Beliefs of Chilean University English Teachers: Uncovering Their Role in the Teaching and Learning Process

Creencias de profesores universitarios de inglés: descubriendo su papel en el proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje

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Beliefs continue to be an important source to get to know teachers’ thinking processes and pedagogical decisions. Research in teachers’ beliefs has traditionally come from English-speaking contexts; however, a great deal of scientific work has been written lately in Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, and Argentina. This study elicits 30 Chilean university teachers’ beliefs about their own role in the teaching and learning of English in university environments. Through a qualitative research design, the data collected from interviews and journals were analyzed, triangulated, and categorized based on semantic content analysis. Results of the study indicate that university teachers reveal challenging and complex views about what it is like to teach English as a foreign language in a university context in Chile. The article concludes with a call to reflect on the importance of beliefs unravelling in teacher education programmes.

Key words: Learning, teachers’ beliefs, teaching of English, university level.

Las creencias continúan siendo una fuente de importancia para conocer los procesos de pensamiento y los estilos pedagógicos de los docentes. Los estudios sobre las creencias docentes provienen en su mayoría de contextos angloparlantes; sin embargo, en los últimos años se ha escrito una gran cantidad de trabajos científicos en Brasil, México, Colombia y Argentina. Este estudio recoge las creencias de treinta docentes universitarios chilenos sobre su papel en la enseñanza y aprendizaje del inglés en ambientes universitarios. A partir de un diseño de investigación cualitativo, los datos recolectados por medio de entrevistas y diarios personales fueron analizados, triangulados y categorizados según el análisis de contenido semántico. Los resultados indicaron que los docentes de educación superior tienen visiones desafiantes y complejas sobre lo que significa enseñar inglés como lengua extranjera en un contexto universitario en Chile. El artículo concluye con una invitación a reflexionar sobre la importancia de transparentar las creencias en los programas de formación inicial docente.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje, creencias de docentes, enseñanza del inglés, universidad.

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Introduction

This research is based on the assumption that beliefs directly affect the teaching practice and the potential success or failure of the teaching and learning process (Borg, 2003; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003; Pajares, 1992; Woods, 1996). In particular, it considers factors that, both directly and indirectly, influence the process of teaching a foreign language, besides the fact that the teaching practice itself can rightfully be addressed from the perspective of the cognition of a university teacher. In this context, the concept of “beliefs” includes all mental, emotional, and reflexive constructs that derive from personal experiences, prejudices, judgments, ideas, and intentions (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011). This study aims at identifying university teachers’ beliefs about their own role in the teaching and learning of English in university environments.

Conceptual Framework

Although there are various international bibliographical references regarding general pedagogical beliefs about the teaching and learning process of teachers (Borg, 2003), there is little research in this area in Chile, despite the several contributions from other Latin American countries. Consequently, this study addresses the beliefs of a group of 30 university English teachers about their own role in the teaching and learning process at a university level.

In general, beliefs are defined as understandings, premises, or psychological propositions an individual has about the world (Kane, Sandretto, & Heath, 2002). Beliefs consist of sets of integrated and generally contradictory and messy ideas that are generated from everyday experiences. According to Díaz and Solar (2011), beliefs are incomplete and simplified versions of reality that have some level of internal organization, structure and consistency.

Through the study of beliefs, the frames of reference by which teachers perceive and process information, analyze, give meaning, and focus their educational performance are made explicit. Thus, studying the beliefs teachers have involves exploring the hidden side of teaching (Díaz, Martínez, Roa, & Sanhueza, 2010). In the scope of this study, beliefs are understood as individual ways a teacher understands the students, the nature of the learning process, the classroom, the teacher’s role in the classroom, and the pedagogical objectives (Northcote, 2009).

Freeman (2002) supports the importance of reflecting on beliefs because this may lead to a number of advantages, such as revealing the conscious thinking behind certain actions; it may make teachers choose to teach differently from the way they were taught or want to expand their techniques and practices; it can confirm the positive things that teachers do in the classroom or make teachers reflect on their somewhat negative teaching practices. Borg (2009) and Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) affirm that beliefs can certainly influence classroom practices, but classroom practices can also trigger the shaping of new beliefs.

Stenber (2011) states that major changes in the quality of university education will not occur if the beliefs that university teachers have about teaching itself do not change. Beliefs vary in intensity and type, and over time, form a system. The ease with which teachers change their beliefs is related to the intensity of those beliefs. The more intense the belief is, the greater the resistance to change it. To reinforce this idea, several authors argue that teachers’ beliefs are rooted in their personal experiences and are therefore highly resistant to change (Farrell, 2006; Kasoutas & Malamitsa, 2009; Richards & Lockhart, 1996).

There is no denying the importance beliefs have in education in general; however, the obvious relationship between beliefs and teaching practices cannot be