

# Why should we investigate secondary school teacher beliefs and teacher perceptions of English language teaching?

Nguyen Viet Hung\*

*Faculty of Foreign Languages, Taybac University, Sonla, Vietnam*

Received 10 May 2011

**Abstract.** The aim of this paper is to make an argumentation on why researchers should start from seeking teacher beliefs and teacher perceptions related to the teaching career. It is organized around three main points: (1) the re-examination of terms related to all perspectives of beliefs and perceptions of teachers in general and teachers of English in particular; (2) the current state of English language teaching in Vietnamese secondary schools; and (3) the importance of studying teacher belief and teacher perceptions of teachers of English about curriculum, textbooks and teaching methodology.

**Keywords:** Teacher beliefs, teacher perceptions, ELT, TBLT.

## 1. Introduction

The series of the new English textbooks for Vietnamese upper secondary schools, which has officially been put into use since 2006, is the result of the innovation by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). However, since that time, few researches have been conducted, particularly those that are concerned with teachers' beliefs and teachers' perceptions of the textbooks and the teaching quality. Therefore, in this paper, an attempt is made to examine this issue.

Over the past two decades, teacher belief and teacher perception have attracted much attention from researchers; the mark for this new trend can be seen in the studies by such scholars as M. A., J. L. Shrum, J. R. Harding & A. M. Cuthbert [1], Kagan [2] and Pajares

[3], Borg ([4], [5]), Verloop, N., J. Van Driel & P. C. Meijer [6], etc. The importance of studying teacher belief and teacher perception is confirmed in studies by Cuban [7], Allwright [8], and Canh [9]. It is, however, not easy to provide an overview of the literature in this field as different researchers tend to conceptualize the notions of teacher belief and teacher perception in a different way. This explains why the section that follows will attempt to look at how these terms have been defined.

## 2. Definition of terminology

The notions of teacher belief and teacher perception can be traced back to Pajares [3]. In a paper entitled *Teachers' beliefs and educational research: cleaning up a messy construct*, Pajares states that defining beliefs is at best a game of player's choice. They travel in disguise and often under alias - attitudes,

---

\* Tel: 84-972.862.865

E-mail: nguyenviethungvnu@gmail.com

values, judgments, axioms, opinions, ideology, perceptions, conceptions, conceptual systems, preconceptions, dispositions, implicit theories, explicit theories, personal theories, internal mental processes, action strategies, rules of practice, practical principles, perspectives, repertoires of understanding, and social strategy, to name but a few that can be found in the literature. Pajares goes further, suggesting that beliefs are the best indicators of the decisions individuals make throughout their lives.

Some other researchers manage to clarify the concept *belief* by making a distinction between beliefs and knowledge [1], [2], [6]. In those argumentations, beliefs are often described interchangeably as attitudes, judgments, values, opinions, perceptions, ideology, and internal mental processes as in [1], [3]. Beliefs are relatively static whereas knowledge changes as more and different knowledge is acquired (Nespor [10]). However, there exist opposite notions of belief and knowledge. Grossman, P. M., S. M. Wilson & L. S. Shulman [11], for example, first attempted to distinguish the two notions but then came to a contrary and surprising conclusion: “while we are trying to separate teachers’ knowledge and belief about subject matter for the purposes of clarity, we recognize that the distinction is blurry at best” (p.31). In later work of Woods [12], a similar conclusion was made. This is because, as Verloop *et al.* [6] explain, “in the mind of the teacher, components of knowledge, beliefs, conceptions, and intuitions are inextricably intertwined” (p. 446).

It is known that teachers rarely alter their knowledge of language teaching based upon teaching methods or research studies they have read and are more likely to do so as a result of personal experiences or advice from colleagues [2]. Knowledge of teaching methodology has been referred to as propositional knowledge, while knowledge from personal experiences has been labeled practical knowledge:

“Practical knowledge is bounded by time, place, or situation. To claim to know something practically is to claim to know something about an action, event, or situation in a particular instance” (p. 28). This delineation is supported further by Calderhead's efforts to differentiate among different sorts of teacher knowledge [13]. It may be that straightforward questions about research results require teachers' theoretical knowledge, while situational questions activate their personal practice or case knowledge.

Another distinction that was made by researchers when dealing with factors that affect language learning and teaching is between the constructs “belief” and “perception”. Perception is generally characterised by a multiplicity of labels which have been posited to describe, wholly or in part, the psychological context of teaching (for discussions of these see, for example, Pajares [3], Verloop *et al.* [6]). While perhaps terminological innovation is a necessary process in the conceptualisation of an emerging domain of educational inquiry, this proliferation of terms has led to a ‘definitional confusion’ [7]. This conceptual ambiguity has been further complicated by the fact that, as Clandinin & Connelly point out, identical terms have been defined in different ways and different terms have been used to describe similar concepts. Language teacher cognition research has inevitably been influenced by concepts established in mainstream educational literature, and consequently a range of different labels appear in the studies.

For the purpose of this study, it can be assumed that “beliefs” and “perceptions” and other terms such as “attitude”, “conception” and “cognition” are better to be synonymous. If, for example, a teacher “believes” that the teaching technique is ineffective, he or she “perceives” that the technique to be ineffective. Indeed, these constructs seem to be interchangeable in much of the literature (see for example [3], [10], and [14]). To illustrate,

Mori, Y., Sato, K., & Shimizu, H. [14] refer to the many studies that have focused on learner strategies and their correlations with learner beliefs as “belief studies” that “have contributed to our better understanding of learner perceptions...” (p. 58). They also speak of the “specificity of learner perceptions” which they define by way of giving an example: “task-specific beliefs” (p. 58).

### 3. English teaching in Vietnamese upper secondary schools

As far as the teaching of English is concerned, methodological renovation is one of the primary focuses of MOET in an attempt to enhance the quality of English language teaching. The implementation of the new series of textbooks since 2006 has placed all Vietnamese teachers of English in the rush of teaching method renovation. The major orientation for renovation is the advocacy of task-based language teaching (TBLT).

As mentioned, the teaching method used in the new series of textbooks selected for English teaching in Vietnam is obviously TBLT which is based largely on the framework of Willis [15] which was then strongly supported by Skehan (1998; 2003)<sup>(1)</sup>, Ellis (2003)<sup>(2)</sup> and Willis [16]. This series of textbooks was carefully designed and developed by a group of ELT specialists headed by Prof. Dr. Hoang Van Van, and this was a big effort to change the teachers’ attitude, teachers’ awareness of English teaching in Vietnam from teacher-centered to learner-centered orientation. According to Prof. Dr. Hoang Van Van (personal communication,

November 15, 2008), the new series of textbooks of English for Vietnamese upper secondary schools employs the learner-centered approach and is implemented by most modern teaching methods, i.e. CLT with its evolutionary version known as TBLT. It is a fact that in the textbooks from grade 10<sup>th</sup> to grade 12<sup>th</sup>, the framework of each unit consists of five parts (reading, speaking, listening, writing, language focus), and in each skill-taught part the teaching consists of three phases (pre-task, while-task and post-task), each of which has smaller tasks or subtasks [17], [18], [19]. To compare this framework with ancestors, it fits well with the one proposed by Willis ([15], [16]), Skehan (1998; 2003) and Ellis (2003). A minor difference between them is that the duration for a task accomplishment in the new series of textbooks is bigger and more ranging to be afforded than the TBLT framework stated in the theory; a task is not accomplished in a class teaching period but in 10 periods (2 periods for each part: reading, speaking, listening, writing, language focus). With those facts, the understandings of the textbooks and TBLT must be an indispensable part of teachers’ knowledge; however, in underdeveloped, remote and mountainous areas, the use of TBLT is largely a lip service. This may be because of the lack of awareness in TBLT or the variation in understanding about TBLT among the teachers and the students, the negative beliefs or unfavorable attitudes towards the new textbooks. Through casual talks with 50 secondary school teachers in the northwest area and through some minor research assignments from my students in the secondary schools that they did their practicum, surprising information emerged. In most statements, the teacher-centeredness was admitted to be popular; nevertheless, learner-centeredness was by far reachable although teachers usually led their teaching according to what the guide books for lesson plan instruct. Besides, there exist dubious beliefs and

<sup>(1)</sup> See more in the work of Skehan, P.1998, Task-based instruction, *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 18, pp. 2 68-286; and Skehan, P. (2003), *Task-Based Instruction*, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>(2)</sup> See more in the work of Ellis, R. 2003b, *Task-based language learning and teaching*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

attitudes of the new series of textbooks; a lot of teachers suppose that it is impossible to use the communicative approach or TBLT as required in the new textbooks because their students are mainly ethnic people who have low proficiency and few facilities for study which result in their demotivation of learning.

This fact should really attract a number of researches in teacher belief and teacher perception of the new series of English textbooks for Vietnamese upper secondary schools and the teaching method (TBLT) implied in this series of textbooks in forthcoming time, and the work of the writer would be one in those. This research decision of the writer appears to be correct due to the supporting information from previous researches of methodologists about the importance of teacher belief and teacher perception and its effects on teaching practice in this field that is about to discuss at the next section.

#### 4. Why Should We Start from Teacher Beliefs?

##### 4.1. The Importance of Studying Teacher Beliefs and Teacher Perceptions

It is obvious that capitalizing on the nature of human beings and their prior cognition receives the focal emphasis from educators and researchers those who intend to investigate the current situation of their teaching in order to propose changes to the matter. The result of teaching certainly depends on many factors, and the teachers themselves with their own perceptions of teaching methods cannot be ignored. Canh [9] argues that to understand teaching, we need to go beyond the classroom to seek answers to the question "Why the interaction between teacher and class happens that way?" (p.109). In other word, the teaching of English can be empowered very much by understanding teachers' cognitive process of teaching and

ELT methodology and if then pedagogical considerations are taken into account.

Borg [5], on the other hand, states that educational researches in over the last 20 years have recognized the impact of teacher cognition on teachers' professional lives, and this has generated a substantial body of research. Having examined several reviews of these researches, such as from [2], [3], [11], [13], he concludes that teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practically-oriented, personalised, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs. Borg [5, p.86] also states, "Beliefs established early on in life are resistant to change even in the face of contradictory evidence (adopted from Nisbett & Ross<sup>(3)</sup>)". Such beliefs take the form of episodically stored material emerged from critical incidents in individuals' personal experience of learning as teacher learner and the teaching as a teacher [10], and thus teachers learn a lot about teaching through their vast experience as learners, what Lortie (1975)<sup>(4)</sup> called their 'apprenticeship of observation'. Mainstream studies illustrate the influence on teachers' cognitions of their experience as learners; similar findings emerge from research with language teachers.

As can be seen from confirmations above, the importance of teacher cognition is clear, so the highlight and encouragement of researches in this field should be made. Canh [9] devotes much of his studies to such issues as teaching reality, teacher cognition and teaching context. He goes further stating that: "...language learning, and therefore language teaching, does not occur in a vacuum, but in larger context; the teacher perception of the context within

<sup>(3)</sup> See more in the work of Nisbett, R. E. & L. Ross (1980), *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcoming of Social Judgment*. Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice Hall.

<sup>(4)</sup> See more in the work of Lortie, D. (1975), *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

which the language or languages are to be learned and used is very crucial" (p. 108). Therefore, the issue is not which method is the best or whether or not a new method is superior to its predecessor; the issue is how teachers learn to vary their method and approach, and how they rationalize the method or approach they use. In other words, teachers should be encouraged to move "from ideology to inquiry" (p.116).

Accordingly, in order to have full understandings of teachers' beliefs and perceptions of their teaching, researches in this field is indispensable; we cannot apply measures to improve teaching quality when we do not have enough understanding of its reality. For example, when we do not have investigations in the teaching reality of a province, we invest more facilities such as computers, cassette players, etc., while teachers in this provinces lack of understandings of the teaching method applied for implementing the new textbooks; that investment is naïve, redundant and ineffective. Through firsthand information, our impression is that secondary school teachers of English in NWA cannot be confirmed as full and correct understanders of teaching methods in their use because most of them declared that they made their teaching plans by copying what had been designed in lesson designing books. That action even makes them not aware of what method they are using, what characteristics the method persists, what advantages and disadvantages the method has, what context the method should be applied, etc. It is dangerous as it is known that textbooks and even lesson designing books are the same in the whole country; whereas, the teaching context, culture and other teaching variables are unidentical between different regions. To understand more about English teachers' cognition in our country, it is appeasable to welcome researches, both regional and overall ones. Expectantly, ELT in Vietnam can be fostered very much when we understand the

role of teachers' cognitions of ELT methods.

#### *4.2. The effects of teacher beliefs and teacher perceptions of ELT methodology on teaching practice*

The discussion of this point is started with the statement by Bransford, Brown and Cockling [20] that "humans are viewed as goal directed agents who actively seek information. They come to formal education and training with a range of prior knowledge, skills, beliefs and concepts that significantly influence what they notice about the environment and how they organize and interpret it. This, in turn, affects their abilities to remember, reason, solve problems and acquire new knowledge" [p.10]. That viewpoint matches well with what Cuban [7] mentioned in case human agents are teachers. He argues that "The knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes that teachers have shaped what they choose to do in their classrooms and explain the core of instructional practices that have endured over time" [p. 256]. In other words, teacher belief and teacher perception have gigantic effects on the teaching quality.

These days, with the ELT methodology development, language is generally no longer regarded as a set of grammatical rules, with sets of vocabulary, to be memorized. Accordingly, learning can hardly be seen simply as a process of habit formation, but a dynamic resource for creating meaning. Teachers and learners with the cognitive processes and social processes they engage in as they learn are seen as fundamentally important to the learning and teaching process. Therefore, sociocultural and psychological theories are beginning to be drawn on in addition to (or even in preference to) cognitive theories. Everybody knows that the main aim of foreign language teaching is to enable learners to communicate in the target language. Therefore, "to be an effective foreign language teacher requires a range of skills and knowledge" Canh [9, p.126]. Unquestionably,

teachers' perception of teaching methodology would very much affect their classroom teaching, or in other words, these two factors correlate well with each other. Allwright [8] made the point that: "... We need studies of what actually happens, not of what recognizable teaching methods, strategies or techniques are employed by the teacher, but of what really happens between teacher and class" (p. 51).

To this point, the majority of class teaching can be interpreted and the reality is easily made out if the researcher can understand teachers' interpretation of teaching methodology, so what applications related to the teaching can originate from the method the teacher chose and how he or she was aware of it. Stern [21, p. 27] has asserted, "No language teacher - however strenuously he may deny his interest in theory - can teach a language without a theory of language teaching". It is an immediately apparent fact that everything teachers do in the classroom is underpinned by beliefs and understandings about the nature of language, the nature of the learning process and the nature of the teaching act (i.e. methodology).

In addition, teachers' beliefs and perceptions appear to possibly underlie their judgments about textbooks and teaching context [3], [6], [22], although many times these beliefs are interwoven with knowledge, making it difficult to separate the two. Many researchers (e.g. Stipek & Byler [23], Wood [12]) have identified teachers' beliefs about textbooks and the language teaching method as a way to explain their practice of teaching. Researches on teachers' beliefs have boomed violently all over the world in recent years; however, few studies have documented how teachers use their own belief systems to their teaching careers in Vietnam.

An example of teacher belief in ELT is through casual talks that the researcher has in turn done to 50 secondary teachers in the

northwest area of Vietnam (NWA) in December, 2010, most of them thought that the teaching methodology is extremely vital to their teaching. They assert to prefer CLT and TBLT as the most used and favourable teaching approaches whose activities are both motivating and interesting, and that they generally promote meaningful exchanges and genuine communication in realistic contexts. The teachers, in addition, believed that implementing CLT and other modern teaching methods such as TBLT is troublesome not only in NWA but also in Vietnam because of the large classes and of lacking authenticity. Besides, they also thought that any deficits in activities and tasks can be overcome through adaptation or supplementation. Also, lots of information from graduation research papers of students of Tay Bac University revealed that teachers in NWA usually had to adapt, change, simplify or remove learning tasks designed in textbooks, and they could not keep up with learner-centeredness approach as required by MOET. They admitted that they had to deal with tasks on their own because they believed that their students were inactive and the language proficiency was insufficient. Those facts may result from the cognitions and beliefs mentioned above. However, this is only information at first hand; the image of teachers' teaching practice reality imbedded into by their beliefs and perceptions in NWA and in Vietnam will be depicted after our big project has been completed in forthcoming months; and its data will be presented and discussed in later papers.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has been concerned with the question, "Why should we investigate secondary school teachers' beliefs and perceptions of English language teaching?" I started by reexamining the terminology related to the issue. Then I looked at the current

situation of teaching and learning English in Vietnamese secondary schools. Having asked the question “Why should we start from teacher beliefs?”, I discussed the importance of studying teacher beliefs and teacher perceptions and the effects of teachers’ beliefs and teachers’ perceptions of ELT methodology on teaching practice. It is obvious that for the teachers to improve the quality of their teaching, the first things we should do is to look at their beliefs and their perceptions of the textbooks and the teaching methodology lying behind them. However, the problem seems to be more complex than it was thought. Hopefully, this paper helps clarify some of the issues concerning the area of teacher belief and teacher perception, an initial step for further study in the area.

## References

- [1] Eisenhart, M. A., J. L. Shrum, J. R. Harding & A. M. Cuthbert, Teacher beliefs: definitions, findings and Directions, *Educational Policy*, 2 (1998) 51.
- [2] Kagan, D., Ways of evaluating teacher cognition: inferences concerning the Goldilocks principle, *Review of Educational Research*, 60 (1990) 419.
- [3] Pajares, M. F., Teachers’ beliefs and educational research: cleaning up a messy construct, *Review of Educational Research*, 62 (1992) 307.
- [4] Borg, S., Studying teacher cognition in second language grammar teaching, *System*, 27 (1999a) 19.
- [5] Borg, S., Teacher cognition in language teaching: a review of research on what language teachers think, know, believe, and do, *Language Teaching*, 36 (2003) 81.
- [6] Verloop, N., J. Van Driel & P. C. Meijer, Teacher knowledge and the knowledge base of teaching, *International Journal of Educational Research*, 35 (2001) 441.
- [7] Cuban, L., *How teachers taught: Constancy and change in American classrooms: 1890-1990* (2nd ed.), Teachers College Press, New York, 1993.
- [8] Allwright, R. L., *Observation in the Language Classroom*, London: Longman, 1988.
- [9] L.V.Canh, *Understanding Foreign Language Teaching Methodology*, Nha xuất bản Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội, Hanoi, 2004.
- [10] Nespor, J., The role of beliefs in the practice of teaching, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 19 (1987) 317.
- [11] Grossman, P. M., S. M. Wilson & L. S. Shulman, Teachers of substance: Subject matter knowledge for Teaching. In M. C. Reynolds (Ed.), *Knowledge Base for The Beginning Teacher* (pp. 23–36), Pergamon, Oxford, 1989.
- [12] Woods, D., *Teacher Cognition in Language Teaching*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996.
- [13] Calderhead, J., Teachers: Beliefs and knowledge, In D.C. Berliner and R.C. Calfee (Eds.), *Handbook of educational psychology* (pp. 709-725), Macmillan, New York, 1996.
- [14] Mori, Y., Sato, K., & Shimizu, H., Japanese language students’ perceptions on kanji learning and their relationship to novel kanji word learning ability, *Language Learning*, 57 (2007) 57.
- [15] Willis, J., *A Framework for Task-Based Learning*, Harlow, Essex: Addison Wesley Longman, Longman, 1996b.
- [16] Willis, J., *Task-based learning? What kind of adventure?* Retrieved April 22, 2005 from <http://langue.hyper.chubu.ac.jp/jalt/pub/tlt/98/jul/willis.html>. 1998b.
- [17] Bo Giao duc va Dao tao, *Tieng Anh 10*, Nxb Giao duc, Hanoi, 2010.
- [18] Bo Giao duc va Dao tao, *Tieng Anh 11*, Nxb Giao duc, Hanoi, 2010.
- [19] Bo Giao duc va Dao tao, *Tieng Anh 12*, Nxb Giao duc, Hanoi, 2010.
- [20] Bransfort, J.D., Brown, A.L., Cockling, R.R., *How people learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*, National Academies Press, Washington, 1999.
- [21] Stern, H. H., *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1983.
- [22] Schulz, R. A., Cultural differences in students and teacher perceptions concerning the role of grammar instruction and corrective feedback: USA-Columbia, *The Modern Language Journal*, 85 (2001) 244.
- [23] Stipek, D. & Byler, P., Early childhood education teachers: do they practice what they preach? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 12 (1997) 306.

# Tại sao nên nghiên cứu niềm tin và nhận thức của giáo viên trung học phổ thông về việc dạy tiếng Anh?

Nguyễn Việt Hùng

*Khoa Ngoại ngữ, Trường Đại học Tây Bắc, Sơn La, Việt Nam*

Mục đích của bài viết này là biện luận về việc tại sao các nhà nghiên cứu lại luôn chú trọng đến việc tìm hiểu niềm tin và nhận thức của giáo viên đối với nghề nghiệp của họ. Bài viết được tổ chức thành ba nội dung chính: (1) xem xét lại các khái niệm liên quan đến tất cả các khía cạnh của niềm tin và nhận thức của giáo viên nói chung và giáo viên tiếng Anh nói riêng; (2) hiện trạng về dạy và học tiếng Anh ở các trường phổ thông Việt Nam; và (3) tầm quan trọng của việc nghiên cứu niềm tin và nhận thức của giáo viên tiếng Anh về chương trình sách giáo khoa và phương pháp giảng dạy.

*Từ khóa:* Niềm tin của giáo viên, nhận thức của giáo viên, dạy học tiếng Anh, dạy học dựa vào nhiệm vụ.