

Pre-service teachers' beliefs in the activity of learning to teach English in the Chilean context

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Research on teachers' beliefs has gained significant attention in second/foreign language teacher education literature in the last 20 years [3]. These studies have highlighted the relevance of teachers' beliefs on teachers' decisions and practices. Although research on beliefs has contributed to our understanding of what teachers think and do, largely these studies have been framed at an individual level [12]. However, more recently research has emerged primarily from sociocultural perspectives exploring the social origin of beliefs [2]. This paper examines English as a foreign language (EFL) pre-service teachers' beliefs about language teaching as part of the activity of learning to teach English in the Chilean context. This paper argues that beliefs mediate pre-service teachers' learning, and that they can potentially develop into concepts. This study suggests that beliefs are shaped and reshaped as pre-service teachers engage in the activity of learning to teach English.

Keywords: beliefs, concepts, psychological tools, second-language teacher education, pre-service teachers, practicum.

Introduction

Research on teachers' beliefs has gained significant attention in the field of second language teacher education over the last two decades [12]. This developing interest can be explained as one attempt to understand teachers' work and the link between what they do and the reasons underpinning their teaching practices [5]. The body of research on teachers' beliefs has demonstrated that the influence between teachers' beliefs and their practices varies and the dissonance is usually associated to contextual factors [9]. Another key finding on research about teachers' beliefs is around the origin of beliefs. It is argued that teachers' beliefs come from different sources such as their experiences as learners, teacher education programs, personal histories, and school norms [4].

Only in the last decade has research on teachers' beliefs moved to explore the social origin of beliefs [12]. This new understanding of beliefs as context-bound is supported by a sociocultural perspective of learning. From this perspective, learning to teach is "a continual, mutually mediating process of appropriation and social action, where practitioners take on the cultural practices that are valued in the social situations of their development whether these settings are schools or universities and employ them in turn

to shape that social situation" [8, p. 6]. Thus, research on teachers' beliefs emerges as a way to illuminate how beliefs are socially formed and how they shape learning.

This paper explores EFL pre-service teachers' beliefs from a Cultural Historical Activity theory perspective, CHAT. CHAT is a theory of human development, which sees culture as crucial in learning and development [18]. This theory is founded on the seminal work of Vygotsky (1978) and later developments of Leont'ev [13] and Engestrom [6; 7]. CHAT provides an understanding that "human development relies on the appropriation of pre-existing cultural tools and that this appropriation occurs through social interchange" [8, p. 4]. This is the perspective adopted in this paper.

This article illustrates the social origin of a group of pre-service teachers' beliefs in the activity of learning to teach English in a Chilean teacher education program. It also reveals how beliefs can be mediating tools in learning to teach English and how they can potentially develop into concepts.

What are beliefs?

From a sociocultural perspective, beliefs are seen as emergent in social contexts, shaped and reshaped through specific instances of social interaction [19]. In this sense,

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beliefs are interrelated with contexts and experiences of participants. As Nequerela-Azarola asserts, beliefs are "social in origin, but also dynamically and personally transformed in the process of internalisation" [15, p. 360]. Internalisation from a Vygotskian perspective refers to a process which starts interpersonally, first at a social level, between people, and later at the individual level [16]. This means that after a series of developmental events, the interpersonal process is transformed into an intrapersonal one.

Beliefs as psychological tools

From a Vygotskian perspective, beliefs are psychological tools that mediate learning. Learning is an activity mediated by tools. These tools are not only limited to objects, such as paper or pens, but they are also artefacts such as language that enables us to bridge the gap between lower (hereditary traits, reflexes, rudimentary conscious processes) to higher mental functions (developed, voluntary, mental functions and associated personality characteristics) [17]. In Vygotsky's words, psychological development consists in "the transition from direct, innate, natural forms and methods of behaviour to mediated, artificial mental functions that develop in the process of cultural development" [17, p. 168]. Using Vygotsky's framework, we are able to understand beliefs as psychological tools that mediate the formation and development of concepts about teaching and language teaching.

Beliefs that develop into concepts

Beliefs are to be considered dynamic, socially-originated, psychological tools that mediate learning. Furthermore, beliefs are situated social ideas that emerge in concrete activities [15]. Beliefs are not only the psychological tools that mediate learning, but also they themselves can become the object of the activity. As psychological tools they are voluntary complex functions that orientate people's behaviours. At the same time they can become the object of the activity as they are changing and being shaped and reshaped by the engagement with the activity. Using Francis Bacon's epigraph, Vygotsky states "neither hand nor mind alone suffice; the tools and devices they employ finally shape them" [16, p. 3]. In this sense, beliefs can be considered as tools and object. These ideas come from different origins and as part of the engagement in the teacher education program. Such beliefs are shaped and reshaped, and concepts about teaching and learning are formulated and are developed.

The dialectic nature of teachers' beliefs

An approach of beliefs with a dialect nature allows us to see them as dynamic and contradictory. The dialectic nature is given as we, human beings are and become in change and contradictions [8]. Consequently, following a Vygotskian approach, the misalignment between beliefs and actions reflect beliefs in actions. As will be shown in the light of the data, pre-service teachers' beliefs about language teaching

and learning emerged in the contexts of school and university, current experiences and past experiences as learners. Pre-service teachers engaged in the activity of learning to teach English, and at first beliefs were external and part of the collective discourse, but as they engaged in the activity, pre-service teachers took those beliefs in, confronted them, modified them, and they became personally meaningful being internalised as concepts. This shows the dialectic nature of a learning activity in which the relationship of the individual pre-service teacher and the community is contradictory, but mutually constitutive.

The study

This paper reports on a critical part of the findings of my PhD thesis *Understanding English language teacher education in Chile: A CHAT perspective*. The study focused on how a group of late stage Chilean pre-service teachers of English (24) learnt to teach English at a teacher education program in Santiago, Chile.

The data reported in this paper emerged from pre-service teachers' interviews, participant's reports, and the researcher's field notes. The analysis will be presented using direct quotes from participants, descriptions, and comments. The data was firstly open coded and then analysed thematically from a CHAT perspective. This lens allowed to view pre-service teachers' beliefs from an individual, but also from a social perspective. The analysis reported here considers how pre-service teachers' beliefs were constructed socially, and the relevance of studying them, not only to highlight their influence on teachers' practice, but also on their potential as mediating tools to the formation of concepts.

Pre-service teachers' beliefs in the Chilean context

The participants of this study were 24 late stage student teachers of English enrolled in an EFL teacher education program in Santiago, Chile. At the year of the study, 2011, these students were doing their last year (5th year) of the program. When they enrolled in the program, they knew little English. Therefore, the first two years of the course, aimed squarely at the acquisition of English. Indeed, English was considered to be the core discipline of study.

Pre-service teachers' motives

Pre-service teachers' reasons for enrolling into the TEFL program reflected that learning English was their most important motive. They were interested in learning the language above all. Few who enrolled in the program were interested in being educators. Interviews with pre-service teachers illuminated their decisions to enrol in the TEFL program. The following is an example of a representative consensus of the data.

I didn't like teaching but I thought, "ok, but it is English, I want to learn English". I've always liked

English, since I was a little girl, because it's like strange codes, and I don't know, I liked it. But I wasn't interested in teaching. (S8_I1)

Another observation reveals this pre-service teacher's interest not only in the language, but in teaching it so that future generations could learn at schools.

My teacher of English sucked. She did nothing, I wanted to learn, but we did nothing so I thought **'what about if I learn this language and I teach it to people who are as motivated as myself and I make a difference'**. I was deeply marked by that teacher. (S13_I1)

Only a few of the pre-service teachers expressed their interest towards teaching, and not necessarily associated to English.

Pre-service teachers' previous experiences as learners of English

The literature on beliefs has confirmed that previous learning experiences shape teachers' beliefs [5]. This study also suggests that pre-service teachers' previous experiences shaped their understanding of language teaching and learning. For example, pre-service teacher 3 commented on her past experience as a learner. She reflects about how different her classes were at school from the classes at university.

My previous experience at school was very different from now. My teacher only taught grammar. I ended up with a good grammar base from my English classes at school, but listening, speaking and writing were very bad. I'd like to change that. **Here, at uni, we are taught that grammar is not the focus of a lesson, that we should focus on communication, on speaking English.** At school, **I thought that that was the way you learn English, but that's not true, I know that now.** (S3_I1)

When pre-service teachers enrol into the teacher education program, they have had at least 12 years of general education, and have had at least 4 years of experience as learners of English as part of the compulsory education system in Chile [1]. This experience as a learner had provided future teachers with what has been called as an *apprenticeship of observation* [14]. This means that as they got into the TEFL program they already came with ideas about language teaching and learning, and with an idea of the teachers they wanted to be, and or they did not want to become. This quote is an example of how most pre-service teachers characterised their English lessons at school.

My teacher of English at school taught only grammar. She just wrote some rules on the board, gave us a handout with exercises to fill in, and that was it. She never spoke English; **we never spoke English in the class.** (S13_I1)

Pre-service teachers characterised their previous experiences as students of English as generally passive learners with Chilean teachers speaking Spanish most of the time in classes, and who used a grammar based approach to teaching. Student 12 here reflects about her own experience at school learning English. This observation is typical of pre-service teachers' interviews.

Here I have learnt English a lot. My skills have developed greatly. At school I was only asked to repeat rules. I was never taught how to write, nor how to speak. So I got here and the teacher started to speak English all the time. I didn't understand anything. I wanted to die at that moment, but then, I not only understood everything, but I could speak as well. (S12_I1)

Pre-service teachers' views on how English was learnt at the majority of Chilean public schools was confirmed by the teacher educators' views. Teacher educators at the TEFL program were emphatic about how bad pre-service teachers' past experiences as learners were. The teacher educators signalled past school experiences of pre-service teachers as one of the major obstacles that pre-service teachers faced in learning to teach English. Moreover, the head of the program emphatically commented that pre-service teachers' beliefs about learning English were incorrect because of the experiences they had as learners.

I think that that pre-service teachers have very incorrect beliefs about teaching and learning a foreign language. **"They think students learn in Spanish by memorizing grammar rules"**. I believe that one of the missions of the program is to unpack students' beliefs and start making changes. I know that to make changes in students' beliefs is really difficult after being at school for 12 years with an awful teaching model. (H_I1)

As the data strongly suggested, apprenticeship of observation shaped student teachers beliefs about teaching and learning English. However, they did not necessarily reify. Pre-service teachers' beliefs as they started in the program were confronted with their new experiences as language learners. Beliefs started to change and concepts about what good language teaching should or should not be, began to develop.

Beliefs about language learning

The first two years of the TEFL program examined in this research study primarily focuses on the acquisition of English. Pre-service teachers had twenty hours of English per week. The aim was that they could gain language proficiency in these two years. The first year could be challenging, and rewarding at the same time. Pre-service teachers faced the challenge of learning English in English with a communicative and interactive class methodology. They were expected to be active and engaged learners. Group work, debates, project and task-based learning were typical tasks of the English classes. Pre-service teachers' beliefs about language learning and teaching from previous experiences were confronted. As pre-service teachers reflected on their experiences as language learners at the university context, they reported the experience as positive, challenging, and rewarding. The experience as learners of English at the university context made them aware that it is possible to learn a language in a very different way from their previous experiences at school. The reflection below is an example of the data that show how their experiences as learners were very positive and dramatically different from their school experiences.

I have had a very good time as a student. I was not sure of my option at the beginning of my studies, but now I see that the whole experience has been wonderful. I love not only the fact that I have learnt English really well, but the way how I have learnt it. **Learning English here has been awesome.** I have enjoyed learning English very much. Every time I have to teach something, I think how I can do it without being focused on grammar. And then I reflect on how I have learnt the language without being taught grammar explicitly. I was taught English through meaningful topics and I learnt the grammar and vocabulary from that. I think that the plays, sketches and games we had to do were helpful for my own learning of the language. (S13_S1)

The positive experience of language learning was the result of hard work and engagement. Pre-service teachers developed their concepts about language learning, and as we can see in the data, they believed that language learning was the outcome of constant practice.

As I said, my English level was maybe higher than my classmates' when I entered this university. They knew nothing by then, but now they are excellent. Then, they worked really hard to get there and I feel they are doing better and better. Obviously, in my case at least, I'm always afraid of making mistakes because one wants to be good at everything, but **it's only a matter of practice.** (S1_I1)

Beliefs about language teaching

After the first two years of intensive English, the TEFL program structure, in the third year, includes linguistic and language teaching methodology subjects. School-based experiences were included as compulsory and student teachers attended to an assigned school twice a week. Pre-service teachers reported that this third year as crucial. They emphasised the fact that in third year, they were challenged for the first time to observe the school from a teacher's perspective. As commented by a student, the third year was a threshold to overcome.

But it was when we really had to face the school system that I started to have many bad feelings about it. The fact that the school treated you badly, that the things you have planned didn't work, or that you started to be aware of your own mistakes. **In the end, in 3rd year, I had a deep sense of what it means to be a teacher – that struck me as something really powerful.** (S15_I1)

School-based experiences had a huge impact on pre-service teachers. The school based experiences were not only a reality check, but also made pre-service teachers reflect and contrast the university reality with school reality. These contexts in opposition challenged the beliefs they had been constructing so far regarding language teaching and learning. Their own past experiences as learners of English at school, provided them with a view of an English class, which contrasted with the university English classes. Not only the English classes, but other subjects such as language teaching methodology and discussion seminars supported that. At the moment when these pre-service teachers went back to schools for their

school-based experiences, they had a naive understanding of what teaching and learning English was. However, the school reality showed them something very different.

As pre-service teachers engaged in the activity of learning to teach English in schools, they connected their beliefs with theory and practical applications in the school context. Pre-service teachers' discourse regarding language teaching and learning revealed clear assumptions about how English should be taught. Pre-service teachers reported that English should be taught in English, and Spanish should not be taught at all. They also repeated that the focus of the English lesson is not grammar and that a communicative approach should be used. Another recurrent pattern in the data about language teaching was regarding the structure of the class. Pre-service teachers reported that English lessons should be structured in three parts: presentation, practice and production. The following observations are examples of pre-service teachers reflecting on their concepts about language teaching.

At first it didn't make much sense to me because we were taught things like the communicative approach and I thought, **"Ok, but how do I teach the language? How?" and it didn't make sense to me until last semester, when we were told things like** "no, you don't have to teach grammar, you have to teach, I don't know, vocabulary in context". Then it made a lot of sense and I hadn't noticed it until then. It was like "take in all of this" and I learned English that way because grammar and those things don't help you speak. Then one does like babies do, repeating and borrowing phrases. (S8_I1)

...because grammar and those things don't help you speak. Then one does like babies do, repeating and borrowing phrases. (S8_I1)

These perspectives not only reflect their views regarding language teaching and learning, but also how they are forming their concepts about language teaching and learning. From the beliefs they brought with them to the program from their past experiences, to the new university context, and back to school again. Apprenticeship of observation is one way to explain the origin of the underpinning reason of teachers' practice, but it does not look about the changes, about how these pre-service teachers endured and changed, and adapted to the new contexts.

Pre-service teachers' beliefs about language teaching kept on changing as they engaged in actual teaching. As they did their practicum, they experienced the challenge of being teachers at schools. On one hand, they had to put into practice what they had learnt at university and on the other hand, they had to adapt themselves to the school context. In doing so, they used their beliefs about language teaching, and constructed and reconstructed new ones in this new realm.

Beliefs about the role of a teacher

Pre-service teachers reported that learning to be a teacher was confronting and challenging. As pre-service teachers engaged more and more in the actual activity of teaching, their beliefs were reshaped in the light of the

school reality. At the beginning of the semester, many of the pre-service teachers reported their idea of a teacher as a change agent. Student 2, for example, expressed his strong commitment to make a difference as a teacher. Later this same student reflected on the complexities of being a teacher and how the school experience has made him think about teachers' work and if he really wanted to do that.

I won't be a messiah for these kids, not at all, but I don't know, **I want to plant a seed**, as many teachers did with me. (S2_I1) (before the practicum)

Teaching English is a complex. Now I know I can teach, **but I don't know if I want to do this for the rest of my life. Sometimes it seems a bit futile.** (S2_R) (After the practicum)

Along the same lines, for these pre-service teachers who wanted to make social changes, English was just a tool. English was considered the vehicle to make their students reflect about their lives and the world they lived in.

English is just an excuse, the most important thing is that you become a good teacher and transfer important issues, like for example, solidarity, and English is just a vehicle, just a way to show what solidarity is. The idea is that the lesson should be about something else, **something that is meaningful for their lives.** (S12_I1)

The idealistic beliefs of themselves as teachers changed as they engaged in actual teaching in their practicum. Their concepts of being a teacher were much more concerned about practical skills, rather than making a difference in society. The reports of their practicum showed that pre-service teachers understood that mastering teaching skills such as giving instructions, voice projection, use of whiteboard and classroom management skills were key to be good teachers. They became aware that if they were not able to manage the class, their ideas about making a difference were impractical. The following student quote was made when she had finished her practicum. Her ideas of being a teacher and teaching had changed in the school context.

I think that my best lessons have been with them **because I do not have problems with classroom management** inside of the classroom, they enjoy my lessons and one of the best things about this is that they love to participate in class. Therefore, what **I always expect for my lessons work out well** and at the end of the class I feel happy because students and I have fun. (S4_R)

During the practicum, they realised that teaching is a complex activity, and their concepts of being a teacher and teaching were shaped by the sometimes-harsh school reality. Another pre-service teacher expressed her difficulties at school confronting her beliefs with the school reality, and then adapting and reorientating her concepts of teaching and her role as a teacher.

One of the problems was that **students didn't know anything about English. That's why, I felt bad when I was teaching them because they didn't understand.** As a result, I lost motivation in the class. This is something that I could improve in my teaching practicum with my work. **I'm aware that it is difficult to teach students that**

don't pay attention and are not interested in the class because they don't understand. (S15_R)

The school-based experiences were crucial for these pre-service teachers not only to see what the life of a teacher is like, but also to enact their ideas about the role of a teacher and a learner. Pre-service teachers almost unanimously acknowledged that the schools influenced their ideas about teaching and their roles.

Learning to be a teacher forced pre-service teachers to reflect on teaching practices, and what teachers did at schools. They expressed a strong desire to become good teachers, whilst the student teachers acknowledged the complexities of such a mission.

I know that I still have a long way to go in order to be a good professional, but I also know that I know what I want to do with the rest of my life. **I want to be in the classroom teaching** what I know, showing the world to new generations and open minds. (S11_R1)

Pre-service teachers developed an idea of what a teacher is in the different contexts they were engaged into. Their beliefs about what constituted to be a good teacher was shaped not only by the different contexts, but as they adapted to the different roles and tasks as teachers.

Conclusion

Pre-service teachers weaved their beliefs about language teaching in their engagement to learn how to teach English. This approach of seeing beliefs in activity has allowed us to understand how pre-service teachers' beliefs are shaped and reshaped in learning to teach EFL. Beliefs as an activity show its dialectical nature as it illuminates both the interpersonal and intrapersonal levels of the activity, and its contradictory nature. As the data revealed, beliefs emerged in the actions pre-service engaged in learning to teach English and the interplay between theory, personal understandings and practical applications. Pre-service teachers constructed and used conceptualisations to explain what they did as teachers because of who they are, where they were, and what they needed to do.

Illustrated by the different examples of the data analysed, the formation of concepts through beliefs is an inherent part of the activity system of learning to teach English. As pre-service teachers learnt to teach, they constructed their theories which mediated and orientated their teaching practices. This dual quality of beliefs and concepts gives us the critical component for studying and promoting beliefs as mediating concept formation, i.e. studying how we make sense of learning engaged in a learning activity [15].

Beliefs can be seen as mediating tools of pre-service teachers' learning, but can also develop as concepts. The data shown in this paper has illustrated that pre-service teachers' beliefs are dynamic. They are shaped and reshaped as pre-service teachers engaged in the activity of learning to teach English: from their previous experiences as language learners, their experiences as learners at university, and then engaging in actual teaching. Pre-service teachers use their beliefs about teaching and language teaching to direct their

actions, which in the end they developed into concepts about language teaching and learning.

This approach of beliefs in activity has illuminated the dialectic nature of the activity of learning to teach

English in Chile. Pre-service teachers reflected on their practices and contrasted these against theory; the different contexts: school and university communities; and their own personal understandings.

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Трансформация убеждений будущих учителей в процессе их обучения преподаванию английского языка в чилийском контексте

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Изучению убеждений учителей было уделено за последние 20 лет достаточно много внимания в литературе, посвященной подготовке преподавателей иностранных языков. В исследованиях подчеркивается значимость убеждений учителя для его профессиональной деятельности и тех решений, которые он принимает. Несмотря на то что изучение убеждений помогло лучше понять, как учителя думают и действуют, в большинстве своем это были исследования, выполненные на индивидуальном уровне. В последнее время, однако, появляются работы социокультурной направленности, исследующие социальные корни убеждений. В настоящей статье рассматриваются убеждения будущих учителей английского языка как иностранного относительно преподавания языков как составная часть их деятельности по усвоению навыков обучения английскому в чилийском контексте. Отмечается, что убеждения опосредуют обучение и могут потенциально трансформироваться в понятия. Данные исследования свидетельствуют о том, что убеждения будущих учителей оформляются и переосмысляются в процессе обучения преподаванию английского языка.

Ключевые слова: убеждения, понятия, психологические орудия, подготовка учителей иностранных языков, студенты-педагоги, учебная практика.

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