# Exploring Teachers' Beliefs and the Teaching Profession in Aceh

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**Abstract**

*Formal teaching is an intentional activity that requires teachers to have beliefs and experiences. Teachers' beliefs are defined by Johnson (1994) as something that is formed early in life as a result of a person's education and experience. Strong beliefs about learning and teaching are well established by the time a student completes schooling. This study intends to find out the beliefs of teachers of English at junior and senior high schools in Aceh. The study surveyed three qualified teachers as participants (in which one is also a vice-principal of his school) and used 15 questions to ascertain their techniques, beliefs and career paths. The results show that teachers' beliefs are related to the teaching methodologies that they use. According to the teachers' beliefs, the teaching methodologies should be varied from time by time according to the situation and the curriculum. Besides, each participant has committed to a career in the teaching profession persistently despite facing many obstacles and challenges during teaching and learning. The participants dreamt of being teachers since they were children. The authors suggest other researchers might see applications of this research for studying the benefits and weaknesses of different teaching methodologies based on teachers' beliefs.*

**Keywords:** Teachers' beliefs, teaching methodology and teaching profession.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background

The teaching profession is not an easy one because when teachers start to work in the field of education, they will face various problems which sometimes can shake their beliefs in the values of teaching and the roles played by teachers. Teachers' beliefs play

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an important role in the processes of learning and teaching. Pajares (1992) argued that beliefs are more influential than knowledge in determining how individuals organise and define problems and are strong predictors of behaviour. This means that beliefs are a big factor that influences how teachers select strategies that can be implemented in their classrooms.

Teaching is a profession that requires four competencies, namely: pedagogical, personality, social, and professional (UU (Law) No 14 year 2005, Permendiknas No 16 year 2007 in Depdiknas, 2007). Professional competence is one of the competencies that support teachers as they perform classroom teaching tasks. Professional competence includes the ability to master learning materials broadly and in-depth that enables the teacher to guide learners to complete the standards of competence specified in the national standards of education. Teachers are also expected to have a solid commitment to expand their knowledge and also to believe in the processes of learning.

Teachers' beliefs determine their achievements in teaching in changing students' behaviour in three domains: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. Experienced teachers will certainly have a high level of knowledge that can make the learning process become more effective and will enhance their beliefs and abilities as teachers to improve students' achievements in learning. Teachers' knowledge can be regarded as a belief when a teacher gains further experience in teaching, her knowledge will increase and will strengthen her belief system that affects perception, assessment and teacher behaviour (Kagan 1992). Teachers who have belief in themselves can continue to progress in their career as a teacher. Ormrod (2009) stated that the beliefs of teachers in assessing their own abilities in helping the student are referred to the self-efficacy of teachers themselves. Self-efficacy in beliefs determines how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave (Bandura, 1994). Individual interests and talents also affect the quality of the teacher so that they can continue to grow in knowledge and achieve desired results in their career.

## 1.2   Research Problem

The writers are interested to know about the beliefs of teachers of English in Aceh and of a vice-principal at schools in Aceh. Their beliefs to be studied specifically are beliefs about the teaching profession, about reflection in teaching, about enthusiasm as a contribution to teaching ability and about shifting careers for teachers.

## 2.   LITERATURE REVIEW

A teacher is a person whose occupation is teaching others (McLeod, 1989). Furthermore, Pearson (1989) said that teachers should have the intention or a goal regarding teaching based on their experiences and their beliefs because teaching is a kind of intentional activity. While belief is defined by Johnson (1994) as a thing that is formed early in life as a result of a person's education and experience, he says that strong beliefs about learning and teaching are well established by the time a student completes schooling.

Teachers' beliefs depend on what they trust should be real and worthy. Their beliefs guide their decision making, behaviour, and interaction with students. The scope of teachers' beliefs is divided into five areas (Calderhead, 1981):

1. Beliefs about learners and learning,
2. Beliefs about teaching,
3. Beliefs about subjects,
4. Beliefs about how to teach, and
5. Beliefs about individuals and teaching roles.

Those beliefs should engage together when a teacher decides to become a teacher and teachers should use them when they teach in the classroom in order to get the best outcomes.

Mohamed (2006) has postulated a definition of teachers' beliefs as the following:

A teacher's beliefs represent a complex, inter-related system of often tacitly held theories, values and assumptions that the teacher deems to be true, and which serve as cognitive filters that interpret new experiences and guide the teacher's thoughts and behaviour (Mohamed, 2006, p. 36).

Mortimer (1999) categorized teaching as imparting information, transmitting knowledge, facilitating understanding, changing learner's conceptions, and supporting students learning. Teachers are expected to develop appropriate professional behaviours in cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains for guiding their teaching.

Teachers' believe in pedagogical principles (Breen, et al, 2001). Teachers' beliefs about teaching enshrine in themselves the convictions that they are able to engage in teaching as their profession. As stated by Tang (1993), beliefs about teaching refer to the concepts that teachers hold and believe in for the teaching process which have relevance for their teaching. In this study, beliefs about teaching are beliefs that teachers hold on to, that is the ways of teaching to use to teach their students in the classroom. Teachers' teaching beliefs refer to the teachers' knowledge and views about teaching of their subjects, the concentration of which includes the nature of knowledge, relevant teaching methods, child development theories and historical and social foundations of education methods, plus numerous other factors (O'Loughin, 1989). It is also argued by Lan (1995) that teaching beliefs refer to teachers' perceptions of the knowledge of the subjects, including the perceptions of the nature of knowledge, teaching, child development theories, the history of education and the foundations of society.

Teachers should understand their own beliefs, theories and/or philosophies. Understanding their own beliefs will influence their professional practice in maintaining the process of personal reflection in their teaching (Williams & Burden, 1997). Teachers not only should follow their profession with dedication and motivation but they should also have a knowledge base concerning their own self-beliefs in order to produce effective teaching.

## 3.    METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using a qualitative method of research to explore teachers' beliefs on teaching and the teaching profession. Qualitative research involves watching, interviewing and describing events and persons in detail without the use of any numerical data. Qualitative research explores phenomena, uses more flexible instruments and an iterative style of eliciting and categorizing responses to questions; it

uses semi-structured methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups and participant observation. Kitzinger (1995) argued that people's perspectives, experiences and feelings can be constructed through discussion and interaction processes by asking questions. Qualitative research aims to create descriptive explanations and accurate facts concerning the phenomenon being investigated whether it is an object, a condition, a thought, an event or the status of a human group.

The participants of this study were three English teachers from different school backgrounds: Teacher 1 (or also coded as H.N. in this paper) is an English teacher from the Senior high school (SMA) of Modal Bangsa in Aceh Besar District. Teacher 2 (or also coded as I.A. in this paper) is from Aceh Singkil, teaching English in SMA Negeri 1 Singkil Utara in classes X, XI IPA (science) and XI IPS (social). Teacher 3 (or also coded as J.L. in this paper) is an experienced English teacher from Panton Labu in North Aceh District who is continuing his studies (from D2 to S1) at Syiah Kuala University (i.e. the teacher certification/qualification program). He is also the vice principal of this school, respectively. Each of the participant teachers' individual teaching experience is more than ten years.

This research is conducted using in-depth interviews with only a few questions that focus on questions related to teachers' beliefs, the teaching methodology they use in their classrooms and the individual teachers' beliefs in the teaching profession. The interview questions used followed those suggested by Kitzinger (1995). The questions were:
1. Why do teachers take up a teaching career?
2. What are the individual teachers' beliefs about their teaching methodology?
3. Do they practice any reflection after their teaching?
4. How do teachers' maintain their enthusiasm for teaching English?
5. Do the teachers want to change their careers? Please explain?

The data (i.e. the teachers' answers to the five questions) was classified and illustrated using quotes from the participants. They were analysed by using expert knowledge that explained the relationship between the expert theory and the answers given by the teachers in their interviews.

## 4.   FINDINGS

The co-writers interviewed three English teachers, in which one of them is also a vice principal of his school. Their findings from the interviews are discussed in this section. The findings start from the interview questions to the answers given by the teachers.

### 4.1   Teaching Career

The first question was *"Why do teachers take up a teaching career?"* Each teacher explained the reasons they chose teaching as their profession.

Teacher 1
*"Being a teacher is a great pleasure for me. I am so happy when I can make the students understand English knowledge through me. So, again, I have no doubt of being*

*a teacher. This profession has been my dream since I was a child and, Alhamdulillah* [praise to Allah], *my dream has come true now".* (H.N.)

Teacher 2
*"I chose teaching as a profession because this profession became my purpose since (I was in) high school (SMA). I also train myself to keep on going, to (keep on) studying through lifelong learning. I am happy to share knowledge with other people".* (I.A.)

Teacher 3
*"I saw the teachers (that came into) in my village were outsiders, so I thought why should outsiders become teachers in my village if people in my village can become teachers, too. Therefore I was motivated to become a teacher in my home village since I was in high school. After I graduated from high school, I registered (enrolled with) SPG (School of Teacher Education), and finally in 1989 I was appointed as a teacher in a school until now".* (J.L.)

The writers found that the teachers really do love their job, it can be seen from their commitment and experience in holding the job as argued by Knobloch and Whittington (2003) that career commitment is a factor that is related to teacher self-efficacy of the teaching experience. The three teachers each viewed their job as a very honourable profession, they are each very grateful to be a teacher because this profession has been their (individual) dream since they were in senior high school. For example, Teacher 1 showed her strong interest as an English teacher since she had been dreaming of being a teacher since she was a child. In addition Teacher 2 also emphasized that to be a career teacher was the profession she wanted since she was a student in the senior high school. Teacher 2 also told the writers that she loves sharing knowledge with others and that is what makes her so happy to being a teacher.

Meanwhile Teacher 3 emphasized a different reason for being a teacher. He saw in his village that many teachers were outsider, so he kept thinking why this condition should happen. The local native human resources should get a chance to be teachers in their own hometowns/villages, and this was the motivation for him to study in the School of Education Program and to finally become a teacher. According to Richards, Gallo and Renandya (2001, p. 35) strong self-motivation will influence a teaching career for life. All participants showed early inclinations and strong motivation prior to choosing teaching as a career.

## 4.2 Teachers' Beliefs

The second question was *"What are the teachers' beliefs about their teaching methodology?"* The responses from the respondents are as the following.

Teacher 1
*"I choose all the methods which are suitable for children's characteristics. The most important thing is that we have to be sincere in teaching and teach with all our heart. Whatever the methods, I always teach my students using a communicative approach in all my lessons".* (H.N.)

Teacher 2
*"I teach at a high school level where the students are entering puberty and have enormous curiosity. My students are very critical in every situation. Formally, I often teach by applying cooperative learning methods. Before starting the learning process, I always try to make the students calm and relaxed; in other words, I try to make them fall in love with my lessons".* (I.A.)

Teacher 3
*"I teach my students by using pictures and pictorial techniques. I believe these techniques will make the students focus on the subject. My experience using these techniques has turned out to be successful in improving students' achievements in mastering the four skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing".* (J.L.)

Eventually, each participant chose a different technique and methodology to teach English. Teacher 1 emphasized that all methods are good if they are relevant to the students' situation but the communicative approach is the most frequent method applied in her classrooms. Second, Teacher 2 said that cooperative learning is suitable for her students. Senior high school students are going through a period of maturity and curiosity, so applying cooperative learning creates a good collaborative atmosphere in teaching and learning English. In contrast to that, Teacher 3 emphasized that using pictures and pictorial techniques is the technique most used in his class. His students have improved their four English skills by using pictures and pictorial techniques. This is further supported by Knobloch and Whittington (2003, p. 67) who said that appropriate teaching methodology should be in line with three considerations: students' needs, curriculum and building skills. So, only Teacher 1 has basically implemented these considerations so far, but that doesn't mean that Teachers 2 and 3 have neglected all these considerations but they didn't say so explicitly.

Furthermore, the most important belief about teaching and learning is method. The teachers describe a variety of methods that they use in the teaching learning process that they believe were important in stimulating students' achievements. It is also argued by Richards, Gallo and Renandya (2001) in their research that the teacher should constantly find new methods of teaching and new approaches in teaching and learning activities. Even though there is no best method for language teaching and learning, teachers should constantly renew and revitalize their methods and approaches.

Teacher 1 agreed that focusing on a communicative approach with a real context is in her belief more effective, practical, successful and natural for language learning. Breen, et al. (2001) found that although at an individual level teachers have unique configurations of practices and principles, at a group level, several pedagogical principles were identified as common to all teachers. This means that different teachers have different characteristics, and also have different ways on how to use teaching methods. They each must believe that they can teach in a good way. They believe that being a teacher and teaching using good and up-to-date methods can create effective learning and improve students' achievements in learning. This proved that they have high self-efficacy in their principles as teachers. As described by Ormrod (2009), when a teacher has a high self-efficacy regarding their effectiveness in the classroom, teachers affect student achievements by being more willing to try teaching strategies that help students learn better and mobilize greater effort in their teaching and are more persistent in helping students learn.

### 4.3 Self-Reflection

The third question was "*Do they practice any reflection after teaching?*" The participants' answers are as follows.

Teacher 1
"*Criticism for myself, perhaps I should study to get a more in-depth understanding of learning methods that are more suitable for my school environment. Sometimes students also criticize the way I teach but I am happy with their criticism because I am motivated to become a better teacher. I think students' criticisms are expressions of their warm-heartedness in the learning process*". (H.N.)

Teacher 2
"*I am less strict to students who do not pay attention when I am explaining the lesson. Senior High School students are sometimes difficult to understand because they are going through puberty. There are several other teachers who do not like my strategy and the approach to students that I use in teaching. But I'm glad those teachers criticize me, especially if the objective of criticism is a positive one to motivate me to modify my strategies to get better at teaching*". (I.A.)

Teacher 3
"*My weakness in teaching was that I used to be not brave enough to use other methods because I was afraid that my students could not increase their knowledge. I had even taught English by using the classical method, that is, the grammar translation method. In the past, I always used the old method. However, now I am braver and I have no doubt to teach using various methods that make me more excited to teach and the students more motivated in learning*". (J.L.)

Teacher 3 informed that he previously had no encouragement to experiment or apply other methods than grammar translation method. However, now he is braver in applying many new teaching techniques and methodologies. It was driven by seeing his students' excitement from time to time that depends on new learning materials and techniques and by reflection given by his students. The students do not necessarily state what they want and/or whether they like his technique, but their need are shown from their attention and motivation during the learning process.

In contrast to Teacher 3, Teacher 2 has gained some invaluable critics from her co-workers. At school, Teacher 2 is given some new insights related to her teaching strategies. Teacher 2 received the input warmly and she is willing to modify her teaching strategies in the future.

Meanwhile, Teacher 1 faced different situation among the others. She was doing self-criticism by means of self-evaluation on herself. Thus, this is a good situation on one hand because it means that teachers who assess themselves are encouraged to build up their career (Richards, Gallo & Renandya, 2001). Teacher 1 also gained evaluation and feedback from her students so as to find better teaching strategies for the future.

According to Lan (1995) and Mortimer (1999), there are three sources of reflection: the first is self-assessment, the second is peer assessment and lastly is outsider assessment. These three sources may create a good reflection atmosphere to

teachers as long as they are willing to receive, modify and adjust accordingly by means of teaching and students' needs.

## 4.4   Teachers' Enthusiasm

The fourth question was *"How do teachers maintain their enthusiasm for teaching English?"*

Teacher 1
*"If my students feel happy I can be more enthusiastic in teaching".* (H.N.)

Teacher 2
*"I don't know but I always try to put on a happy face when I teach my students. It is not always easy especially when I am tired and my students are very noisy and don't pay attention in class".* (I.A)

Teacher 3
*"My excitement comes when my students are motivated and interested in my teaching and are keen to learn English".* (J.L.)

The enthusiasm of teachers has been discussed as one of the most important factors in producing excellence in the teaching and learning process (Lan, 1995; Mortimor, 1999; Knobloch & Whittington, 2003).  The importance of enthusiasm will lead a teacher to produce a higher performance in their teaching.

Teacher 2 said that her interest in teaching comes from two triggers, firstly from herself and secondly from her students' interest or enthusiasm. Whilst Teacher 3 stated that his enthusiasm comes from his students' excitement in studying. Lastly, Teacher 3 said that he feels more enthusiastic if his students show they are happy with the teaching and learning process.

## 4.5   Shifting Career

The last question was *"Will you change your career? Please explain?"* This question was about their consistency as a teacher, whether they would survive (as a teacher) or would they each like to find another job. The responses from the respondents are as below.

Teacher 1
*"No, I even want to add some more hours of teaching, I intend to teach not only in schools but also in various places, it can be in formal or in informal schools. However, I need to increase my knowledge in advance because the students are so smart nowadays".* (H.N.)

Teacher 2
*"At this moment absolutely no, I'm enjoying this job. But maybe in the future, yes. As time goes by, I will be getting older and definitely my movements will become slower and I will prefer more relaxed work with not so much challenge".* (I.A.)

Teacher 3

*"Of course not, since the beginning when I became a teacher until now I have had 22 years of experience, this profession is still the best for me. So, I say to myself that I will keep teaching until I am getting too old (to teach). There is no reason to change to another profession".* (J.L.)

The writers concluded that Teacher 1 will not change her profession; besides, she is convinced that this profession is very influential in her life. Teaching is her hobby and she is happy being able to implement her hobby in the best Islamic boarding school in Aceh, Modal Bangsa. Regarding the teaching methods, although sometimes a little bit slow to master everything, but she is still learning to apply adequate teaching methodologies in her classroom.

Teacher 2 is an energetic and delightful teacher. This teacher is able to overcome the problems in class confidently, even though she was less strict but she can set the strategies for students who disobey her in classroom. Teachers believe learning together is really helpful. Learning together happens best through dialogue and shared interaction between teachers and students. Discussion and discovery learning pedagogies when found in the beliefs of individuals and groups create meaningful understandings (Bandura, 1994). Teachers should have self-efficacy and strong beliefs to implement strategies and techniques in learning activities in order to solve problems. Solving problems can be done through reflection and discussion with students. In contrast with the others teachers, this teacher do not want to be sustained for a long time in teaching, she has a target to be able to move on to another career if she feels she has had enough to her career as a teacher.

Teacher 3 has been teaching for 22 years; his teaching experience makes him very confident to continue and expand his career as a teacher. Due to his intrinsic motivation, he is not only a good teacher but has also been the vice principal to the junior high school he is teaching in since 2012 to the present. As stated by Bandura (1994):

People motivate themselves and guide their actions anticipatorily by the exercise of forethought. They form beliefs about what they can do. They anticipate likely outcomes of prospective actions. They set goals for themselves and plan courses of action designed to realize valued futures. (Bandura, 1994, p. 110)

Therefore, self-efficacy plays an important role to career for Teacher 3. He has motivation to change his hometown minimum human resources as teachers and it led him to be a great teacher and a vice principal in his future.

## 5.    CONCLUSIONS

This study found that the research study participants, in this case English teachers in Aceh, used a wide variety of teaching methods in their classroom activities to get good results in teaching students. The participants are great, highly talented teachers that have been able to sustain long careers in education. A successful teacher depends on having strong beliefs in order to follow a professional career. Teachers who are confident and knowledgeable are able to find solutions to every problem that happens in the teaching and learning process in their classrooms. Therefore teachers' beliefs and

confidence are an important factor for teaching and learning activities. The conditions of students with different backgrounds require teachers to be able to master different methods of teaching and to use appropriate methods which can improve the achievements of their students in learning.

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