learning

The notion of cultures of learning is used to describe teachers’ frameworks of expectations, attitudes, values and beliefs about successful teaching and learning and how talk is used in interaction, among other aspects of learning (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006).