

## DO EDC INSTRUCTORS SHARE SIMILAR TEACHING BELIEFS?

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### ABSTRACT

The idea behind this project was to ascertain how similar English Discussion Center (EDC) instructors are in terms of their teaching philosophies, and to explore the implications of this with regard to working in a program with a unified curriculum. Based on their answers to a questionnaire, instructors were placed into one of the three main conceptions of teaching, as defined by Zahorik (1986). Although a significant degree of diversity was found, no common background factors among instructors who were placed in the same category were identified. A further objective was to consider how useful these teaching conceptions are as a method of classifying teachers according to their teaching beliefs.

### INTRODUCTION

By any standard the English Discussion program at Rikkyo University can surely be classed as conforming to a unified curriculum. All teachers use the same textbooks and are trained to teach in accordance with the principles of the course, with the goal of improving students' oral communicative competence in a discussion-based setting. However, the teaching staff on the EDC program consists of approximately 40 teachers, who vary not only in terms of age and nationality, but also in terms of teaching experience, educational background, and personal foreign language study and acquisition. Working within such a diverse community on a daily basis, I began to wonder to what extent there also exist disparities between overall 'teaching philosophy' among the members of staff.

As with all teaching, language teaching can be viewed from a scientific, a philosophical, or an artistic viewpoint. Indeed Zahorik (1986) classifies conceptions of teaching into these three main categories: 'Science-Research', 'Theory-Philosophy', and 'Art-Craft'. Put briefly, 'Science-Research' conceptions of language teaching tend to be derived from research and empirical investigation. Therefore an instructor who believes in following a tested model of teaching, or replicating the behavior of teachers who are proven to be effective, may lean towards this category.

In contrast, 'Theory-Philosophy' conceptions are based on "what ought to work or what is morally right" (Zahorik, 1986, p.22) This encompasses both 'theory-based' approaches, such as Communicative Language Teaching and the Silent Way, as well as 'values-based' approaches. An instructor who prioritizes what they believe *should* happen in the classroom, ahead of the results of empirical research, may tend towards this category.

Finally, 'Art-Craft' conceptions emphasize the role of the individual. Rather than committing to a single method of teaching, proponents of this approach argue that a teacher is more likely to achieve their full potential if they try to remain flexible and view each situation as unique.

If it is found that there are indeed substantial philosophical differences among EDC teachers, can they be ascribed to any common background factors, such as amount of teaching experience, nationality etc.? Richards (2002) argues that the conceptions mentioned above could actually be seen as "forming a continuum". As such, the evidence-based 'Science-Research' conception would provide an initial point of reference for less experienced teachers. With more experience they may develop support for a particular theory or set of values ('Theory-Philosophy'). Finally, still greater experience may lead to an appreciation of individual

situations inherent in the ‘Art-Craft’ approach. In this way, the teacher may be seen to have progressed from a ‘top-down’ to a ‘bottom-up’ approach to teaching, or at least to a hybrid of the two. If this were indeed the case, perhaps we would expect less experienced teachers to tend towards ‘Science-Research’ conceptions, while those with more substantial experience may gravitate towards ‘Art-Craft’ ones.

This study’s research questions, therefore, can be stated as:

- 1) To what extent do EDC teachers differ in terms of their ‘teaching philosophy’?
- 2) Can any such differences be attributed to common ‘background’ factors?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

As the intention was to make the study as comprehensive as possible, all EDC instructors were invited to participate. 30 instructors chose to do so, representing about 75% of the overall teaching staff. Of the 30 participants, 24 were native English speakers and the remaining 6 were Japanese. 21 were men and 9 women. In terms of ESL teaching experience, they varied from 1.5 to ‘about 20 years’, with the average being 7.7 years. For reasons of privacy, it was not deemed appropriate to ascertain precise ages.

### **Procedure**

The instrument used to gather data was in the form of a questionnaire (see appendix). Following analysis of a pilot study, the final questionnaire was divided into 3 sections: ‘Background Information’, ‘Teaching Philosophy’ (further sub-divided into ‘Courses’, ‘Lessons’ and ‘Students’), and ‘EDC Course / Classes in General’. The ‘Teaching Philosophy’ section was the main one used to categorize instructors and for this purpose a multiple choice section was included. The statements in this section were chosen so that an equal number (four each) primarily related to each of the three categories. For example, the statement ‘A language course’s objectives should be based on empirical research and data’ was included because agreement in this instance could be said to indicate a tendency towards the Science-Research conception of teaching. Similarly, a respondent indicating agreement with the statement ‘Language learners should learn things other than language skills in class’ could be said to have shown a tendency towards the Theory-Philosophy conception, since it suggests a broader ‘values-based’ approach, rather than a purely empirical one. Lastly, agreement with the statement ‘Teachers should be free to deal with situations in class the way they feel is most appropriate’ could indicate an Art-Craft tendency, in which flexibility of approach is emphasized.

A tally was kept of all responses to the multiple-choice section and respondents were placed in the category to which they indicated most agreement overall, as shown in Table 1 below. When a respondent’s answers indicated equal suitability for two categories, they were assigned a half value to both. In one case, the respondent’s answers indicated suitability to all three categories equally. That person’s results have been omitted from the graph.

As well as the multiple-choice questions, respondents were given the opportunity to expand on their answers. These comments, along with the answers to the ‘EDC Course / Classes in General’ questions were used for two purposes; firstly as a way of providing supporting material to check the accuracy of the categorizing exercise, and secondly to provide some richer insight into the topic, i.e. to “convey the flavor of responses” (Aldridge & Levine, 2001, p.102).

Answers from the initial ‘Background’ section were then analyzed to see if any patterns could be discerned regarding what kind of instructors adhered to the various teaching beliefs.

The questions themselves had to be worded very carefully, as this can clearly influence participant responses. For example, when commenting on the statement, ‘It is important to learn from effective teachers and replicate their behaviour’ one instructor wrote:

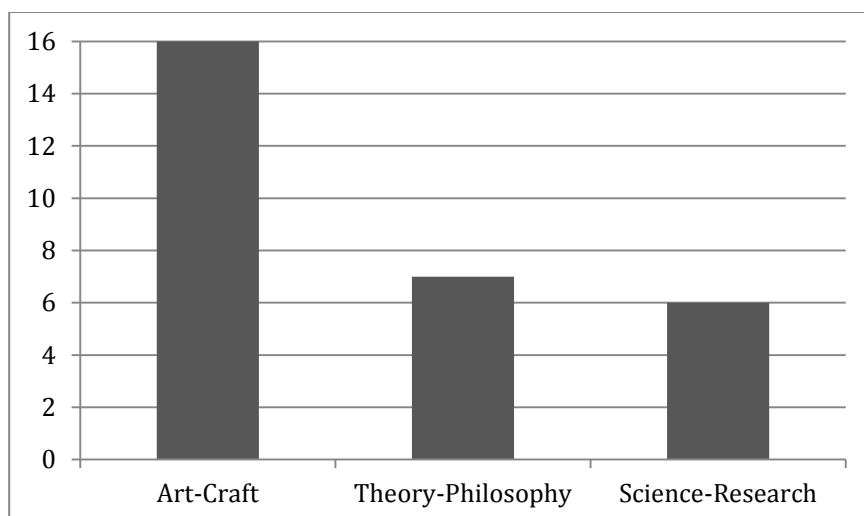
*The word ‘replicate’ forced me to circle disagree. However if you said “learn from effective teachers, then try out and see how their techniques might be adapted to your teaching style” I would strongly agree with this.*

While I would argue that this comment validates the choice of the word ‘replicate’, as it was intended to express a Science-Research conception, it highlights the importance of the question wording.

## RESULTS

Based on their answers to the multiple choice questions in the questionnaire, the 30 respondents were divided into the Zahorik categories as indicated below.

Table 1: *The EDC teaching staff as divided by Zahorik’s classification of teaching conceptions*



These results suggest that there is indeed a substantial diversity of teaching beliefs among the EDC teaching staff, although the overall tendency was towards the Art-Craft category. In most cases, respondents’ additional comments tended to support the initial categorization (based on the multiple-choice section). For example, the following are taken from respondents placed in the Art-Craft category:

*... teachers should have as much freedom to experiment with methods as possible, since they have the most observational data to draw upon and need to be most invested in these methods.*

*(Course) objectives should have an empirical base but should include the needs of the students as well, even if those needs aren’t based on research and data.*

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*... good teachers should be able to utilize their skills and experience to teach on any program, even on ones which may be based on beliefs that are different from one's own.*

*Each teacher is different and will need to adapt what they learn from others into a teaching practice that best fits who they are as a teacher.*

*I often deviate from my lesson plan depending on the needs of the class...*

These comments tend to support the idea that teachers should be flexible in the way they deal with teaching situations, which is a key component of the Art-Craft conception.

The second-most common category (albeit by a tiny margin) was Theory-Philosophy. Here are some comments from respondents who were placed in that category:

*From my Master's, the core philosophy behind my teaching has had a strong emphasis on learner autonomy. Teaching at EDC has reinforced this philosophy and introduced me to more ways to help my learners to be more autonomous, such as self-assessment and peer reflection.*

*Ideally, a critical thinking aspect would become part of the discussions.*

*(students) should be exposed to new ideas too.*

Such comments suggest a desire to integrate the instructor's personal belief or theory into the lessons (with the best of intentions of course!) This is consistent with a Theory-Philosophy mindset.

There were fewer comments that seemed to support a Science-Research conception. The following comment came from a respondent placed in that category:

*Possibly the criteria for the discussion tests (could be changed). I don't always feel that high discussion test scores necessarily correspond to the kind of discussion / communicative behavior that we should be aiming for.*

It seems to hint at an empirical approach, although the phrase 'we should be aiming for' could also indicate a values-based conception.

Indeed it would be misleading to suggest that all comments neatly reflected the category into which the respondent had been placed. For example, the following comment came from someone who placed squarely in the Art-Craft category yet, at least in this instance, suggests a Theory-Philosophy mindset:

*I would like the (course) content to remain closely connected to students' experiences but extend more to contentious social and global issues ... I would like this course to challenge students to think beyond themselves more often and to think about what they hope for in society.*

However, overall it is fair to say that most comments tended to support the initial categorization.

With regard to the question of whether any differences in teaching beliefs can be attributed to common background factors, No such evidence could be found. Respondents placed in all three categories varied in terms of ESL teaching experience, formal teaching qualifications, foreign language proficiency, and nationality - in other words all of the factors on which they were questioned! One particularly stark example is that the respondents with the

least ESL teaching experience (1.5 years) and the most ('about 20 years') both placed in the same category (Art-Craft).

## DISCUSSION

First of all it is important to stress that, due to the qualitative nature of this study, any general conclusions must be drawn very carefully. Indeed Zahorik himself acknowledges that these conceptions of teaching are to some extent "arbitrary frameworks". Bearing this in mind, what conclusions can be drawn from this study? If we accept the hypothesis that there is a substantial diversity of teaching beliefs among the EDC teaching staff, surely this has implications for a program based on a unified curriculum, such as the EDC. For example, do instructors feel restricted by having to conform to such a program? The following instructor comment serves to highlight this point:

*I feel I sometimes want to talk about my opinions or share my experiences ... Sometimes teachers can inspire students by giving some of their experiences. However, I never talk about myself.*

In fact, of the 30 respondents, 10 instructors said that their teaching philosophy had not significantly changed, since joining the EDC program, as represented by the following comment:

*My philosophy has changed only slightly. If anything, many of my beliefs and practices have been reinforced through teaching in the program.*

However, 17 instructors wrote that their teaching philosophy had changed considerably, with the following being two particularly dramatic examples:

*I think I was a talkative teacher before I started teaching EDC classes. Now I am trying very hard not to help (the students) too much, not to support them until they really need it ... my teaching philosophy has changed a lot!*

*The program has certainly dramatically enhanced my personal development, made me a MUCH better teacher than I ever was before...*

This suggests that having a unified curriculum can actually lead to a convergence of previously more diverse teaching beliefs, particularly if the program is widely seen as having value among its staff. When asked to suggest ideas for changes to the program, most tended to be either very minor, or related to further study and how to build on what the students had already learned through the program itself.

The fact that no correlation could be found between length or type of ESL experience and stated teaching belief suggests that Richards' argument that Science-Research conceptions can provide a starting point for less experienced teachers is not borne out by the reality. If many teachers actually begin with an Art-Craft conception, rather than moving towards one over time, this may also have implications for teacher training. Perhaps initial training should focus partly on the pros and cons of such an approach. To what extent is experience actually necessary in terms of being able to deal creatively with various classroom situations? When is it preferable to refer to a tested model or empirical data?

Finally, to what extent can we say that Zahorik's classification of teaching conceptions offers a useful way to categorize instructors in terms of their teaching beliefs? While teachers' beliefs and behaviours will of course overlap to some degree, it may at least give some insight into the priorities of the individual. Indeed it is perhaps on the individual level that it has greatest relevance. Tsui (2003), among others, emphasizes the importance of individual self-reflection, which Farrell (2007) claims represents a 'bottom-up' approach to professional development. If an individual can identify broadly into which category they belong, it may assist in the perception of how their beliefs relate to those of their colleagues, or other teachers in general. For example, an instructor who finds they have most in common with the 'Theory-Philosophy' conception might have cause to re-examine where such beliefs originate from and whether or not they are valid or appropriate. Conversely, someone who finds they generally have an 'Art-Craft' conception of teaching may benefit from considering what the merits of this are, as opposed to a more 'Science-Research'-based approach, and so on.

### **Limitations**

Although great care was taken in constructing and refining the questionnaire, it necessarily involves an interpretation of the Zahorik classification system, which therefore adds a further layer of subjectivity.

Furthermore, while some instructors placed quite clearly in a certain category, others were virtually on (or in a few cases actually on) the border between different categories. There is therefore bound to be a significant amount of overlap in respondents' answers. This is illustrated in the example, mentioned earlier, of the 'Art-Craft' instructor who demonstrated 'Theory-Philosophy' tendencies.

In order to be able to gain more detailed information about instructors' teaching beliefs, it would be necessary to conduct interviews on an individual basis. The researcher would then be able to ask respondents to clarify particular answers, rather than relying on voluntary comments, as in this study. Watching lesson videos would also be beneficial, as it would give an indication of the relation between teaching philosophy, as stated by the instructor, and the reality of their teaching; what Farrell calls the disparity between "espoused theories" and "theories in action".

### **CONCLUSION**

This study does suggest a significant diversity of teaching beliefs among the EDC teaching staff, although just over half of respondents tended towards the Art-Craft category. The questionnaire responses, however, do not suggest any inherent conflict between such diversity and a unified curriculum, as represented by the EDC. In fact, in this case, the existence of a unified curriculum actually appears to have led to some degree of convergence of teaching beliefs.

As is the case with such qualitative research, care must be taken when trying to draw general conclusions. In the absence of further data, it may be more beneficial for each instructor to reflect individually on their approach and on the merits of that and other approaches, as part of an ongoing process of self-reflection and professional development.

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## APPENDIX

### Teaching Philosophy Questionnaire

#### a) Background Information

1. How long have you been teaching English as a foreign language?
2. What teaching qualifications do you have?
3. What experience do you have of learning foreign languages (including compulsory education)?
4. What level of proficiency do you have in any foreign languages?

*Please circle a, b, c, or d. In all cases a = strongly agree, b = agree, c = disagree, d = strongly disagree*

#### b) Teaching Philosophy: Courses

1. It is important to follow a fixed curriculum in language teaching.
2. A language course's objectives should be based on empirical research and data.
3. It is important that any course I teach is based on beliefs that are similar to my own.
4. Teachers should be free to deal with situations in class in the way they feel is most appropriate.

#### c) Teaching Philosophy: Lessons

1. It is important to learn from effective teachers and replicate their behaviour.
2. It is important to focus on language form, not just language fluency, during EDC lessons.
3. My teaching style reflects my personality.
4. I often depart from my lesson plan, depending on the needs of the class.

#### d) Teaching Philosophy: Students

1. It is essential that all EDC students improve their discussion skills as much as possible.
2. Language learners should learn things other than language skills in class.
3. It is essential that students have a positive experience in class.
4. It is essential to develop a good rapport with students.

Please comment on any answers you wish to expand on in the box below.

#### e) EDC course / classes in general

1. What is your definition of a successful EDC lesson?
2. To what extent has your teaching philosophy changed since you started teaching EDC classes?

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3. If you could change anything about EDC classes / the EDC course, what would you change?