# Exploring Foreign Language Pre-service Teacher Beliefs:
# An International Exchange Experience

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## Abstract

This article explores the beliefs of two groups of students who teach and learn foreign languages at two major universities in Argentina and the USA. Specifically, it discusses how their prior beliefs and experiences shaped their teaching selves, and assesses the extent to which an international exchange experience about perceptions of foreign language teaching impacted their current beliefs. It is our contention that beliefs are "deeply personal and rooted in the culture and norms held by individuals and society" (Tatto & Coupland, 2003). However, this study has shown that pre-service teacher beliefs were fairly similar across languages and cultures. The article concludes with a set of practical implications for teacher education programs.

## Introduction

There are multiple factors affecting the education of current and prospective foreign language teachers (Bailey, 1996; Borg, 2003; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Huhn, 2012; Richards, 1998; Roca de Larios, 2002; Watzke, 2007), including their cognition and beliefs. These, in turn, are influenced by both past and present educational experiences. According to Tatto and Coupland (2003), teacher beliefs are "one of the most prolific areas of research in teacher education" (p. 123). However, few studies have examined pre-service teachers' beliefs and thinking in teacher education programs, which may be due to the fact that the construct is difficult to define.

Among the most widely cited studies on the topic are those by Nespor (1987) and Pajares (1992). The former has admitted that "we do not know very much about how beliefs come into being, how they are supported or weakened, [or] how people are converted to them" (p. 326). In turn, Pajares (1992) has stated that "understanding the belief structures of teachers and teacher candidates is essential to improving their professional preparation and teaching practices" (p. 307).

Although some studies have focused on exploring pre-service teacher beliefs before and after their teaching practicum (Ha Chan, 2014; Haigh, Pinder, & McDonald, 2006; Zhang, 2012), there is scarce research that focuses on investigating teacher beliefs in the context

of foreign language teacher education programs. In an attempt to bridge this gap, the purpose of this study was to investigate pre-service teachers' prior experiences in learning a foreign language, how their perceptions and prior experiences might have shaped their teaching selves, and how international exchanges about perceptions of foreign language teaching might re-shape their current beliefs.

## Conceptual Framework

There are many definitions of teacher beliefs in the education literature. According to Aguirre and Speer (2000), "beliefs are defined as conceptions, personal ideologies, world views and values that shape practice and orient knowledge" (p. 328). These conceptions and world views guide pre-service teachers' decision-making processes and ultimately determine everything that happens in the classroom, including choice of activities, materials selection, and handling of student errors, among others.

Researchers have pointed out that pre-service teachers "have deeply grounded beliefs and attitudes about teaching and learning and expectations about the role of the teacher formed on the basis of their extensive experience as learners" (Karavas & Drossou, 2010). This *apprenticeship of observation* (Lortie, 1975) describes the phenomenon "whereby student teachers arrive for their training courses having spent thousands of hours as schoolchildren observing and evaluating professionals in action" (Borg, 2003). Thus, it is believed that we teach the way we were taught or, at least, that "the obvious relationship between beliefs and teaching practices cannot be ignored" (Diaz Larenas, Alarcon Hernandez, Vasquez Neira, Pradel Suarez, & Ortiz Navarrete, 2013).

Some researchers have expressed that "the beliefs [pre-service] teachers hold are implicit, informal and embedded in their mental images of classroom practice" (Karavas & Drossou, 2010). In turn, others have stated that it is critical to develop an understanding of the structure of teachers' beliefs in order to enhance their educational experiences and professional development (Alarcon, Diaz, Tagle, Ramos, & Quintana, 2014), which can be accomplished by helping pre-service teachers identify and reflect upon their beliefs, as these can shape, influence and guide their classroom practices (Cabaroglu & Roberts, 2000; Diaz Larenas et al., 2013; Karavas & Drossou, 2010; Northcote, 2009).

Despite the evident link between teacher beliefs and practices identified in the extant literature, a more in-depth review of the literature revealed that few studies have explored the connection between beliefs and perceptions about the self, both as teachers and students, especially in teacher education programs (Northcote, 2009). In addition, few studies have focused on investigating the beliefs of in-service foreign language teachers (Graham, Santos, & Francis-Brophy, 2014) and pre-service foreign language teacher education majors (Alarcon et al., 2014; Diaz Larenas et al., 2013). Thus, the present study aimed to explore and identify the beliefs as foreign language learners, as well as personal beliefs about foreign language teaching, of two groups of students who teach and learn foreign languages at two major universities in Argentina and the U.S. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to investigate the following:

a) What were pre-service teachers' prior experiences in learning a foreign language?

b) What were pre-service teachers' perceptions about the teaching and learning processes in the foreign language classroom prior to the exchange?

c) What was the impact of the exchange experience on pre-service teachers' beliefs and perceptions about foreign language teaching and learning?

## Method

### Participants

Participants in this qualitative case study included students enrolled in two intact college Foreign Language Teaching Methods classes at two major universities, one in Argentina and the other in the United States. Undergraduate students pursuing a foreign language teaching degree at these universities are required to take the Methods course prior to their teaching internship. The four female participants at the Argentinean university were enrolled in a Methods class that was held once a week and focused on methods and approaches of teaching English as a Foreign Language to native Spanish speakers. On the other hand, the four female participants at the US university were enrolled in a Methods class that was held twice a week and focused on methods and approaches of teaching modern foreign languages, namely, Spanish, French and German, to native English speakers.

### Research Assumption

Following the methodological approach adopted by Diaz Larenas et al. (2013), the present study is based on the assumption that "beliefs influence the teaching practice" (p. 87) and therefore aims to explore if and how pre-service teachers' prior experiences learning foreign languages shape their beliefs about teaching and learning foreign languages.

### Instruments and Procedure

The pre- and post-survey questionnaires used in this study were adapted from Richards and Rodgers (2001) and Larsen-Freeman (2000). The pre-survey questionnaire administered before the exchange included open-ended questions regarding the following: pre-service teachers' past experiences as language learners, as well as their personal beliefs and principles about foreign language teaching and learning, including the teacher's role in the classroom, the nature of effective teaching and learning, the difficulties learners face and how these can be addressed, successful learning activities, as well as the structure of an effective lesson. The post-survey questionnaire administered after the exchange included open-ended questions regarding the following: (a) pre-service teachers' contributions to the international exchange; (b) what they learned as a result of the exchange in terms of the teacher's role in the classroom, the nature of effective teaching and learning, the difficulties learners face and how these can be addressed, successful learning activities, as well as the structure of an effective lesson; and (c) the impact of the experience on their current beliefs.

The exchange experience was conducted through Skype on two different occasions. During the initial exchange, students introduced themselves and described their past experience learning a foreign language, their teaching experience, and their motivation to become a foreign language teacher. In a subsequent meeting, they discussed their answers to the pre-survey questions and exchanged views on various topics, for example, teaching strategies used across languages, and difficulties encountered by foreign language learners of English and Spanish, among others.

## Data Analysis and Discussion

The data collected through the pre- and post-surveys were analyzed using NVivo in order to identify emerging themes in each of the categories in the surveys, which included: experiences as language learners, personal beliefs and perceptions about teaching, and personal beliefs and perceptions about learning.

This section summarizes the most important findings. Each of the three research questions that guided the present study is followed by relevant tables, which present the most salient themes that resulted from the data analysis. Finally, a short discussion connects the information in the tables with pertinent quotes from the participants.

### What were pre-service teachers' prior experiences in learning a foreign language?

When describing their experiences as language learners, pre-service teachers identified the themes listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1

*Experiences as language learners*

| Language learner difficulties | Types of learning activities | Structure of lessons | Students' role in the classroom | Teacher's role in the classroom |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Motivation | Translation | Grammar based | Passive | In charge |
| Listening comprehension | Vocabulary activities | | | Source of knowledge |
| Grammar | Communicative activities | | | |
| Communication | Grammar exercises | | | |

Regarding the first category that emerged in the data analysis, language learner difficulties, pre-service teachers expressed a deep concern for motivational factors, namely: "Since we were expected to complete grammar exercises in writing, many of the students lacked interest in the subject and only learned the rules by heart but were unable to remember them after a short period of time." Likewise, they manifested that "listening was hard because [they] didn't use to practice much," which is a common problem among

foreign language learners in general (White, 1998). Finally, they admitted to having had "[...] difficulties in matching gender and number, conjugations, and direct and indirect object pronouns."

In connection with the second category, types of learning activities, pre-service teachers claimed to have been mostly exposed to traditional grammar exercises and tests. In their own words, "most of the activities were drills focused on specific grammar points to practice each structure separately" and "we were evaluated on reading dialogues and translating them." Not surprisingly, they were not asked to engage in communicative activities. As one of them confirmed, "we had very few speaking activities."

With respect to the third category, structure of lessons, pre-service teachers said, "the teacher presented a topic and a text and then students completed activities." According to Richards and Rogers (2001), this was the typical structure of a grammar-based lesson, where the main focus was on presenting a given grammar rule and the students were expected to practice the new grammar point through controlled activities such as memorization of dialogues and drills.

Regarding the fourth category, students' role in the classroom, pre-service teachers claimed that "the role of the students was a very passive one and students participated in class only when they were asked to." In keeping with the grammar-based classroom, the students were expected to adopt a passive role and the teacher remained in control (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Thus, pre-service teachers' comments in connection with the fifth category, teacher's role in the classroom, identified the teacher as the main source of knowledge. In their words, "the teacher directly instructed students at the front of the class."

As evidenced from pre-service teachers' comments, there is a clear connection among the themes emerging from pre-service teachers' responses to the questions in this section. Specifically, the fact that teachers were in charge and the sources of knowledge in the classroom, while the students' role was passive and consisted in asking questions when instructed to do so is closely related to and reflected in the structure of lessons and the types of activities that students completed: focus on grammar and drilling activities, rule memorization, and lack of listening and speaking opportunities in the classroom, among others.

**What were pre-service teachers' perceptions about the teaching and learning processes in the FL classroom before the exchange?**

When describing their perceptions of teaching and learning foreign languages prior to the exchange, pre-service teachers identified the themes listed in Table 2 below.

Table 2
*Perceptions of teaching and learning foreign languages prior to the exchange*

| Language learner difficulties | Addressing language learner difficulties | Effective learning activities | Nature of effective teaching | Structure of lessons | Teacher's role in the classroom |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Self-confidence | Opportunities to use the language | Based on learners' needs and interests | Consider learners' needs and interests | Plan that includes: activation of background knowledge, introduction/ co-construction of new knowledge, guided practice, independent practice, closure | Consider learners' needs and interests |
| Applying what they learned Motivation | Error correction Encourage-ment | Focus on language function Promote learner autonomy and critical thinking | Recycling Inductive approach | | Source of input Foster learner autonomy and collaborative learning |
| Communi-cative skills | Opportunities for critical thinking | Authentic, real life, communi-cative | Input-rich learning environment | | Facilitator |
| Pronuncia-tion | Variety of activities | | Promote critical thinking and communi-cation | | Promote use of target language for communicative purposes |
| | | | Motivation | | |

Regarding their perceptions on language learner difficulties, pre-service teachers identified some of the main difficulties that students typically face, as was reflected in

such comments as, "in my experience, the main difficulty students face is pronunciation." Moreover, they discussed how these difficulties should be addressed and claimed that "[…] the best way [these difficulties should be handled] is practice," which is in keeping with the latest communicative teaching practices (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Concerning their perceptions on effective learning activities, their comments also reflected a strong preference for authentic, real life, and communicative activities, as was evidenced by such comments as, "learners should be provided with plenty of opportunities to use the language within appropriate contexts and situations, e.g. role-plays" and "successful learning activities are those which clearly reflect real life situations."

While discussing their perceptions on the nature of effective teaching, pre-service teachers claimed that teachers should "show [the learners] they can do it, celebrate their achievements, put their proficiency level in perspective," which again points to the importance of motivation. Moreover, they stressed the need to promote critical thinking and communication. In their own words, "students have to be engaged for effective learning to take place. The easiest way for this to happen is for teachers to incorporate the five Cs and the three modes of communication."

As regards their perceptions about the structure of lessons, pre-service teachers showed great appreciation for the lesson planning frameworks used, which was reflected in such comments as "PACE lessons are incredibly effective lesson/learning activities" and "the best lesson structure is the one that we studied: ARC. This consists of four stages: application, comprehension and clarification, and reflection." Thus, they were fully aware that they should resort to a coherent lesson planning framework that would link and develop all of the language skills (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Finally, concerning the teacher's role in the classroom, they admitted that teachers had to develop a different view of their own role in facilitating language learning. In their views, not only should "the teacher […] facilitate learning" but he/she should make real communication the focus of language learning.

Based on their responses, it was evident that pre-service teachers' perceptions of how foreign language teaching and learning should be structured differed considerably from what they described as their prior experiences learning the language, thus contradicting the idea of *apprenticeship of observation* put forward by Lortie (1975).

**What were pre-service teachers' perceptions about the teaching and learning processes in the FL classroom after the exchange?**

When describing their perceptions of teaching and learning foreign languages after the exchange, pre-service teachers identified the themes listed in Table 3 below.

Table 3

*Perceptions of teaching and learning foreign languages after the exchange*

| Language learner difficulties | Addressing language learner difficulties | Effective learning activities | Nature of effective teaching | Structure of lessons | Teacher's role in the classroom |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Writing | Provide opportunities for practice | Based on students' expecta-tions | Effective lesson planning | Include activation of background knowledge | Facilitator, guide, model |
| Pronunci-ation | Provide encourage-ment | Foster critical thinking | Active role of students in the classroom | Based on student learning outcomes | Not the only source of knowledge |
| Grammar | Use L1 to provide explanations | Useful and interesting | Based on students' needs and interests | Inductive grammar instruction | Promote learner autonomy and positive learning environment |
| | Provide strategies based on specific problems | Authentic material | | Practice | |
| | | | | Models | |
| | | | | Structured, organized logically | |

As shown by some of their responses, pre-service teachers' perceptions after the exchange did not differ significantly from their perceptions before the exchange. Not only did they talk about language learner difficulties, but they also discussed how these difficulties should be addressed. In their own words, "the difficulties are seen mainly in production. Students don't know how to speak, how to write." Thus, "teachers should focus on each learner's problem and teach him strategies and ways to tackle that issue."

Regarding effective learning activities, they further stressed the need to resort to authentic materials and tasks. Moreover, they emphasized the need to take students' expectations into account. As they put it, "If teachers are providing students with authentic materials and exercises, then both learning and teaching will be effective" and "knowing the aim of the students for learning the language narrows down many of the things to be done in the classroom to help the learner meet their expectations."

In keeping with the ideas above, pre-service teachers' comments concerning the nature of effective teaching focused on the importance of taking students' needs and interests into account, which was reflected in such comments as, "effective learning takes place when teachers consider and are sensitive to students' needs and interests. Because students will feel motivated to learn when the topics are interesting and are connected with their real lives." Once more, they also highlighted the importance of careful planning on the part of the teacher, namely: "Teaching and learning is a give and take process. It involves well-planned lessons from the teacher and being sure to have active learners in the classroom."

Regarding their perceptions about the structure of lessons, pre-service teachers admitted that there is no single lesson planning framework that has been universally accepted. Thus, "the structure of an effective lesson can be diverse and can change depending on what you are trying to teach. It should also vary but keep a similar structure so that students know what to expect [and] are also challenged to think in a different way." However, they emphasized that "lessons should be clearly structured and logically organized" if they were to be truly effective.

Finally, pre-service teachers restated that the role of the teacher in the language classroom should be that of a facilitator, who creates a classroom climate conducive to language learning and promotes learner autonomy, both in terms of the content of learning as well as the processes they might employ. In their own words, "teachers should be flexible" and "students should become autonomous and independent; otherwise, they would automatically stop learning when the teacher is not there."

**What was the impact of the exchange experience on pre-service teachers' beliefs and perceptions about foreign language teaching and learning?**

After the exchange, pre-service teachers expressed that they felt they were part of a community learning about similar issues, only in different educational and cultural contexts. For example, they claimed, "I enjoyed feeling the sense of community that came from the fact that we were learning the same methods." In addition, although they did not feel there was a significant change to the beliefs they already held about these topics and issues, they did state that the experience helped them realize that the strategies and approaches they were learning about could be applied when teaching other languages to foreign language learners. As some of them concluded, "I do not think that this experience changed my beliefs about foreign language teaching, but it did open my eyes beyond using the strategies we learned for just Spanish or French" and "it is reassuring and fascinating to think about the same strategies being used across the world and that they are effective across languages," "[...] most importantly, we exchanged ideas on what the best lesson structure to teach is, which also coincided with them. What we call ARC they call PACE, which is basically the same."

## Conclusions

As demonstrated by the results outlined before, pre-service teacher beliefs about teaching did not seem to originate from their personal experiences as students, i.e., they did not appear to teach or intend to teach the way they were taught; as one of them expressed: "we highlighted the difference between how we were taught in the past and how we are taught to teach currently." This contradicts an important concept put forward by Lortie (1975), namely *apprenticeship of observation*. In other words, there were significant discrepancies between the pre-service teachers' beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning versus their experiences as learners. For example, translation and grammar exercises were highlighted as part of their experiences as learners whereas authentic, real-life and communicative activities were mentioned both during and after the exchange.

Moreover, pre-service teachers did not simultaneously seem to hold beliefs that were inconsistent or in conflict with one another. Not only were their beliefs aligned with each other but also, and most importantly, with the field. For instance, both groups of students saw the teacher as a facilitator and the learners as active participants of the teaching-learning process. Likewise, they did not favor translation and communicative teaching practices at the same time.

Perhaps the most important finding was that pre-service teachers' beliefs did not vary across languages or cultures. Not only were they able to identify similar problems for foreign language learners, such as the use of prepositions, but they also stressed the importance of communicative teaching practices as well as the need to cater for students' interests. What is more, they found several parallels between the two lesson planning frameworks used, i.e., ARC (Scrivener, 1999) and the PACE model (Adair-Hauck & Donato, 2002).

No doubt, the teacher trainers themselves may have contributed to re-shaping the pre-service teachers' beliefs by mirroring and promoting good teaching practices. This was an important limitation to the study, which was conducted after all the methods and approaches had been compared, contrasted and critically analyzed. Apart from that, pre-service teachers' beliefs may also have been influenced by previous instructors and/or their participation in workshops or webinars. We must not overlook the fact that both groups of students had attended at least four other methodology-related courses before the exchange.

## Implications and Further Research

This study attempted to address a number of issues that were seen as relevant to a critical examination of how pre-service teachers' beliefs are shaped in foreign language pre-service education. Given the results obtained, teacher trainers are urged to make pre-service teachers' beliefs a concrete focus of teacher education programs.

As exemplified by the different nodes or categories that resulted from analyzing pre-service teachers' responses, their beliefs play a fundamental role: they "shape the instructional decisions they make and, in turn, affect their relationships with students" (Davis, 2006, p. 196). Moreover, pre-service teachers' beliefs influence teaching techniques and strategies, selection of instructional resources, as well as the structure of lessons, in effect determining what should be taught and how.

Given that teacher beliefs are so crucial in guiding their practices in the classroom, pre-service teachers should be encouraged to reflect upon and identify beliefs that conflict with current best practices in the field and reconsider them, as well as identify those beliefs that match these best practices and hone them. Many teachers engage in informal reflection about what goes on in the classroom at the end of each day, but a more formal approach to critical reflection needs to be adopted—reflection that is not only structured or guided but also consistently done throughout the course, i.e., "reflection-on-action (after-the-event thinking) and reflection-in-action (thinking while doing)" (Finlay, 2008).

Although it *is* time-consuming, without reflection pre-service teachers will never know if they need to change or not. Thus, they must be given the necessary time to reflect upon "how their personal and teaching identities affect their attempts to facilitate classroom interactions" (Davis, 2006, p. 212) and instructional practices.

Above all, teacher trainers must receive adequate training. If they intend to guide pre-service teachers and help them uncover their beliefs, they must be receptive to their needs. Not only must they be trained in areas such as effective teaching techniques, providing on-going and meaningful feedback to pre-service teachers, but they must also be able to reflect upon their own teaching practices and uncover the rationale behind them. This may require teacher trainers to answer a number of questions, such as those proposed by the Office of Faculty and Instructional Development at Qatar University (http://www.qu.edu.qa/):

- "What kind of classroom atmosphere do I create?
- What kinds of questions do I ask?
- Is my classroom spontaneous or is it predictable?
- Are my students involved?
- Why didn't a lecture go over well?
- Why did a lecture work?"  (p. 1)

Further research might look into the effect that reflection may have in changing or shaping pre-service teacher beliefs. Future studies may also compare and contrast pre-service teacher beliefs across other languages and cultures, particularly during the initial phase of training. More research into the nature of pre-service teacher beliefs at the beginning phase of training would be important for teacher educators in foreign language teaching education programs to train and equip pre-service teachers for their upcoming tasks and responsibilities as foreign language teachers.

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