A Case Study on EFL Teachers’ Beliefs About the Teaching and Learning of English in Public Education*

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Received: 1 January 2013 / Accepted: 31 July 2014  
ISSN: 1697-7467

ABSTRACT: Teachers’ beliefs have been a fascinating topic for researchers for the amount of input they can provide for reflection and the improvement of the teaching and learning of English. This case study aims at identifying the beliefs held by a group of sixteen Chilean EFL teachers who work in public secondary education. A semi-structured interview and a Likert type survey are used to collect data from the participants. Semantic content analysis and the Atlas.ti qualitative software are used to transcribe, code, and segment data to then establish seven categories and six subcategories that depict what participants believe regarding English teaching and learning.  

Keywords: beliefs, English, teachers, secondary education.

Un estudio de caso sobre las creencias de profesores de inglés respecto a la enseñanza y aprendizaje del inglés en la educación pública

RESUMEN: Las creencias de los docentes han sido un tema fascinante para los investigadores por la información que pueden aportar a la reflexión y el mejoramiento de la enseñanza y aprendizaje del inglés. Este estudio de caso tiene como objetivo la identificación de las creencias que sostienen un grupo de dieciséis profesores de inglés chilenos que se desempeñan en la educación pública secundaria. Se ha utilizado una entrevista semi-estructurada y una escala tipo Likert para recoger los datos de los participantes. El análisis de contenido y el software Atlas.ti han sido utilizados para transcribir, codificar y segmentar los datos para luego establecer siete categorías y seis subcategorías que ilustran lo que los participantes creen respecto de la enseñanza y aprendizaje del inglés.  

Palabras clave: creencias, inglés, profesores, educación secundaria.

*Research grant FONDECYT 1120247 “Investigación del Conocimiento Profesional, las Creencias Implicitas y el Desempeño en Aula de Estudiantes de Pedagogía en Inglés como Estrategia de Generación de Indicadores de Monitordeo de su Proceso Formativo” and also funded by the International Association for Researching and Applying Metaphor.
1. **Introduction**

For Borg (2001:187), a belief is a mental state which has as its content a proposition that is accepted as true by the individual holding it, although the individual may recognize that alternative beliefs may be held by others. Beliefs may have two main characteristics: they can be conscious or unconscious, and they have an important impact on the way a teacher behaves. This case study addresses some teachers’ beliefs from the point of view of English teaching in public secondary education. It is a case study that develops an in-depth analysis of sixteen cases and uses an interview and a Likert scale as data sources. Case studies can deal with one single individual or with multiple cases and the small number of subjects is by no means connected with lack of scientific rigour, case studies are an opportunity to study, describe, examine a phenomenon in depth (Creswell, 2007:10). The phenomenon this case study approaches is beliefs.

2. **Theoretical Framework**

Beliefs are socially defined interpretation of experience and as mental and affective constructions of experience are integrated into schemata. Beliefs are any simple propositions inferred from what a person says or does, capable of being preceded by the phrase, ‘I believe that’. Stephens et al. (2000:535) affirm that “there are four ways that individuals fixate beliefs: believing what one wants to believe (tenacity), believing what someone else has said is true (authority), believing what one always has and which seems reasonable (a priori) and believing what one has tested out through investigation (scientific method)”.

Beliefs guide teachers’ behavior and inform teachers’ practice by serving as a kind of interpretative framework through which they made sense of what they do in their classrooms. For Richards, Gallo & Renandya (2001:50) “teachers’ beliefs are formed on the basis of teachers own schooling as young students while observing teachers who taught them”. In other words, the first perceptions about teaching emerge as learners, the way teachers perceive teaching raises from their experiences at school.

Beliefs depend on teachers’ experience, and are true for the person who holds them (Diaz, Martinez, Roa & Sanhueza, 2010:75; Freeman, 2002:11; Kasouta & Malatmis, 2009:69; Northcote, 2009:73). They are a frame of reference around which many classroom decisions are made and pedagogical practices are decided. Beliefs affect practices and some practices affect beliefs causing reorientation. In fact beliefs can be changed or reoriented as a result of input from other professionals and activity type interventions (Danielson & McGreal, 2000:12; Diaz & Bastías, 2012:248; Gross, 2008:16). As such beliefs do not require a condition of truth, they are episodic, affective, built on presumptions and have an adaptive function (Erkmen, 2010:22).

Beliefs are the intermediary between knowledge and action; between individuals and their performance. Beliefs are anchored knowledge. They exhibit the knowledge that is most worth and has proven itself in action. Kumaravadivelu (2012:67) distinguishes between core and peripheral beliefs. The former are more influential in shaping teachers’ instructional approaches whereas the latter can cause divergence between what teachers claim they do