Teachers' Belief Systems: Implication of Teacher Professional Development Program and Educational Change

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Abstract: This article discusses teachers' belief systems, sources of teachers' belief systems and the relationship between teachers' belief systems and their classroom practices. It also presents ways in which teachers' belief systems influence the implementation of curricular innovations. The discussion is based on the findings of studies conducted in different countries by other researchers and in Ethiopia by the writer of this article. It finally underlines the importance of taking into consideration teachers' belief systems in professional teacher development programs and in the efforts made to introduce changes in education in the country.

Concept: Teachers' Belief Systems

Between the 1950 and the 1980s, writing on language teaching was characterized by a strong concern with 'method' and with teaching procedures (Asher, 1965; Gattengo, 1972; Curran, 1976; Lazanov, 1978; Goodman, 1986). This period marked the time when different language teaching approaches and methods appeared on the stage in different geographical locations in the world in order to overcome the shortcomings inherent in the grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods. In addition, the use of different kinds of activity types, modes of classroom management and the use of technological aids such as the video or, more recently, computers in language teaching practices were widely discussed.

In recent years, however, more attention has been paid to the subjective realities of language teaching and learning. From the learners' point of view, this has led to more importance being accorded to subjective needs and to developing a more educationally-sensitive approach to language teaching in general, as witnessed by work on learner training and autonomy. Along side

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increased awareness of the subjective realities of language learning from the learners' point of view, there has also been a recognition of the subjective realities of language teaching from the teachers' point of view (Freeman and Richards, 1996; Richards and Lockhart, 1996; Woods, 1996; Richards, 1998).

It has been observed by scholars that what teachers actually do in the classroom is as strongly influenced by their personal agenda and set of beliefs about language teaching as it is by the method or approach which they are following (Woods, 1996). In other words, teachers, as much as learners, have their own private agenda which they bring with them to the process of language teaching. Teachers, thus, have subjective needs which influence their behaviors in classrooms.

In other words, since the late eighties and early nineties, researchers have begun to study the influence of teachers' thoughts, decisions and judgments on second language instruction (Woods, 1996; Richards, 1998). Such research is necessary to understand why teachers make the decisions they do and why they choose certain instructional materials over others; or why they prefer certain practices over others. There is now a consensus among scholars that what teachers do in the classrooms is determined more by teachers' belief systems (what they think about language, language teaching and learning, their roles in the classrooms, etc.) than by the textbooks they are supposed to use in the classrooms, or the methodologies recommended to be followed. Because of this, the focus nowadays is more on looking at language teaching from the 'inside' rather than from the 'outside in'. Richards (1998, p. 49) observes:

> In recent years, research on teaching has attempted to understand teaching from the 'inside' rather than from the 'outside in'…. In both general researches on teaching …as well as on second language teaching…the need to listen to teachers' voices in understanding classroom practice has been emphasized. What is missing from the knowledge base for teaching, therefore, are the voices of the teachers themselves, the questions teachers ask, the way teachers use writing and intentional talk in their work lives, and the interpretive frames teachers use to understand and improve their own classroom practices.

Similarly, according to Johnson (1994, p. 439), there are three basic assumptions in studying teachers' belief systems. These are:

- Teachers' beliefs influence both perception and judgment which in turn affect what teachers say and do in the classrooms.
- Teachers' beliefs play a critical role in how teachers learn to teach, that is how they interpret new information about learning and teaching and how that information is translated into classroom practice.
- Understanding teachers' beliefs is essential to improving practices and professional teacher preparation programs.

The phrase 'teachers' beliefs' is usually used to refer to teachers' pedagogic beliefs, or beliefs of relevance to an individual's teaching. The areas explored are teachers' beliefs about teaching, learning and learners; subject matter (language); self as a teacher, or the role of the teacher.

Richards and Lockhart (1994) state that "… teachers' belief systems are found on the goals, values and beliefs teachers hold in relation to the content and process of teaching, and their understanding of systems in which they work and their roles within it" (p. 30). According to Richards (1998,p. 66), teachers' belief systems refer to "…the information, attitudes, values, expectations, theories, and assumptions about teaching and learning that teachers build up over time and bring with them to the classroom."

Teachers' belief systems emerge from the experiences of teachers as learners and life in general. Johnson (1994, p. 440) states, "…teachers' beliefs …do not operate in isolation, but are instead interrelated to all other beliefs. By the time prospective teachers enter college their beliefs are well formed and tend to be extremely resistant to change. Such beliefs tend to be rooted in images based on early experiences as students". This implies that teachers' belief systems are stable resource of reference, are built up gradually over time, and relate to such dimensions of teaching as teachers' theories of language, the nature of language teaching, the role of the teachers, effective teaching practices and teacher-student relationship. Belief systems serve as the background to much of teachers' decision making and action, and hence constitute what has been termed the 'culture of teaching' (Richards and Lockhart, 1996).

Sources of Teachers' Belief Systems

Referring to research on the area, Richards and Lockhart (1994, p. 31-41) identify different sources of teachers' belief systems. These are:

a. Their own experience as language learners: All teachers were once students, and their beliefs about teaching are often a reflection of how they themselves were taught.
b. Experience of what works best: For many teachers experience is the primary source of beliefs about teaching. A teacher may have found that some teaching strategies work well and some do not.
c. Established practice: Within a school, an institution, or a school district, certain teaching styles and practices may be preferred.
d. Personality factors: Some teachers have a personal preference for a particular teaching pattern, arrangement, or activity because it matches their personality.
e. Educational based or research-based principles: Teachers may draw on their understanding of a learning principle in psychology, second language acquisition, or education and try to apply it in the classroom.

f. Principles derived from an approach or method: Teachers may believe in the effectiveness of a particular approach or method of teaching and consistently try to implement it in the classroom.

Teachers' Belief Systems and Teachers' Classroom Practices

A number of studies have been conducted to investigate the relationship between teachers' belief systems and their approach to language teaching. Research in language classroom shows that teachers' feelings, values, needs and beliefs, combined with experience and theoretical knowledge, usually guide their language instructional practices. Teachers' perceptions of how languages are learned also play a crucial role in determining a teacher's willingness to experiment with new approaches. In the following section, we will look at a few of the studies conducted on teachers' belief systems and their classroom practices.

Richards et al (1992), as cited in Richards (1998), studied the belief systems of 249 teachers in China. In the study, Richards et al. asked what the teachers thought to be the best way to learn a language. In response they noted that learners should expose themselves to the language as far as possible, interact with native speakers, and read books in English. They did not believe that either studying the rules of the language or repeating and memorizing chunks of language was helpful. Compared with the experienced and trained teachers, inexperienced and untrained teachers were more likely to think that grammatical theories of language are useful to language teaching, and believe more strongly in the value of requiring students to memorize dialogues. The teaching methods they thought most useful were identified as a grammar-based approach, a functional approach, and a situational approach. Differences in their beliefs, however, resulted from the amount of teaching experience they had and whether they subscribed to a primarily functional or grammar-based orientation to teaching.

Studies have sought to investigate the extent to which teaches' theoretical beliefs influence their classroom practices. According to Richards (1998), Johnson (1991) used three measures to identify teaches' beliefs: a descriptive account of what teachers believe constitutes an ideal ESL classroom context, a lesson plan analysis task and a beliefs inventory.

In the sample of thirty teachers studied, she identified three different methodological positions: a skills-based approach, which views language as consisting of four discrete language skills; a rule-based approach, which emphasizes the importance of grammatical rules and a conscious understanding of the language system, and a function-based approach, which focuses on the use of authentic language within situational contexts and seeks to provide opportunities for functional and communicative language use in the classroom. The majority of the teachers in the sample held clearly defined beliefs that consistently reflected one of these three methodological approaches. Teachers representing each theoretical orientation were then observed while they were teaching and the majority of their lessons were found to be consistent with their theoretical orientation. A teacher who expressed a skill-based theoretical orientation generally presented lessons in which the focus was primarily on skill acquisition. A teacher with the rule-based orientation tended to employ more activities and exercises that served to reinforce knowledge of grammatical structures. She constantly referred to grammar even during reading and writing activities, for example, by asking students to identify a key grammatical structure and to explain the rule that governed its use. The function-based teachers, on the other hand, selected activities that typically involved the learners' personal expression. They taught word meaning and usage through a meaningful context. The teachers also chose reading activities that focused on the concepts or ideas within the text, and used context-rich writing activities that encouraged students to express their ideas without attention to grammatical correctness.

In exploring the relationship between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices, Woods (1991) carried out a longitudinal study of two teachers with different theoretical orientations who taught the same ESL course in a Canadian university (Richards, 1998). According to Woods, one teacher had a 'curriculum-based' view of teaching and the other a 'student-based' view. A curriculum-based view of teaching implies that decisions related to the implementation of curriculum activities are based primarily on what is preplanned according to the curriculum. Student-based teaching, on the other hand, implies that decisions are based primarily on factors related to the particular group of students in the classroom at that particular moment. The teacher with the curricular view of teaching explained her goals and evaluated her teaching in terms of planned curriculum content. She tended to evaluate her teaching in terms of how successfully she had accomplished what she had set out to do according to the curriculum. When there was a choice between following up something that developed in the course of a lesson, she invariably followed her plan. The other teacher, on the other hand, was much guided by student responses. He was much more prepared to modify and reinterpret the curriculum based on what the students wanted.

The studies reviewed so far demonstrate that the teachers put their beliefs into practice. However, evidence shows that there are accounts of situations where there is no a high degree of correspondence between teachers expressed beliefs and their actual classroom practice. Studies conducted by Duff and Anderson (1986), Hoffman and Kugle (1982), and Yim (1993), cited in Richards (1998) indicated that there are differences between beliefs expressed by teachers and lessons they conducted in the classroom. Duff and Anderson (1986) studied eight reading teachers and found that only four of them consistently employed practices that directly reflected their beliefs. Factors identified in the study as likely to prevent teachers from teaching according to their beliefs include the teachers' need to follow a prescribed curriculum, lack of suitable resources, and students' ability level. Hoffman and Kugle (1982) found no significant relationships between teachers' beliefs about teaching and the kinds of verbal feedback they gave during reading lessons. Yim (1993), likewise, in studying ESL in Singapore found

that while teachers were able to articulate beliefs about the role of grammar teaching from a communicative orientation, their beliefs were not evident in their classroom practices, which were driven more by exam-based, structured grammar activities of a non-communicative kind. Donaghue (2003, p. 345) states reasons for such differences between what teachers say and what they actually do in the classroom as follows:

> The difficulty in eliciting beliefs lies in the fact that personal theories may be subconscious; teachers may be unable to articulate them. Also related to this is the issue of self-image; subconsciously or consciously, teachers may wish to promote a particular image of themselves. Furthermore, there is often a difference between espoused (theory claimed by a participant) and theory in action (what a participant actually does in the classroom).

Teachers' Belief Systems and Educational Change

Teachers' beliefs represent a complex and inter-related system of personal and professional knowledge that serves as implicit theories and cognitive maps for experiencing and responding to reality (Woods, 1996). One common conclusion about teachers' beliefs is that changing them is a complex process. Contrary to the attempts of theorists and those involved in trying to promote teacher professional development, teachers' beliefs appear to be static and resistant to change. Evidence shows that the more central a belief, the more it will resist change. Woods (1996) speculates that when teachers' beliefs are very tightly interconnected with their other beliefs, they are more difficult to change. On the other hand, when the belief is less connected to other beliefs, change is a less complex process. The implication is that, in order for change to occur, there must be some deconstruction of beliefs before another set can be constructed. This process, Woods argues, can "…lead to periods of disorientation, frustration, even pain" (p.293). Furthermore, Woods argues that because each belief is

part of an interwoven network which includes many other beliefs, teachers cannot simply change on belief and continue to hold another belief.

Evidence shows that teachers resist innovations introduced in language teaching because of the beliefs they hold about language teaching. For example, Karavas-Doukas (1996) did an attitude survey on fourteen Greek teachers of English to access their beliefs about Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The survey results leaned toward agreement with CLT principles, but when she observed the classroom teaching environments, "… the classroom practices deviated considerably from principles of communicative approaches," (p. 193). Teachers tend to follow an eclectic approach, exhibiting features of both traditional and communicative approach in their classroom practices. Most lessons were teacher-fronted and exhibited an explicit focus on form. Kanavas-Doukas suggested that such mismatches between what teachers say and what they actually do in the classrooms might be attributed to the influence of their attitudes and belief systems. There is often a difference between theories claimed by teachers and what teachers actually do in the classroom which often creates difficulty in eliciting teachers' belief systems. Rokeach (1968), as cited in Johnson (1994):

> …beliefs cannot be observed, but instead must be inferred by what individuals say, intend and do. Thus, investigating into teachers' beliefs entails inferring beliefs not only from the statements that teachers make about their beliefs, but also by examining teachers' internationality to behave in a particular way and, then, of course, what they actually do," p. 440).

Teachers' beliefs about what learning is affect everything they do in the classroom, whether these beliefs are implicit or explicit. Although a syllabus or curriculum may be set down precisely for teachers, it is personally shaped by teachers' own belief systems. Woods (1996) considers how teachers' beliefs, assumptions and knowledge shape their understanding of teaching

and their decisions. Analyzing the interviews he conducted and teachers' stories and video-recordings of their lessons, Woods states that teachers' beliefs, attitudes and experiences influence their classroom practices. Teachers' underlying beliefs, assumptions and knowledge about what language is, how it is learned, and how it should be taught resulted in different classroom experiences for the learners.

As mentioned earlier, teachers resist innovations introduced in language teaching because of their belief systems. Teachers have their own beliefs about language learning and teaching that have a direct impact on their behaviors in the classrooms. One main factor for the failure of CLT in many countries is teachers' resistance due to their belief systems and attitudes about language learning. Karavas-Doukas (1996) explains:

> Despite the widespread adoption of the communicative approach by textbooks and curricula around the world, research suggests that communicative language teaching principles are rare, with most teachers professing commitment to the communicative approaches in the classrooms. The literature on curriculum innovation and implementation suggests that one of the causes of the discrepancy between prescribed theory and classroom practice may be teacher attitude (p. 187).

Similarly, Chick (1996) attributes the failure of implementing communicative methodologies mainly to the resistance of the teachers. He says, "A number of the in-service teacher education projects complained about the reluctance of many teachers, and even some of the students, to adopt the more egalitarian, de-centralized ways of interacting associated with these approaches to language teaching" (p.22). The main factor usually associated with teachers' attitude is the fact that attempts were made to implement CLT methodologies before adequately training teachers, and changing their beliefs and attitudes about language teaching and learning processes. Wagner (1991) as cited in Karavas-Doukas (1996) underlined the

importance of attitude change before introducing innovations in education as:

> …attitude change is an essential and inevitable part of any pedagogical innovation. If incompatibilities between the philosophy of an approach and teachers' theories exist, teachers will tend to interpret new information in the light of their own theories, and will tend to translate innovative ideas to conform with their own style of teaching (p.188).

All this shows that teachers' belief systems play an important role in the language learning process and that, teachers must understand their own beliefs, theories, or philosophy. Teachers must maintain a continuous process of personal reflection, and that, it is by becoming aware of their beliefs that they come to understand their own implicit educational theories and ways in which such theories influence their professional practice.

From the above discussions, we also notice that changing teachers' belief systems is not easy to accomplish, as teacher change is attitudinal and cognitive. As Pennington (1995) rightly put it, "The key ingredient to teacher change and long-term development is awareness" (p. 705). That is, teacher change and development require awareness of the need for change, or at least of the desirability of experimentation of available alternatives. According to Pennington, the means by which teachers' awareness and practice change involves the interplay of two processes: innovation and critical reflection. Pennington argued that innovation is the source of new information that triggers change, and critical reflection is the processing of information gained through innovation in relation to teachers' existing schema for learning. It is only when teachers are willing to modify their existing beliefs and ready to experiment with new ideas and practices that innovations can succeed. Tudor (1996, p. 139-140) concluded:

> Key players in any form of educational innovation are, of course, the teachers: it is therefore essential to consider their attitudes and expectations, their corporate value system and professional self-image, their level of professional training and morale, and their expectations with respect to their students and within society at large…. For any change, whatever its nature or scale to be successful, it has to be accepted by teachers who will realize it.

Thus, in general, as Johnson (1994) underlines it, exploring the cognitive dimensions of how second language teachers' thoughts, judgments, and decisions influence the nature of second language instruction is important for three main reasons.

- To establish insight into the unique filter through which second language teachers make instructional decisions, choose instructional materials, and select certain instructional practices over others.
- To determine how pre-service teachers conceptualize their initial teaching experiences, interpret new information about second language learning and teaching, and translate this information into classroom.
- To integrate information about the cognitive dimensions of second language teaching into the content of teacher education programs.

Implications for Teacher Development and Educational Change in Ethiopia

The following main points can be identified from the discussion so far made in the context of teachers' beliefs systems and their classroom practices.

- Teachers' belief systems emerge from different sources.
- What teachers actually do in the classroom is determined by teachers' belief systems rather than by the textbooks prescribed or methodologies recommended.

- Experienced and inexperienced teachers can have different belief systems.
- There can be differences between what teachers report about their belief systems and what actually they do in the classrooms.
- Teachers' belief systems are stable in nature, and, thus, it takes time to modify them.
- Teachers can resist innovations introduced in education because of their established beliefs about what constitutes language teaching and learning.

These points clearly depict that teachers' belief systems should be one of the primary concerns of teacher preparation programs. However, there is no deep-rooted tradition of studying teachers' belief systems and incorporating issues related to them in teacher preparation programs in Ethiopia.

Studying teachers' belief systems enables us to understand the beliefs of the trainees who join teacher training programs. It is obvious that trainees bring their own beliefs about language and language teaching to the training programs. Understanding these belief systems is useful because the belief systems are key elements in determining how student-teachers respond to training experiences. For example, in 2001/2 academic year, I asked third year trainees in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, Addis Ababa University, about what perceptions they held about the role of learner-centered practices in language learning at the time they had joined the university two years earlier. They said that they disliked the pair and group activities that they frequently had been asked to do without much input from the instructors. When asked if they had maintained the same view after two years, they said that they had gradually started enjoying the learner-centered practices. The new practice they faced enabled them to modify their beliefs about language teaching and learning. Moreover, I tried to survey the attitudes of MA students who joined the training program in 2006/7 towards independent learner-centered approach when they joined the program. Information from the candidates indicates that near the beginning of the semester, the students did not have much confidence about the importance

of independent learning; they had expected a lot of input from their teachers. However, as a result of much library-based independent work, classroom presentation discussions and feedback, the studies reported that there was a change in their attitude towards the end of the semester.

This clearly implies that, studying teachers' belief systems enables teacher development programs to understand the beliefs that trainees bring to the training programs, and the extent to which the trainees modify their beliefs through the type of activities they conduct in different courses they take. It also implies that their teachers' implicit theories provide a useful perspective for student teachers to examine their own belief systems in the course of their professional preparation, as they explore both their own thinking as well as that of their classmates.

I mentioned earlier that there is no well-established tradition of studying teachers' belief systems. There is also no tradition of considering teachers' belief systems in teacher development programs. The attempts made to introduce changes in education in Ethiopia have also disregarded the import. The approach has been mainly top-down. The people at the top usually design the intended changes they wish to make and impose on teachers to implement them in schools. The educational changes observed in the country have been determined by the changes of government and aids received from donors, rather than the initiatives to promote changes in education in the country based on the results of research outputs. A good example of this is the prescription of CLT methodologies in the mid 1990s. Following the change of government in 1991, Ethiopia designed the existing education policy in 1994. The design of this policy coincided with the time when learner-centered approach dominated the literature on language teaching. Thus, with the help of experts from the British Council, it was decided that language textbooks be developed according to the insights gained from the CLT theories. The decision was made without feasibility studies on the part of the decision makers. Thus, a lot of hurdles encountered the implementation of CLT techniques in Ethiopian secondary schools (Alemu, 2004).

However, very few students in the MA (TEFL) program in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, Addis Ababa University tried to assess the feasibility of CLT techniques in Ethiopian schools from the point of view of teachers' belief system.

For example Ayneabeba (1993) studied the effects of teachers' and learners' educational expectations on innovating within the language learning process. To this effect, he prepared materials which were considered suitable for interactive learning. He, together with other teachers used the materials and taught students in four government schools for a period of six weeks. During these 6 weeks, Ayneabeba observed that teachers were teaching a number of lessons. He also carried out self-observation during his own teaching. Then, he administered questionnaire to the teachers and students in order to assess the feasibility, acceptability and relevance of interactive teaching in the light of teachers' and learners' cultural and educational expectations. He also conducted interviews with some of the teachers and students who had completed the questionnaires.

Results of his study reveal that, overall cultural parameters have a bearing on what happens in the classrooms due to prior experience, lack of exposure to more appropriate procedures, etc. He also noticed that teachers found it difficult to adjust their teaching style. On the other hand, students were very enthusiastic in the classroom about the interactive learning approach but they found it difficult to reconcile how they liked to learn with what they felt they ought to be learning, based on their prior cultural and educational perceptions of who does what in the classroom.

Similarly, Alemu (1994) investigated the extent to which the teaching and learning of vocabulary by an awareness-raising approach could be considered feasible and acceptable to teachers in high schools. He collected materials representing an approach of a different nature from the approaches practiced in high schools from different sources. The subjects of his study were made to study the materials for three to five days. To determine their attitudes towards the materials at an initial stage and see

how acceptable or feasible the activities they thought would be, a questionnaire was issued to all of the subjects. Interviews were also made with some of them. Reactions to the materials at this stage were based on past experiences, teaching habits, traditional expectations, etc.

Then, Alemu (1994) arranged practice teaching sessions in which the use of tasks was demonstrated in a typical high school classes for the subjects to observe. The same questionnaire was administered again and the subjects were made to express their reactions about the approach. The emphasis was to find out the degree to which teachers can modify their attitudes initially, through exposure to materials representing a different approach and through observation of classes taught using the materials. The result of the study showed that teachers had no much confidence about the value of such an approach in facilitating the learning of new lexical items. However, a slight modification of attitude was observed regarding the feasibility and acceptability of such an approach in Ethiopian schools.

Though the studies conducted by Ayeneabeba (1993) and Alemu (1994) were much focused in scope, they highlighted interesting information about teachers' feelings regarding the feasibility of CLT methodologies in Ethiopian schools. Based on their findings, Ayeneabeba and Alemu underlined the importance of orienting teachers through extensive workshops/seminars before the prescription of CLT methodologies in schools. However, it seems that priority was given to changing the textbooks rather than changing the teachers who were responsible for implementing the materials. Studies show that, though the textbooks have been changed, practices of English language teaching have not been changed to the extent intended-traditional language teaching practices are still very frequent in language classrooms (Berhanu, 1999, Alemu, 2004).

This clearly shows the importance of studying teachers' belief systems, attitudes and affective factors in the contexts of teacher development programs and in the efforts made to introduce curricular innovations in the country.

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