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TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT TEACHING READING IN A SECONDARY SCHOOL IN LITHUANIA

The beliefs teachers hold are significant concepts that shape the work that they do in classrooms. In accordance with such beliefs, teachers exert some influence over their working environments and decide what and how to teach learners. Understanding the beliefs of teachers is important to develop pre-service and in-service teacher development programmes and to increase the teaching quality. However, there is little previous research on this issue in the Lithuanian secondary school context.

This case study explored the beliefs of five English language teachers when it came to teaching reading in a secondary school in Lithuania. The study sought to investigate teachers' beliefs about the reading needs of secondary school students who learn English as a foreign language (FL). It also explored the methods that teachers reported they used to meet students' needs in reading classrooms. The findings suggest that teachers' theoretical beliefs about the reading development vary from the personal beliefs of how the teaching of reading should be conducted in the classrooms.

KEY WORDS: teachers' beliefs, reading, practices, secondary school.

Introduction

The evolving field of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) has become particularly diverse in recent years because teaching English is practiced by different educators who bring various experiences and knowledge to their classrooms. The issue of what constitutes the 'best' pedagogy remains debated. One factor linked to the background of teachers that has an influence on students' learning outcomes is their personal beliefs. The beliefs of teachers are significant mediators of their behaviour in classrooms and they are essential concepts in understanding the thoughts and decision making processes that are unique to teachers (Pajares 1992). An increasing body of research (for example, Kalaja and Barcelos 2006) notes that beliefs are context-bound and they are influenced by social, cultural and historical factors. Therefore, beliefs are not personal constructs (Woods 2006). Rather, beliefs are acquired through social interaction and are based on self-reflections. Therefore, teachers' beliefs refer to their perceptions of the learning and teaching process and these are influential in shaping the teaching and learning conditions for students.

The purpose of this study was to examine English language teachers' beliefs about the reading needs of their students and to understand what methodological practices teachers use to meet their students' needs.

The need for the study stemmed from the fact that the achievements of pupils in a secondary school in reading in first language (L1) and FL have been gradually reducing in recent years. To illustrate this, the international organisation PISA (2009) conducted research in sixty five countries, including Lithuania, and assessed the level of knowledge amongst 15-year olds in reading in L1. The results suggested that reading and literacy skills in Lithuania are lower than the European average, and they are gradually decreasing. Moreover, it is increasingly argued that reading is a pivotal skill in both L1 and FL and such language skills are needed in almost all spheres of human life. In order to be successful in a dynamic society, students and teachers should be good readers that are able "to engage in advanced studies, get a job, travel, gain access to information, become more cross-culturally aware, communicating with others" (Grabe 2009, p. 6). Thus, an investigation of teachers' beliefs about reading instruction is topical and relevant. Similarly, little has been done to investigate teachers' beliefs in secondary school settings in Lithuania and research has yet to examine teachers' beliefs about reading instruction.

This study therefore sought to answer the following **research questions**:

1. What reading needs do secondary school English language teachers believe their pupils have when developing reading in a secondary school in Lithuania?
2. What methods do English language teachers report they use to meet the reading needs of their students in a secondary school in Lithuania?
3. How effectively do English language teachers work in a secondary school in Lithuania according to the extent to which they perceive that they successfully meet the reading needs of students?

1. Chosen Methodology and Method

This study utilized a case study design within a qualitative framework which draws on the interpretative paradigm. The qualitative inquiry is valuable to this study for several reasons. First, qualitative research, being a naturalistic approach, allows exploring phenomena in context – specific settings (Creswell 2007). Moreover, I sought to understand teachers' beliefs about teaching reading, that is, I was interested in their experiences. As such, case study within the qualitative framework is open to explore the particularities of experience within the context (Stake 1995).

The study was based on both convenience and purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews with five English language teachers working in a state secondary school were used to achieve the aims of this study. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, the names of the teachers were changed to Teacher 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5.

2. Conceptual Framework

A sociocultural theory was chosen as an appropriate theoretical lens through which to view teachers' beliefs and reading development. This theory views learning as an interactive process, constructed through the interaction of individuals and their environments with implications for their cultural, historical and social development (Burr 1995). Given that teachers' beliefs are important factors that influence the decisions in their classrooms, some researchers (such as Woods 2006) have examined that these should be investigated within a social context in which teachers situate their work. This theory emphasises the assumption that "action is mediated and that it cannot be separated from the milieu in which it is carried out" (Wertsch 1991, p. 18). That is, specific contexts, such as classrooms, curricula, and student needs, can influence teachers' beliefs and practices.

3. The Definition of Beliefs

There is no universally agreed approach within the fields of education, psychology, and philosophy as to an accepted definition of the term 'beliefs', because it is "too vague, too varied …to be clearly defined" (Eisenhart *et al.* 1988, p. 53). In this study teachers' beliefs will be approached as dynamic, constantly evolving entities that are "situated in a social context and formed through the specific instances of social interaction" (Woods 2006, p. 202). Moreover, beliefs will be considered as cognitive constructs but they will be "integrated in a larger dynamic model of thought and action, forming not the periphery but the central framework within which all learning take place" (ibid, p. 202). The context in which teachers work and form their experiences will be taken as an important factor because the beliefs of teachers are "born out of our interaction with others and with our environment" (Barcelos 2006, p. 8).

4. Reading Development

Over the years there has been considerable controversy as to the definition of reading and different theoretical models that can ensure reading success for different learners. Through a historical perspective, traditionally reading was conceptualised based on three main models of bottom-up, top-down or interactive.

Until the late 1960s, a reader was viewed as someone "working through a text in a rigid, word-by-word fashion, decoding information in a precise manner from print to speech to aural comprehension" (Clarke & Silberstein 1977, p. 136). These processes are typically related to bottom-up or skills-based approaches to reading.

By the mid- to late 1970s, reading researchers started to contend for a model of reading based on a "psycholinguistic theory of reading" advocated by Goodman (1982) and Smith (1988). Goodman (1982) describes reading as a "psycholinguistic guessing game" and argues that reading is a selective, active, and cyclical process when readers predict information, sample the text and confirm the predictions. In fact, both Smith and Goodman agree that the prior knowledge of readers is an important factor in reading comprehension.

In this study, the definition of reading will be expanded to the broad definition of literacy that

> *combines a focus on language use in social contexts…with an additional component of active reflection on how meanings are constructed and negotiated in particular acts of communication* (Kern 2010, p. 39).

Kern (2010) suggests that in the 21st century, educators should focus on preparing learners for full participation in societies that increasingly demand multilingual, multicultural, and multi-textual competence. Thus, the definition of reading should weave "together linguistic, cognitive and sociocultural strands" (Kern 2010, p. 16). Likewise, Gee (2011) explains that literacy is a social practice, thus language teaching methodologies should involve teaching and learning social languages ("social languages are what we learn and what we speak" (Gee 2011, p. 46)).

5. FINDINGS

5.1. Lexical and Grammatical Knowledge

The first dominant theme that emerged from the data was related to a common belief that students need to learn lexical and grammatical knowledge as a part of reading development process. This notion is encapsulated in the following quote:

> *They [students] need to know certain amount of words to be able to read in English. Without understanding of words and grammar, you will not be able to understand the text (Teacher 5)*

The quote above reflect the belief that vocabulary and grammar influence comprehension. Similarly, Teacher 4 was unsure as to how to understand the meaning without vocabulary. This teacher suggested that "meaning comes through the words" Later in the interview she reflected that she had begun learning English using vocabulary lists and grammatical rules. This belief is clearly mediated to teachers' personal experience as a learner of FL. It appeared that this teacher originated her belief about reading process from methodological models that were dominant when she was learning English.

Moreover, some teachers believed that vocabulary interacts with grammar and creates the basis to understand the meaning of a text. Another respondent claimed that students "cannot omit the information in the text and should read every single word to understand all the text" (Teacher 1). Such descriptions of reading development clearly reflect that reading is a linear cognitive process. Furthermore, some teachers revealed in interviews that their professional context is influential in framing their beliefs. For example, they agreed that the examination system is the main tool that mediates their beliefs about the importance of vocabulary and grammar teaching in reading lessons.

5.2. Cultural Knowledge in Reading Development

Following on from teachers' beliefs about vocabulary and grammar, two teachers suggested their individual beliefs that students needed to acquire cultural knowledge in reading development lessons. The quotes below illustrates this notion:

For me culture is important in reading lessons. We read texts regarding customs, traditions, the way of life, geography, everything which is related to English speaking counties (Teacher 5)
…when you teach reading, cultural knowledge is a necessary component. You should select texts that are full of various facts about different countries, people and their lives (Teacher 3)

One of the teachers (5) emphasised that her cultural knowledge was based on the belief that today's diverse societies require intercultural competence amongst individuals. Based on these findings, it seemed that teaching beliefs about cultural knowledge in reading lessons are influenced by students' needs and their personal understandings about the value of cultural knowledge. Both teachers appreciated the need to extend the teaching of FL beyond the classroom and they believed that knowledge acquired in the classroom should be applicable in a "real life situation" (Teacher 3). The findings chime with Kern's (2010) perception of reading pedagogy that indicates that educators in the 21st century should prepare learners to participate in societies that require multilingual, multicultural and multitextual competence. In other words, learners should have not only linguistic knowledge but also a deeper knowledge about other cultures and other people.

5.3. Beliefs about the Methods to Meet Students' Reading Needs

The second aim was to explore teaching beliefs about methods that are used to meet the needs of students learning reading skills and how well, teachers believe, these needs are met. During the data analysis, two basic methodological directions emerged (integrated-skills and collaborative approach) that are discussed below.

5.3.1. Integrated-Skills Approach

Some teachers reported that they used an integrated-skills approach in their English language teaching lessons and this reflected their beliefs that FL should be taught through a combination of reading, speaking, writing and listening skills. This idea is illustrated by the following quote:

…it is very difficult to teach grammar alone. If you do not connect grammar to practice, I mean, to reading, speaking or writing, your teaching can go to zero (Teacher 5).

One of the teachers wondered: "what are your lessons worth if your students cannot write, speak or read?" (Teacher 4). The examples above illustrate the notion that teachers in this sample shared a belief that language teaching should be related to functional language use that could be applied to broader communication situations outside of the classroom. This notion closely aligns with Kern's (2010) proposed literacy approach that suggests that language teaching should be connected to a single communication act. In pedagogical terms, language teaching should encompass not only rehearsing discrete skills such as reading or writing, but it should also enable students to use language outside the classroom in broader communications contexts or later for career- related purposes.

5.3.2. Classroom Interaction: Collaborative Working

The data revealed that three out of five teachers used collaborative work during reading instruction while two other teachers did not find this method valuable in their reading lessons.

Three teachers valued discussions in groups in their reading classrooms and this approach was seen by each as successful to meet their students' needs. These teachers believed that oral development activities were closely related to the meaning formation process and that meanings were "better discovered" (Teacher 3) in collaborative work. The findings suggest that these teachers used a social constructivist view to learning and employed mediation as the main tenet of sociocultural theory to engage learners in an active learning process. Mediation occurs in the classroom when learners engage in a dialogue with each other or through collaborative activities (van Lier 2000). These teachers support the view that learners should learn in a meaningful environment or, in van Lier's (2000) terminology, through a "semiotic budget" whereby learners, teachers and the environment cooperate in order to engage in an active learning process.

However, two of the teachers (1 and 4) in the sample had more unique views and each valued a teacher-fronted pedagogy. Both teachers suggested that they lacked sufficient knowledge in terms of how to organise group-work. As a result, they did not find it to be useful in their individual learning sets.

5.4. A Lack of Knowledge to Meet the Reading Needs of Students

The third aim of this study was to explore teachers' perception of how effectively they met their students' reading needs. The findings can be divided into two areas. First of all teachers agreed that they needed further development in reading methodologies in order to better meet the needs of their students. Some wanted to gain knowledge about how to motivate students to read inside and outside of the classroom. Second, three teachers thought that they lacked proficiency in communication skills.

It is evident that teachers mediated their beliefs to their students' needs in reading lessons and it seemed they lacked sufficient confidence to meet their students' needs comprehensively.

6. Discussion

These findings are discussed in terms of how literacy can be conceptualized and implemented in the FL classrooms and in terms of their implications for FL teacher development.

The findings from this study suggest that individual teachers have personal beliefs and pedagogic values when it comes to teaching reading. These values were framed by their personal experiences and student needs for informed practice to develop literacy in FL teaching classrooms. Surprisingly, the teachers interviewed believed that their instructional practice is based on teaching literacy but not only on discrete skills. In recent years the notion of literacy has been conceptualized by reading researchers as a social and cultural

practice that encompasses cognitive, linguistic and sociocultural strands (Kern 2010). From this perspective, literacy originates from social interactions between teachers and learners who form the environment and conditions for literacy events (ibid). To expand upon the understanding of the reading process in terms of literacy, four interconnected dimensions are discussed below.

6.1. The Multidimensional Approach to Literacy

Kucer and Silva (2006) indicate that "every act of real word use of written language involves four dimensions: cognitive, linguistic, sociocultural, and developmental" (ibid. p. 3). According to authors, a cognitive dimension is associated with a meaning making process whereby the mental processes, skills and strategies are employed to extract meaning from the text. Putting this into practice, teachers can ask students to use prediction or background knowledge activation strategies that can help them to establish a purpose for reading and set realistic expectations. The linguistic dimension encircles the cognitive dimension and concerns how "language operates as a vehicle for communication" (Kucer and Silva 2006, p. 7). This dimension concentrates on lower-level processes that involve semantic, syntactic, morphological or pragmatic knowledge.

The sociocultural dimension views literacy as a social practice whereby the readers' background knowledge, their beliefs, values, culture or even gender frame how people make meanings and interact with texts. In pedagogical terms, literacy teaching should encompass the possibility to provide learners with "multiple experiences, in multiple contexts, with multiple text genres…for multiple purposes" (Kern 2010, p. 37). Finally, the developmental dimension encircles cognitive, linguistics and sociocultural dimensions. This dimension develops throughout life and "represents the learner's growth in the ability to effectively and efficiently apply the literacy strategies across an ever widening range of context" (Kucer and Silva 2006, p. 61).

6.2. Developmental Framework for Second Language Teacher Education

Data from this study revealed that teachers lacked knowledge in reading development and teaching methodologies. In light of these findings, it might be useful to draw the attention of educational policy makers and teacher educators towards the idea of providing additional reading programmes and methodologies that shape how to teach reading in a secondary school. Most importantly, teacher educators should be aware of the beliefs that teachers possess such as filtering mechanisms to accept or to reject new information (Kumaravadivelu 2012).

In addition, the findings from this study suggest that teachers' beliefs while teaching reading in their professional context were framed by several mediating factors. First and foremost, beliefs about how to teach reading in the classroom were framed by the examination system. In the light of this belief, it is suggested that educational policy makers enable teachers to adapt a constructivist view to learning rather than inhibiting teachers in examination-oriented pedagogy. Furthermore, most of the interviewed teachers

reflected the need to teach students communicative competence in the reading lessons. Therefore, attention should be paid to supporting teachers in developing approaches to teach students speaking skills and exchanging a teacher-centred pedagogy for a learner-centred teaching strategy.

Conclusions

The findings revealed that these five teachers have been asked to deliver theoretically grounded approaches to teaching reading process that are at variance with their personal beliefs about how to teach reading. Such teaching methods were based on the notion that reading is a linear psychological product-oriented process; meanwhile their classroom practice reflected more subjective values that reading should be taught as an active, social and process-oriented event.

The variation in the beliefs of these teachers perhaps originates from several sources. Theoretical beliefs about the vocabulary and grammar needs of students were generally based on the requirements of exams that basically assess vocabulary and grammar knowledge through numerous discrete vocabulary or grammar tasks. In contrast, their reading instructional practice was guided by their subjective understanding of how the whole learning process should be organised. In this sense, teachers drew on a broad concept of human learning by believing that learning is a process that should involve students in active participation that connects knowledge to their lives and experiences.

Although the findings of this study are not generalizable, some suggestions may be useful for teachers working in a secondary school context in Lithuania. To understand the reading process and to enrich teachers' methodological practice, teachers should acquire additional knowledge about what constitutes a reading process. It is, thus, recommended that teachers adapt the multidimensional approach to reading development proposed by Kucer and Silva (2006). Furthermore, this study recommends providing broader in-service teacher education programmes that expose teachers to knowledge of reading processes and new reading methodologies for L2 learners.

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R e s e a r c h   i n t e r e s t s : *English language teacher identities and beliefs, critical literacy, teacher training*

TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT TEACHING READING IN A SECONDARY SCHOOL IN LITHUNIA

Summary

The beliefs teachers hold are acknowledged to shape their classroom practice and influence the achievements of their students. Understanding the beliefs of teachers is significant to improve pre-service and in-service teacher development programmes and to increase the teaching quality. In this study teachers' beliefs are approached as social, dynamic and context-bounded entities that are constructed through social interaction (Woods, 2006).

This case study investigated English language teachers' beliefs about teaching reading in a secondary school in Lithuania. The goal of the study was to understand teachers' beliefs about their students' needs when teaching reading and what reading methods teachers use to meet those needs. The study also aimed to explore the extent to which a small sample of teachers' believed they met their students' needs. The findings revealed that most of the interviewed teachers' beliefs about the reading process were conceptualized in terms of lexical and grammatical knowledge. However, their beliefs about classroom practice revealed that teachers used multiple methods to teach reading and viewed the teaching of reading as an interactive, social and process-oriented event. These beliefs originated from practice and allowed inferences to be made that beliefs about reading development were not completely consistent with beliefs about how to teaching reading. Finally, the study identified that teachers share the belief that they lacked sufficient knowledge of how to meet

the reading needs effectively of their students and this seemed to impact on how they constructed their identities as teachers. The given data suggest that the interviewed teachers' theoretical beliefs about reading development are at variance with their personal beliefs of how to teach reading. The variation in the beliefs of these teachers originates from several context-bounded sources such as the requirements of exams, personal experiences of teachers, and learners' needs.

KEY WORDS: teachers' beliefs, reading, secondary school.

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Moksliniai interesai: *mokytojų identitetas ir vertybinės nuostos, kritinė pedagogika, pedagogų kvalifikacijos kėlimas, medijų analizė*

MOKYTOJŲ VERTYBINĖS NUOSTATOS APIE SKAITYMO ĮGŪDŽIŲ MOKYMĄ VIDURINĖJE MOKYKLOJE LIETUVOJE

Santrauka

Mokslinėje literatūroje yra pripažįstama, kad mokytojų turimos vertybinės nuostatos daro įtaką metodologinių sprendimų pasirinkimui ir mokinių akademiniams pasiekimams. Šių nuostatų analizė yra svarbi ir reikšminga, vystant ir diegiant būsimų ir esamų mokytojų kvalifikacijos kėlimo programas ir siekiant tobulinti užsienio kalbos mokymo metodiką.

Vertybinės nuostatos šiame straipsnyje yra apibrėžiamos kaip daugianaris konceptas, kuris apima profesines žinias, asmenines savybes, požiūrius, įsitikinimus ir pažinimus, kurie yra formuojami ir įtakojami socialinės aplinkos, kurioje individai vykdo savo veiklą.

Šis mokslinis tyrimas buvo atliktas Lietuvoje, interviu metodu apklausus penkias anglų kalbos mokytojas, dėstančias anglų kalbą vidurinėje mokykloje. Tyrimo tikslas buvo išsiaiškinti kaip tyrimo dalyviai suvokia, kokie yra mokinių poreikiai ugdant skaitymo įgūdžius ir kokiomis vertybinėmis nuostatomis mokytojos vadovaujasi, parinkdamos skaitymo ugdymo būdus ir metodus. Tyrimo metu taip pat siekta išsiaiškinti, kaip mokytojos vertina skaitymo metodų taikymo efektyvumą.

Duomenų analizė atskleidė, kad visos tyrime dalyvavusius mokytojos teoriškai skaitymą suprato kaip linijinį psichologinį procesą, kurio metu mokiniams yra svarbu įsisavinti ir gilinti žodyno ir gramatines žinias. Tačiau respondentai, paklausti apie metodologinę skaitymo mokymo praktiką, atskleidė daugiasluoksnę nuostatą, kad skaitymas yra raštingumo ugdymo procesas, kurio metu turi būti ne tik integruotai mokomi kalbėjimo, rašymo ir klausymo įgūdžiai, bet ir formuojama asmenybė, skatinant kritinį mąstymą ir tarpkultūrinę kompetenciją. Tyrimas taip pat parodė, kad respondentams trūksta anglų kalbos komunikacinės kompetencijos ir žinių apie naujausius skaitymo mokymo metodus, siekiant patenkinti mokinių poreikius, jiems formuojant skaitymo įgūdžius.

Duomenų analizė leidžia prieiti išvados, kad teorinės respondentų žinios apie skaitymo mokymą nesutampa su jų asmenine vertybine nuostata apie skaitymo metodologinę praktiką. Respondentai atskleidė, kad šiems vertybinių nuostatų skirtumams darė įtaką tokie faktoriai kaip egzaminų reikalavimai, asmeninė mokytojų patirtis ir mokinių poreikiai.

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: mokytojų vertybinės nuostatos, skaitymas, vidurinė mokykla.