Shining the Light on Core Beliefs: One Teacher's Journey

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Abstract

This paper explores the depth of core beliefs and how teachers struggle with values that might have taken root in childhood, in their own learning and finally in their teaching. Becoming aware of how these values affect teachers' priorities and actions in the classroom is an important step in understanding the concept of core beliefs and how they are situated within the realm of theory and practice. This paper explores three core beliefs of one teacher and how she comes to terms with each one by determining its relevance in the field of TESOL research. This paper suggests that exploring ones beliefs, while having respect for others, can help us to better articulate our thoughts and be open to new ideas.

Introduction

Three concepts exist regarding the importance of a teacher's core beliefs and how both teachers' and students' motivation levels can increase in ideal situations. In their journal article, Tardy and Snyder (2004) connected three major concepts that involve core beliefs of teachers. First, Csikszentmihalyi's (1996, as cited in Tardy & Snyder, 2004) concept of flow can be applied to the moments when teachers feel most satisfied and most successful in their teaching. Second, Prabhu's (1990, as cited in Tardy & Snyder, 2004) "sense of plausibility", is defined as "a concept of how learning takes place and how teaching uses or supports it" (p. 124). Third, Johnson (1992, 1996, as cited in Tardy & Snyder, 2004) stresses the importance of sense-making for teachers and suggests that teacher education "provide opportunities for teachers to refine their perceptual knowledge (practice) through ongoing reflection, exploration, and articulation of their work" (p. 124). Thus, teacher education programs often require teachers to explore their core beliefs in order to articulate their origin, to research that which either supports them or defies them, and finally to consider how their core beliefs define their evolving teaching styles.

Upon exploring my own core beliefs, much from the past and present has been unearthed, and I have discovered that my beliefs now stand on shaky ground. However, these are my core beliefs, and I adhere to them because for me, they can be attributed to any success I have had in my classroom. In this paper, I will explore three of my core beliefs: one in language, one in teaching, and one in learning, leading to self-reflection about how these beliefs and findings from the literature have directed my teaching journey.

Language — Vocabulary is a powerful tool for communication

The origin of the belief that vocabulary is a powerful tool for communication was activated in the development of my first language skills. I was constantly looking up words and concepts in encyclopedias, dictionaries, and my mother's medical textbooks. I knew words like "trachea" and "esophagus" long before other children my age did. I surprised my seventh-grade science teacher when I began articulating these words as if they were naturally used in my home every day. He asked how I could possibly know such words. I explained that I was interested in biology and liked studying about it on my own, which was partially true. I just liked words, plain and simple.

Another story that goes back further relates to spelling and usage, and how, with the right words, you can impress people, but with the wrong spelling or usage, you might succeed in turning them off. My parents were joking about a parade float that had featured a misspelled word. College, they said, had been misspelled "collage" and they continued discussing how in the world people could be so stupid as to spell that word wrong. They did not know I was listening to their conversation. I was about eight-years-old. I barely knew what a college or collage was, but I went to the dictionary and looked up the word. Later that day, I somehow impressed my parents with the correct spelling of the word. I am not sure how I worked it into the conversation, but I do remember my parents being happy with me for being so intelligent that "even our eight-year-old knows how to spell 'college' for god's sake!" I had learned to be resourceful at an early age.

In sixth grade, I requested a dictionary for Christmas. My parents gave me a heavy, thick one. I soon became frustrated with it though. The definitions were so difficult that I had to look up words from the definitions to figure out what the original words in question meant. It seemed like an endless cycle. I often remember this story when I encourage my L2 learners to use English-English dictionaries because they probably feel the same.

In my own language-learning days, one particular story relates to the acquisition of *kanji*, or Chinese characters. My professor gave us *kanji* quizzes three times a week. Each quiz consisted of about thirty or forty *kanji*. I devised a simple columned folded-paper system for writing the *kanji* in the first column, the *kanji* reading in the second column, and the definition in the third column. I thought it was very useful for memorization, but I soon became overwhelmed with all the *kanji* and the endless folded notebook papers. I do not recommend this rote memorization technique to my students because it did not work for me; however, I do still feel that learning useful words and their collocations is very important.

What the Literature Says

Vocabulary teaching and learning has been thoroughly explored in the literature, particularly by Nation (1990), who cites Elley and Mangubhai (1981) in their revelation that "it is not difficult to find language teachers who think that vocabulary can be left to take care of itself, and there is some experimental evidence to support that position" (p. 1). Due to my core belief, I find it difficult to agree with this, but in considering my former work situation at a public high school, there were bi-weekly 10-minute vocabulary tests that were given to our learners, but no explicit teaching of the vocabulary. The English textbooks included very short vocabulary lists accompanying each chapter. In the classes in which I was directly involved, vocabulary did not play a big part, as the four skills were deemed to take precedence. Nation (1990) discusses research on vocabulary teaching and learning, and states that "our vocabulary work can be directed towards useful words and can give learners practice in useful skills" (p. 1), and that there are a wide variety of approaches to teaching vocabulary in language learning. Both learners and the researchers view vocabulary as an important, if not the most important, component of language learning because "learners feel that many of their difficulties in both receptive and productive language use result from inadequate vocabulary" (Nation, 1990, p. 2). Practice in the four skills cannot succeed in acquisition without some amount of vocabulary teaching. Although learners and researchers understand the importance of vocabulary, I sensed a gap in my school's curriculum, which stressed rote memorization of vocabulary words but provided very few opportunities to use them.

Krashen (1981a, as cited in Nation, 1990), as part of his Comprehensible Input Hypothesis, likely supports the teaching and learning of vocabulary, as he states that certain conditions must be present in order for learning to occur: Interest in the message, the need to understand it, the message contains some vocabulary items that are just beyond the learners' current level, and an absence of stress and worry (Nation, 1990). These conditions assume that there is a message in the first place; however, with rote memorization of vocabulary lists, there is no message. In addition, it is not difficult to imagine that learners feel threatened by their weekly vocabulary tests, for which they cram, and then worry about the effect the test scores will have on their grades. Nation (1990) suggested approaches for teaching vocabulary and explains that both receptive and productive usage of vocabulary items can lead to real vocabulary learning. He encourages teachers to:

> help the process along by drawing attention to particular words, by teaching strategies for learning vocabulary, and by providing simplified material, but meeting the words in a variety of contexts and having to use some of them to express new ideas provide the most important

opportunities for vocabulary learning (p. 6).

This is in line with Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis. Over the years, Nation (2008) developed a more structured approach and recommended that teachers plan the vocabulary portions of their lessons in four equally balanced strands for vocabulary teaching: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development.

After learning about the potential positive effects of vocabulary notebooks, I opted to use them in my curriculum for a course called "Current English." I thought that vocabulary notebooks would be a useful way to track vocabulary and to fully illuminate several details about each word item, such as the definition, the part of speech, an illustration or image, and a few example sentences. Several studies, as summarized by Nation (1990), demonstrate that in order for words to be learned, they must be recycled. This seems like an obvious principle, but one that is probably not put into practice much. Nation (1990) notes that if recycling is neglected, "many partially-known words will be forgotten, wasting all efforts already put into learning them" (p. 7). When dealing with vocabulary, Allen (1983, as cited in Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995) suggests that teachers should create a need for new vocabulary items if they want them to be acquired. Gairns and Redman (1986, as cited in Schmitt & Schmitt, 1995) suggest allowing learners to choose the words that they want to study.

How I have come to terms with this belief

Although I do feel that vocabulary learning and teaching is quite important in any language-learning curriculum, I find that other program requirements allow for very little vocabulary teaching time. In my own classes at my former school, the focus tended to be on grammar and format in writing, presentation skills, and critical thinking skills. It was only in my course entitled "Current English" that I could justify the need for acquiring the most currently used vocabulary in the English language. Unfortunately, this course was an elective and was offered to my students in their last year of high school.

During my tenure at the high school, I saw this particular course change from its original title of "Speech" to "Current English" as mandated by the Ministry of Education in 2006. I discovered many ways to incorporate a more aggressive vocabulary teaching approach. In my graduate studies, I was exposed to the Academic Word List for the first time, and my colleague and I regularly cross-checked it with the news articles we chose for the material content of our class by using an online vocabulary profiler. From these words, we chose only twenty per week for the students' vocabulary lists, and after several weeks, we allowed the learners, themselves, to choose the words that would be incorporated into the mid-term and end-of-term exams. I noticed the same words being utilized again and again each week in our discussions, and I would point out these useful words to my learners, who after several repetitions, become more comfortable with using words such as “criticize”, “issue”, and “revolution.” I believe that knowing these words allowed for deeper discussions about current events and social problems because my learners could not only express their opinions, but they could also discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the issues along with possible solutions, using some of their partially or fully-acquired vocabulary. My hope was that they would come to enjoy the words for what they are — powerful tools for communication and not just potential test items.

Teaching — Teachers have to cater to all learning styles and preferences

The belief that teachers have to cater to all learning styles and preferences may originate from the beginning of my teaching career when I read the book, *The tapestry of language learning: The individual in the communicative classroom* (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). Until then, I was not fully aware of the notion of learning styles. In my own learning, it took a long time to figure out what I was good at and what I was not. I needed to hear as well as see (not one or the other), and I enjoyed doing activities more than sitting; however, I did not mind either way. The only thing I knew for certain was that I needed variety in order to stay awake and alert during classes, so listening to a long lecture by a teacher was not my preferred way of learning.

The existence of learning styles did not seem odd to me as I knew there were communication styles, something I had studied in my conflict resolution classes when I was an undergraduate. I had also taken the Myers Briggs Type Indicator test during university, and I was made aware of the notion that personality was somehow related to people's talents and potential career tracks. In my second year of teaching, I was given the opportunity to design a brand new course called “Everyday English.” I was excited to apply some of my newly-formed beliefs about learning styles, thus I included a variety of activities and exercises into each unit so as to cater to all learning styles and preferences. For example, in my “Money, Money, Money” unit, I planned some listening exercises and dictations for the auditory learners, images and storyboards for the visual learners, math story problems for the analytical learners, counting activities with fake money for the kinesthetic learners and role play situations for the experiential learners. Even from my perspective in the classroom, I was never quite sure which learning styles my students preferred at any given time, but I felt confident that my classroom did include a combination of the styles, and I was very willing to accommodate their needs while exposing them to styles that were perhaps not their strong suit. All learners were required to do all activities; however, I thought of this approach as a way to allow all types of learners to shine at least once in each unit.

In their chapter entitled “Characteristics of Individual Learners.” Scarcella and Oxford (1992) describe the categories and principles of learning styles and strategies. Their list of learning styles includes analytic, global, visual, auditory, hands-on, intuitive, and sensory. This was my introduction to the world of English teaching, something that I found to be intriguing and useful in the classroom for lesson planning and management. According to Scarcella and Oxford (1992):

> Teachers can help their students develop beyond the comfort zone dictated by their natural style preferences. They can do this by providing a wide range of classroom activities that cater to a variety of learning styles and that challenge students to try new things. The key is offering variety and change in activities with a steady, consistent, learner-centered, communicative approach (p. 63).

Nunan and Lamb (1996) cite Willing's (1988) list of four concise "learning strategy profiles" akin to the learning styles mentioned in Scarcella and Oxford (1992): concrete, communicative, analytical, and authority-oriented learners. Though it may be difficult for learners to box themselves into one of these four categories, it gives the teacher a general idea of how the learners see themselves. For me, this came in handy when I wanted to assign members to groups. Sometimes, I mixed up the groups and put one of each type in a group, while other times, I put all of the so-called analytical learners together, and so on. I found that either grouping strategy works well because it merely serves as a way to get students working with a variety of people, and to also be aware of learning styles and how that might affect peoples' approaches to tasks.

What the Literature Says

In order to name and categorize learning styles, a variety of models have been presented in the literature. The Myers Briggs Type Indicator, a model of personality types, has been embraced in the field of education. Others, such as Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory and Felder-Silverman's Index of Learning Styles, were models I had only heard about in passing. Felder (1998) described the notion of learning styles by simply acknowledging that "a learner's approach to acquiring, retaining, and retrieving information may be different, but not inferior or superior to other learners' approaches" (as cited in Tuan & Long, 2010, p. 43). This was an important concept in the field of education. As is the case with Multiple Intelligences Theory, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), an instrument that is widely acknowledged in the education field, also has its share of opponents from the psychological community. For example, Bayne (1995, as cited in Lloyd, 2008) listed ten common criticisms leveled against the MBTI instrument. One criticism holds that any attempt to classify personality is an over-simplification, and only succeeds in reducing the uniqueness of an individual. Many psychologists feel there is no justification for the categories of MBTI and that "it leads to unacceptable pigeon-holing of complex personalities into a mere sixteen 'arbitrary' categories" (Lloyd, 2008, p. 45).

Lloyd (2008) provides a convincing explanation about why, in scientific research, there are two levels of belief, that which can be proven by observed facts, and that which has yet to be proven or might be unprovable. Myers-Briggs fits into the latter; however, as Lloyd (2008) persists, it does not make it any less practical. Supporters of Myers-Briggs find its usefulness stems from its framework of personality descriptions that individuals can identify with. The personality types allow people to understand why "teams need a mixture of personality types to function optimally" (Ibid., p. 48) as well as why conflicts or misunderstandings sometimes occur and how these can be resolved. The same could be said for Gardner's Multiple Intelligences (MI) Theory, which also should still be called a hypothesis since, according to opponents of MI Theory, no empirical evidence has validated the existence of it (Visser, Ashton & Vernon, 2006; Waterhouse, 2006). Followers and critics of any hypothesis need to realize that further research needs to be performed, because in actuality, the hypothesis may be unprovable. In some cases, it does not really matter as long as it leads the users further along the road to success. Still, a hypothesis is a hypothesis, and it is important not to prematurely embrace new concepts as if they are proven theories.

Despite the various models and the opposition these researchers face, it is the practical use of learning styles in curriculum design that cannot be taken lightly. Tuan & Long (2010) discuss the research that has been done regarding teaching styles and the possibility of mismatches between learning and teaching styles. Reid (1995, as cited in Tuan & Long, 2010) found that a mismatch could lead to "learning failure, frustration, and demotivation" (p. 52) and that in order to overcome these problems, teachers should endeavor to find a balance, what is referred to as a multi-style approach, in which:

> all learners will be taught partly in a manner they prefer, which leads to an increased comfort level and willingness to learn, and partly in a less preferred manner, which provides practice and feedback in ways of thinking and solving problems which they may not initially be comfortable with, but which they will have to use to be fully effective professionals (Tuan & Long, 2010, p. 52).

In order to meet the needs of all students and teachers at one time, a seemingly impossible task, cooperative and collaborative learning has been recommended by researchers who found this type of learning can lead to an atmosphere of harmony in the classroom (McKeachie, 1980; Johnson et al., 1991; Wankat & Oreovicz, 1993; Smith & Waller, 1997; Wankat et al., 2002, as cited in Tuan & Long, 2010).

How I have come to terms with this belief

I find that in my own classes, the courses in which cooperative and collaborative learning are part of the curriculum seem to be the most flexible for me, as the teacher, to design lesson plans that feature each learning style at one point or another in the unit. In my courses in which the learning styles are balanced, I find that students have to use their brains more in order to develop the ability to achieve task goals even with styles they are not as comfortable with, and I sometimes hear complaints about it being "too hard," "too demanding," or "too stressful." It seems to indicate they are using their brains and developing their abilities to perform in a variety of situations.

The mere notion of learning styles is primarily what educators have embraced, and not necessarily all models or particular models. Multiple Intelligences Theory might be one of the more well-known ones; however, I wonder if people actually know what it is and how it was developed. Most educated people know that a hypothesis cannot become a theory unless validated by empirical testing. The same can be said for Myers Briggs Type Indicator. It is simply a model, based on a hypothesis, about individual personality types. No matter which model teachers embrace and apply to their own teaching, the fact of whether learning styles do exist is not really the question. The question that educators have to answer is whether or not to show sensitivity to their learners' preferred styles of learning.

In terms of learning styles themselves, I have come to realize that my learners have not had much experience in learning, and the only learning style they are really familiar with is rote memorization in preparation for a constant barrage of exams and quizzes, which culminate in the ultimate test, their entrance exams for the next stage in life. Ehrman, Leaver, and Oxford (2003) state "it is expert teachers with flexible but clear syllabi who can most systematically provide for the individual differences among their students" (p. 324). I believe it is important to expose learners to various techniques and learning styles in order to allow them opportunities to try a variety. Later in life, they might decide they are most successful or most comfortable with certain styles and techniques; however, an even better result is that learners realize they are good at or enjoy a mixture of techniques, somewhat akin to being ambidextrous.

I would also add that keeping lines of communication open between teachers and students, be it written or oral, is important so that teachers can adjust their lessons as needed. I found this occurred more frequently with my high school third year students, who became more confident in their abilities and were able to express their desires, as they had formulated a more accurate view of themselves compared to my first graders who just did whatever they were told without question. Paying attention to and being sensitive about learning styles is a great way to show learners that you care about them and want them to succeed.

Learning — Output is what primarily leads to learning

The belief that output is what primarily leads to learning harkens back to my own learning in childhood, but I doubt that I ever considered the necessity of "output" much before becoming an English teacher. As a child, I have fond memories of my schooling, mostly related to output that included posters, plays, oral book reports, poems, stories, research projects, etc. My favorite projects consisted of researching my own original topic with partners or individually, and then getting up in front of the class and explaining my topic with a variety of activities and visual aids.

When I joined the staff at my former high school as an untrained teacher, I could only go by my memories of what I had enjoyed or gained the most from during my school days. As I went about building my own original curriculum, I was informed that my school was most interested in the students' output and they felt the native teacher could have the most effect on the quality of the students' output. This seemed an unfair burden to put on a brand new untrained teacher, but I undertook the challenge and dug deep into my past to uncover some of my most enjoyable memories from my education. For the duration of my time as a high school teacher, the students continued to perform much-improved versions of the same projects that I initially designed; however, it demonstrates how output was an important part of the curriculum and remained the overriding responsibility of native-English teachers.

It was not just because of my past, but also a belief that stemmed from approaches to assessment. How can teachers assess their students without some level of output? How can learners show what they have learned with no output? How can the gaps between the learners' current output and the native-level output be noticed without some kind of oral or written output? The answers to these questions seem clear to me. Nevertheless, opponents to output seem to be saying that teachers who rely on output are on the wrong path in leading their students to language learning success.

What the Literature Says

The Comprehensible Output Hypothesis (COH) was developed by Merrill Swain in 1985. After studying her learners who had received a great amount of input but were still unable to speak or notice gaps in their output, she formed a hypothesis in which learners need to be pushed to create output so that they can notice the gaps between their own output and a native speaker's output. Skehan (1998a, as cited in Ellis, 2008) supports COH by describing six roles that output production plays in language acquisition: (1) Output serves to generate better input through the feedback generated because of learners' efforts, a reference to the possibilities for more effective and more frequent corrective feedback. (2) It forces syntactic processing and (3) it allows learners to hypothesize about target language grammar and then test it out, both of which allow learners to focus on form and to negotiate meaning with their interlocutors. (4) Output helps to reinforce existing L2 knowledge and (5) it provides opportunities for learners to develop discourse skills.

Finally, in relation to Schmidt and Frota's (1986, as cited in Ellis, 2008) findings regarding noticing, (6) learners can notice the gap between their interlanguage and the target language.

The concept of negotiating meaning as part of the interaction between interlocutors has led Swain (2000) to expand the COH further to include a concept she refers to as collaborative dialogue, defined as "dialogue in which speakers are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building" (p. 102). Through examples from her own research, she demonstrated how collaborative dialogue in which the interlocutors collectively build knowledge can serve as a tool for constructing their linguistic development of their L2. In other words, by talking about the L2 in their L2 and coming to terms with the new forms, learners can pay attention to gaps in their interlanguage, negotiate the meaning together and then find solutions all while increasing their individual knowledge of the language. Calling attention to the collaborative function of output has led Swain (2000) to reposition her COH as a sociocultural hypothesis.

Both Long (Ellig, 2008) and Krashen (2003) oppose Swain's Comprehensible Output Hypothesis. Swain's (2000) claims that collaborative dialogue is a form of interaction. Despite Long's claims that COH plays no role in his Interactional Hypothesis (Ellis, 2008), it is clear that interaction is comprised of input and output between learners and between learners and teachers. Though Krashen (2003) claims that a severe problem of COH is the rarity of output, Swain (2000) argues that output from one learner or native speaker can be the input for another learner, and that learners who seek to improve their language output may feel motivated to request input from interlocutors in order to modify their output. She does not deny the existence or significance of input. Krashen (2003) summarizes his views by saying that COH entails the following difficulties: Output, specifically comprehensible output, is too rare to make a real contribution to linguistic competence; high levels of linguistic competence are possible without output; there is no evidence that comprehensible output leads to language acquisition; some evidence suggests that students do not enjoy being pushed to speak. Krashen's hypothesis of comprehensible input dismisses output, and puts the focus back on input.

How I have come to terms with this belief

I believe that both Krashen and Swain are correct. Learners need input in the form of vocabulary, sentence structures, cultural information, etc. in order to have the rich content needed for further interaction and output. However, in my former and current jobs, the purpose of the native teachers is to provide plenty of opportunities for output, and I find I am happiest (in the flow) when my students are speaking, writing, laughing, sharing, and creating. My job is to facilitate input, output and interaction between the resource materials, myself, and the learner. In some of my classes, my colleague and I designed units that were input-oriented as the learners did silent reading. At these times, I felt an urge to go up to the front of the classroom and explain a new activity or to lead a discussion about the topics. However, I keep Krashen (2003) in the back of my mind because I believe he is correct to state there is legitimacy to reading. Even so, it is inevitable that I eventually turn the silent reading task into an interactive activity, culminating in some output later. I know I do that because it is practically ingrained in me.

Discussion and Conclusion

Researching and writing this paper has allowed me an opportunity to explore my beliefs and to justify the basic ideas I have regarding the importance of vocabulary, learning styles and output. I probably will not be able to dismiss my core beliefs easily, but I do believe it is important to be aware of the findings from research and to be flexible about beliefs, allowing for other ideas to filter in. My adherence to output is a perfect example of this. Despite my tendency to design projects and lessons with plenty of output, I have come to realize that learners need more input in order to acquire the structures and vocabulary needed to produce the output. In addition, it has come to my attention that hypotheses need to be proven with reliable and valid empirical research, and without this, the ideas, concepts, and recommendations brought forth by researchers and educators are merely based on experience or the syntheses of past research. It does not mean that the concepts themselves are invalid because in the classroom, they may lead to success. However, teachers have to be wary of theories and methods that are not properly supported, such as the Multiple Intelligence Theory or the Myers Briggs Type Indicator tool, and as Beatty (June 9th, 2012, personal communication) explained, the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis, which despite its practicality in the classroom, has not been proven...yet.

A teacher's core beliefs are tied to the concept of flow that may occur while teaching, especially when a teacher's lesson content strikes a chord with his or her core beliefs. In addition, understanding our core beliefs can contribute to our sense-making when we reflect on our own teaching decisions in and out of the classroom. Becoming aware of our own beliefs while being open to the beliefs of our colleagues allows us opportunities to not only articulate our beliefs but to integrate new ones into our belief systems, much like Prabhu (1990) points out in the concept of plausibility. Plausibility, sense-making, and flow are directly related to our core beliefs and have the potential to allow us to become better teachers and better colleagues.

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