

Teachers' Beliefs about Language Learning

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Key words : Teacher cognition, curriculum development, faculty development, teacher beliefs, semi-structured interviews,

In a summary of research on teacher cognition, Borg (2006) cites Clark and Yinger saying in 1977 that “A relatively new approach to the study of teaching assumes that what teachers do is affected by what they think.” This is a limited, and tentative investigation into the beliefs of language teachers at Shinshu University, through semi-structured interviews. The interviews suggest that teachers’ beliefs derive from their experience learning languages and go on to influence their practice. As well as considering the interviews themselves, we advocate the use of self-structured interviews for faculty development and curriculum development.

1. Method

Brierley and Ruzicka (2008) suggested that teacher interviews may provide useful information for general curriculum development both by feeding back teachers’ opinions about what curriculum goals there should be, and by disseminating ideas and techniques as to how such goals can be achieved. In addition, such interviews may, in themselves, be a useful experience for teachers by giving them the opportunity to reflect on their teaching practice. Another reason for interviewing language teachers may be to investigate a group of language learners who could be seen as ideal or model learners.

According to Pajares (1992), researchers are confident of the following assertions: “beliefs are formed early and tend to self-perpetuate even against contradictions caused by reason, time, schooling or experience” (p. 324); “belief change during adulthood is a very rare phenomenon” (p. 325); “beliefs about teaching are well established by the time a student gets to college” (p. 326). If this is true, and if teacher beliefs do influence teacher practice, it is likely that teachers will try to fulfil curriculum requirements in ways that cater to their own agendas, rather than following a curriculum that contradicts their beliefs. If teacher practice influences learning, as teachers sincerely hope, it behoves institutions to investigate the beliefs of its teachers to ensure that they are compatible with the curriculum.

Garton (2008) investigates the radically different belief systems and classroom interaction patterns of two experienced teachers, but finds both to be effective. She concludes: “Concepts such as ‘best method’ and ‘good teaching’ should . . . be abandoned in favour of the

recognition of diversity in teachers” (p. 83). She recommends that experienced teachers be aware of their beliefs in order to teach most effectively.

In this research we tried to follow the method of the semi-structured interview. Pajares cites Nespor’s view (1987) that while knowledge is stored as words, beliefs are kept in our episodic memory; in other words we may not necessarily say what we believe, and beliefs must be inferred from our thoughts and actions. Other advantages of the semi-structured interview are given in Borg (2006, p. 203) and more details can be found in Brierley and Ruzicka (2008). In designing the interview, we began with the subtext of “How do people acquire language?” and “What place does language acquisition have in the language classroom?” From these questions, we generated a list of 18 questions in 6 categories, similar to the questions in Borg (2006, p. 206). The intention was not for interviewees to answer each of these questions in turn, but for the questions to generate and prompt a conversation between interviewer and interviewee, both of whom are teachers and therefore valid subjects for our investigation.

A) Students

1. How do people learn languages?
2. How did you learn English/a foreign language?
3. Were/are you good at English/foreign languages?
4. Why are some people better at languages than others?
5. What is a successful language learner?
6. What do your students need?

B) Curriculum

7. Do you think language education in Japan is effective? Why or why not? In what way?
8. What curriculum goals should there be for English lessons?
9. What is the objective of English lessons? What outcomes do you want in your lessons?

C) Teachers

10. What do you do in class, and how does this help you meet your objectives?
11. Are there any skills that foreign language teachers need that other kinds of teachers don’t need?
12. How do you measure your success as a foreign language teacher?

D) Technology

13. To what extent can technology help foster language acquisition in language classrooms?
14. Should there be any limits on the use of technology in language classrooms?

E) Motivation

15. How important is student motivation in terms of foreign language acquisition?
16. What can/should language teachers do to help increase student motivation in the classroom?

F) Grammar

17. What do you think of grammar?
18. How do you think grammar should be taught?

2. Interviewees

For this research, we interviewed four university teachers, ranging in age from late thirties to mid-sixties and we consider data from three of these interviews. Subjects were chosen out of convenience, and we do not attempt to generalise our findings beyond these teachers. Rather we are interested in the kinds of beliefs they hold, where their beliefs might come from, and what kinds of teaching practice they may lead to. We should note, however, that each teacher is responsible for several classes and their beliefs and attitudes will likely affect over 100 students, so even the beliefs of a single teacher are worthy of consideration.

Each interviewee was at least tri-lingual. Teacher A is a native speaker of Japanese and Korean with English as a second language. Teacher B is a native speaker of Japanese and proficient in English, German and Latin. Teacher C is a native English speaker with Italian and Japanese. Two university teachers conducted the interviews. Transcripts have been modified slightly, including some punctuation and editing for clarity. Within the transcripts, pauses in speech are indicated by periods within parentheses “(.)” while words or phrases that have been removed are indicated with three periods within square brackets “[. . .]”. The interviews took between thirty and sixty minutes.

Throughout the interviews, several themes recur. As well as themes directly related to our questions: learning environment, study methods, Japan’s curriculum, goals, the role of the language teacher, classroom practice, technology, motivation and grammar, several comments could be categorised into literature, communication and culture. Let us first introduce the three teachers by looking at their experiences with foreign languages.

Teacher A

Teacher A did not enjoy English at school, apparently because she did not have a good teacher. “But after graduating from university, I became an independent learner, to pursue my purpose to go abroad and study [. . .] at university for my masters degree.” During this study, Teacher A used short-term objectives, such as the TOEFL or TOEIC tests, acting as extrinsic motivation to gain some tangible measure of her English ability. In her own study, Teacher A mentioned practicing dictation, practicing reading orally, and trying to memorize words and phrases. Teacher A’s overseas study may then be seen as a kind of immersion, in which the environment was critical.

Teacher B

Teacher B was exposed to foreign language and culture from an early age through her

father's work with UNESCO. She would write letters to children around the world, which he would translate. A student of English literature and a devout Christian, Teacher B's father also taught his children English songs and hymns. Teacher B began formal study at a junior high school, which, unusually at that time, employed a native teacher. Living close to a US military base in an area frequented by tourists, she had plenty of opportunities to speak English, which she made the most of. At university she went on an exchange programme to a US university, where she studied German and also Latin "because I thought foreign language study must be given in much better way in the States than in Japan." Teacher B's experience with language therefore included a domestic environment with exposure to other languages and cultures, and later immersion in a foreign country.

Teacher B says "my greatest motivation was the joy I got out of the conversation with the tourists." She also says: "I didn't have special interest [. . .] in talking English with foreigners before the formal English education."

Teacher B has a long association with literature: "my father bought me a small book two weeks after I was born." In the first grade of elementary school, he bought her a translation of King Lear from a series of literary classics aimed at fifth- or sixth-grade students, and she continued to read translations of literature from around the world. "The first book was so difficult, but gradually I was so interested in reading those series. That book cost 200 yen, and my pocket-book at that time was 200 yen so every month I was just waiting for the pocket money to be given and I went to the book store and bought one book every month and read and read and read. So gradually, foreign names or the names of the places (.) all those foreign languages came into my brain." Teacher B was exposed to English literature from the third year of her secondary school, which was a combined six-year junior and senior high school, "our school was kind of a higher level [. . .] in the fourth, fifth and sixth year, teachers really pushed to use side readers. So we did 'Happy prince' in the 4th year, and then Sommerset Maugham's "Rain" in 5th year [. . .] when I re-read that novel last year, I found 'wow that's something' I mean not just the English level, but the contents (.) did we really understand that? But it was interesting." She says later, "I read so many books. Not just King Lear (.) Robin hood, Les Miserables. I really wanted to visit France, Germany and all other countries." At University, "we were to read 1 book in 2 weeks and reading must be done by ourselves, but we had some pattern practice or pronunciation classes or conversation classes based on those materials read," and for the first-year homework assignment, they were to read a very thick paper-covered book, "which had 742 pages I still remember".

Teacher C

Teacher C studied French at school, from the age of 11, as was customary at that time. He was not bad at this language, although aware that other people were much better. He began studying Italian at university at the age of 18. This was much more successful for a number of reasons, firstly because it was much more intensive. As a student of modern languages, with

experience in one or two Romance languages, such as French or Latin, the university assumed that he would be able to learn the language. The most intensive parts of the study were stays in Italy among Italians, once an immersion experience.

Teacher C also mentioned his study of English literature as a benefit in studying Italian. He suggests reading in Italian was also essential to learning the language. At the end of his first year, he was told by a teacher, “you’ve got all the nuts and bolts, you can read more or less, [. . .] you’d better go and read about 30 novels over the holidays [. . .] that was his theory (.) if you read these 30 novels all the grammar will click into place.” Teacher C’s teacher used the analogy of learning to drive a car: “when you start to drive a car, you’re thinking about changing gear and looking at the controls all the time because you’re doing it consciously [. . .] you only really start to drive properly when you don’t have to think about changing the gears and the clutch. Once it becomes automatic then you can actually start to go.” In choosing these thirty novels, “they were not supposed to be [. . .] intellectually demanding [. . .] they were all established 20th century authors.” As well as not being too difficult, Teacher C says that the inclusion of dialogue was important “I think I was aware that would help with speaking Italian (.) bits of description as well, but they had a lot of direct speech.” This was not a unique feature of those 30 novels; the interviewer adds: “this is one great thing about fiction. A lot of students want to read non-fiction, but non-fiction does not have a lot of dialogue in it.”

For Teacher C also, language study “seemed like hard work. But I studied quite hard so I could do it more or less.”

3. Learning experience and beliefs

While talking about their experience learning foreign languages, the teachers also allude to, or reveal their beliefs. This suggests a connection between their own experience learning languages and their beliefs relating to language teaching.

Teacher A says “I still believe my English is not enough to smoothly communicate with other people also to talk about what I really want to speak, so still I am in the middle of the stage of leaning English.”

Teacher B

Teacher B mentions the intensity or frequency of study, for example the frequency of her English study at junior high school, or the very intensive English course at university with more than 20 classes a week—four or five hours of English lessons every day—for first-year students. This suggests a belief in the importance of intensity and frequency in language study.

Teacher B says her experience with reading “is why I think reading Japanese books are very important, also extensive reading [in English].” Teacher B mentions her own experience from reading about the world, in her native language, and generalises this to motivation, or lack of

motivation among people who have not had the same experiences: “I started to read so many books in the first year. So the names (.) or the names of the places or the names of something, they were not translated into Japanese, for example Mark or Elizabeth. So those English names came into my ear and they stayed in my brain so naturally, so I didn’t have any resistance or hardship in reading or memorizing the names or the human relationships. But if the students haven’t had any experience of getting to know the people named Mark or Elizabeth, it must be very difficult for them to make them stay in their mind or to have some imagination what Mark did or what Elizabeth said or something like that.” She also relates her experience teaching English to school children: “I found that some children whose family members have no interest in foreign culture, they never speak the words, I mean English words or even foreigner’s names or foreign places’ names. Then, they are so slow in catching English words. Those words do not stay in their brain. But once you are introduced to those words or notions, then you can get these words easily.”

Teacher B mentions culture in her motivation to study German. “Unconsciously I got so much interest in German people and German culture through my father’s UNESCO activity. He had a friend, a German lady in Berlin. She often wrote him letters and sent him photos. I saw the pictures she sent, and I was a child but still I thought Germany was defeated just like our country but why could she wear such a beautiful dress?”

Teacher C

Mirroring Teacher B’s mention of frequency of study, Teacher C mentions the ineffectiveness of low-frequency language exposure: “there was a French woman in my Primary school on and off, but it didn’t make any difference.”

Teacher C talks about people who were good at languages at his school: “I was aware of people at school who were better than me, but they were a bit geeky. The sort of people who would get a kick out of memorising vocabulary and they didn’t seem to ever forget it. So they were very good at tests. They were good because they were good in school and they were good at tests.”

Teacher C recounts experiences at around 16 at school with a French tutor: “we used to go off, three people once a week or once every two weeks and have a session [. . .] It was excruciating, because none of us could speak. But there was one [student who] was amazing, he could just ramble on, unstoppably, I think it was just because he’d spent a lot of family holidays in France or (.) I don’t know how he did it (.) he could do it. So I just felt quite inadequate but I couldn’t speak.” This is likely the same for many of students of general education classes, for whom English is not a subject of choice.

Teacher C seems to have taken to heart his university teacher’s analogy of learning to drive a car for learning a language through reading. Like Teacher B, Teacher C draws a connection between his own experience of reading and his interest in extensive reading as a language-learning methodology. “When I got interested in Extensive Reading a few years ago,

that's when it clicked, because I'd done that."

Teacher C talks about the connection between literature and language teaching in the UK, saying that "people who teach [foreign languages] are not really interested in language—they would be in the linguistics department—they're interested in literature. Learning a language is simply a vehicle (.) a means to an end [. . .] you learn [language] so you can read the books and then incidentally because you read the books you get the language, so you get two shots at it. You get this conscious learning approach which you have to do to begin with because you can't read the language really, but that's very intensive and short-lived and once you've got through that, which is a bit painful, then you can start reading and then you get into the second phase of it where you just read read read (.) it enforces all that grammar stuff that you might then have forgotten if you hadn't done all the reading. It's like conscious learning followed by a more acquisition-type unconscious learning."

4. Beliefs

In many instances, teachers reveal their beliefs directly. Teacher A says students "have to know better strategies to learn language. Because people have different preferences when they learn languages (.) for example some people prefer verbal practice while other people enjoy reading silently, so I think that one of the key factors is to meet a good teacher or a good adult." As well as the possible role of teachers to "guide and to help that person to be a better learner", for Teacher A "we have to have a good role model as a learner. So if students admire their teachers, they may enjoy communicating with the teacher."

Teacher A thinks English grammar is not easy for Korean and Japanese people, and she admits to not being good at it. However, she hints that grammar may not be so important, from her previous experience when she worked "as a researcher for a medical devices company and translated a lot of protocols and some technical reports. And then, English used for such documents was very simple, no, like, past present continuous or some other complicated grammar. Very simple future, present and past." She goes on to say that the grammar of her first language, Japanese, is also difficult. She suggests that what is difficult is not necessarily the grammar itself, but the terminology that must be used to learn about grammar "learning about the grammar was very difficult because there were some technical terms used. But we cannot avoid learning those words for example for Japanese language, *renyoukei* or some technical term. Also for learning English, they have to learn about, for example *kankeidaimeshi*. So the grammar problem is not mainly about grammar, but to understand the technical terminology."

In assessing Japan's language education, Teacher A identifies the problem of time: "Firstly I think most of all the university ask their students to take an entrance exam before coming to university, so among all the subjects, English is one of the important subjects, but they just start learning English from their junior high school days, and I think that is too late for kids to

learn English.” She adds: “If they can learn English more frequently at school, they might be able to power up their knowledge of English [. . .] I think that English curriculum should be drastically changed.”

Teacher A relays her recent experience of motivation and frequency from another classroom: “I’ve been teaching English at elementary school as a volunteer teacher. My class is first graders. They quite enjoy learning English, but, during one semester they only study one English lesson with me, and then next semester, when I see them, they tend to forget everything.”

Teacher A mentions the living environment in answering the broad question of how we learn language, and when asked why some people are better at languages than others, she suggests, “probably the environments they are raised in are very good for learning languages (.) for example if you lived abroad or if you had a parent who spoke different languages, then you will benefit from such an environment I think.” Teacher A also mentions communication and motivation in the classroom environment, saying that her students “quite enjoy lessons because now English classes are one of the best environments to communicate with other students.”

Teacher B

In Teacher B’s own experience, the final year of high school was dominated by grammar lessons and special drills as most of the students wanted to go to university. She comments on her later experience: “teachers [of German in the US] are not very good at teaching grammar. This is a funny thing; every time I asked the question ‘why do you use accusative case in the sentence?’ then the German teachers said ‘Oh you always ask that kind of question. Why? I don’t know but you just memorize the usage.’ In a way that was correct.”

Teacher B mentions the importance of the teaching materials, “To have them interested, of course the content of the textbook is very important.” She agreed with the interviewer that if the teacher does not find the textbook interesting, the students will certainly not find it interesting. But she also feels the teacher is responsible for this motivation: “how the teacher explains or how the teacher introduces those topics (.) our attitudes, or sometimes our voices or rhythms or our facial expressions, all are very important.” She also stresses how graded readers can be motivating: “If the students can enjoy reading books, even the small books in our extensive reading, then the curiosity or the joy can push them forward.”

Teacher C

In Teacher C’s words: “you can’t learn a language without wanting to.” Teacher C talks of the challenge of language learning in university general education: “the question is time. What can you do if your time budget is very [limited]? Can you do anything worthwhile at all?”

Despite the notion of language learning being hard work, Teacher C does not think it is necessarily difficult: “the sense I get often is that people think that learning a language, say

English, is a difficult cognitive process (.) that it requires difficult thought processes (.) you have to be clever or something which I don't think is true at all [. . .] It's the opposite (.) learning a language is actually very, very easy but it just takes a lot of time." He also says, "to make language learning academic is strange in a way, because language learning is an incredibly social activity, naturally."

For Teacher C: "I think the problem in Japan is there's a huge number of learners who really do just completely give up and they just have such a negative experience." "What's difficult about Japan is that people do invest a lot of time, it's just the wrong kind of practice." He also cites a talk by Stephen Krashen saying that it is "not necessary to learn a foreign language very early, because when you're older you can learn much more quickly because you have all this background knowledge of the world that you can bring to the whole process. And late learners can learn just as well as early learners (.) it's just different."

In relation to curriculum goals, Teacher C talks about the "zero tolerance attitude" of his teachers who "expected us to be able to read anything." He suggests a standard that may be very high for language students in general education: "the idea of not being able to read anything completely for total 100% understanding, relatively quickly, means that you've not got far enough. You've sort of failed."

Teacher C comments: "I think tests are a waste of time. It's not teaching, is it." His first impressions of language teaching in Japan was that "people were testing rather than teaching."

Teacher C broadens the scope of English classes: "A lot of the university [English] classes will be translation into Japanese, which is a valid thing to do, as long as you recognise that it's a Japanese class as much as it's an English class, which is fine."

Teacher C contextualises students' note-taking abilities into the changing needs of students from the "you-tube generation". "I know in the UK people will turn their lectures into podcasts and some now do videos and once you can film anything and easily put it online, why does anyone need to take notes any more?" The interviewer suggests that the "point of taking notes is that writing down is a very good way of remembering things, even if you write it down and throw it away." Teacher C suggests that memorizing and note taking may be much less important when information can quickly be found on the internet: "with our students they are a different generation, it's quite hard to persuade them to take notes and write things down when they don't have to." Teacher C contrasts comprehensive photocopies provided by some teachers with his own experience: "when I was in lectures, it was exhausting, because for an hour you'd be taking notes, but," he notes, "it meant that you worked out how to organise what you were listening to simultaneously and you had to listen and write at the same time, so you had to listen very intensely." Teacher C also reports students using their mobile phones to take pictures of homework assignments written on the board, and suggests this may be "a shift as big as in the Middle Ages when people started to read silently for the first time (.) people only read out loud and a lot of people wrote by dictating; speaking was the same as writing."

5. Learning and Practice

In many cases teachers relate their beliefs to classroom practice. We could interpret this as evidence that beliefs and practice are intertwined. Alternatively this may be seen as teachers trying to justify their beliefs by projecting them into their own activities. A future study could include some investigation of actual classroom practice to more objectively describe teacher practice. Using the data available, we shall consider their comments about their own practice, including any goals that they set or wish to set.

Teacher A

For Teacher A, “one thing which is really different from the other subjects is that language is our (.) one of the attributes of human beings. Although the purpose of learning foreign language is learning that language, we also have to give better opportunities for students to have better communication skills.” To improve these communication skills, she often organizes group activities and presentations in class, or gets students to play different roles, for example the leader’s role, speaker’s role or listener’s role.

In defining goals, Teacher A calls for some standardisation. “Both quantitative and qualitative goals should be clearly defined.” Teacher A says that students “need more opportunity to use the foreign language and then if there are more opportunities to learn and use the language (.) I think they need to have some theoretical bases and motivations first, but they also need a practical way of using the language to output what they know and what they have learnt.” Teacher A stresses the importance of thinking in English. “The four skills of languages tend to be stressed very much—reading, listening, speaking, writing—but I think we have to enhance students’ thinking ability in English. Of course, the four skills of the languages are very important, but [. . .] generating more abstract concepts in English could be an important thing I think.”

Teacher A believes that “Students can learn language by writing a story or writing their opinion. Not only practicing writing one short sentence but also writing longer stories or sentences.” She says, “Japanese schools should start teaching writing from junior high school, for example teachers using ‘there was’ ‘there are’, they created a very scary story, ‘once upon a time there was a castle and then there were two girls...’, and then they quite enjoyed writing a story.” Also, for 2nd year junior high school students, “when I finished teaching present past, then they wrote opinions about the atomic bomb, and students could write very good sentences using passive, ‘the bomb was dropped’. They can write their opinion, for example ‘I think peace is important’. Not many students are given such opportunities to practice writing at junior high school, and then they suddenly start writing long sentences in university and they don’t know what to do.”

Teacher A also raises the notion of respect for students: “we should not under-estimate student ability. My students are usually false beginners [. . .] they didn’t have chance to meet

good teachers or good text books. But I think if I give the right path for the students, we can guide students in a better way [. . .] they have been learning English for more than 6 years, but still we can lead them to the right track to learn English [. . .] just giving the fun atmosphere is not enough I think.”

Teacher B

The exchange below indicates both the beliefs and practice of Teacher B, as well as reminding us of her experience learning language.

Interviewer: How can we make students more motivated?

Teacher B:: Sometimes I tell them how important the English skills or English knowledge will be in their future, or how they can broaden their world, or how...

Interviewer: Do you think they believe you?

Teacher B: I don't know. But when I tell them my own experiences in America or in Europe, they just raise their faces and stare at me with interest and curiosity, so I think they are interested.

For Teacher B, the goal of English lessons is “To have pleasure in getting to know people.” This may endorse the social function of the language class, echoing Teacher A's comments about communication. Teacher B says, “I'm confronting the students as a human being, I want them to react to me also as the human being.” She considers her teaching to be communicative, “even though I'm teaching grammar or rules.” Teacher B applies similar affective goals to reading: “I want them to find fun or pleasure of reading something written in English.” Teacher B says that if a student finds a goal, he or she studies very hard without any advice from the teacher. This corresponds to her view that “as a language teacher, I want to give the students, first of all, interest in the language they are learning.” Teacher B also suggests broader goals relating to personal development, saying she wants to give students “a chance to think about themselves using either in Japanese, also in the language they are learning.”

When asked how grammar should be taught, Teacher B says, “Idealistically, I think the repeated study by yourself will help you most. But it is difficult to acquire all the grammatical knowledge by yourself.” She suggests that in learning grammar, “reading books help the most. [. . .] but without any grammar knowledge, it is impossible to read the books written in German, French or English at first. But even if you know the grammar knowledge, it does not guarantee that you can read the book. The most important thing is to find a very interesting book and once you get interested in it, even though you will struggle, you will try to find out the meaning.”

Teacher C

Teacher C talks about “creating a social experience in the classroom, and if the students enjoy interacting with one another within the context of an English lesson, then presumably

they come out of it feeling more positive than they might.”

For Teacher C, “what can go wrong is that you can give them a sense that they can’t understand it, they can’t do it, which is what a lot of them probably think already: they’re failing to do something, a lot of students have the idea that they’ve failed to learn English. If you can remove that sense (.) or distract that sense of failure.” He also says, “what [native teachers] do here a lot of the time is try to work against the fact that students just don’t like English and they don’t like it because it’s been an exam subject so they try and make it fun.” He cautions that this may not be enough: “the students probably do have fun, but that’s probably all they have.”

Teacher C suggests teachers “look at ourselves not as language teachers, but as communication teachers [. . .] maybe they’re drawing more on their Japanese than their English, but whatever they’re doing, they’re still communicating. And the university increasingly [. . .] values that. [The] emphasis in the Faculty Development on group work is all coming out of a sense that students aren’t able to communicate well enough when they graduate.”

Teacher C talks about correcting student papers: “What makes that process really difficult is the intellectual work of trying to decide which rules you’re going to correct for, because if you correct everything, you’re working at a really high end of subtle rules and you’re editing something as if it was for publication, which is pointless really [. . .] if you were going to correct anything, you should only correct the very simple rules that they have learnt, or should have learnt, in some kind of codified form. Even then [. . .] it’s probably pointless.”

Teacher C discusses the problem that students are writing at a much more difficult level than they can read at. “If we’re asking them to write things that are more difficult than the level at which they can read, it’s not going to work, which is why [. . .] they have to copy stuff. [Also, translating] is probably quite an ingrained habit with a lot of students. How do they stop?”

Teacher C comments on students using the target language in class, “I think you have to resign yourself to (.) the actual time that they’re going to have that input is quite limited. But it’s worth paying that price to maintain the atmosphere and to keep things positive and to keep them enjoying it. I could just stand there for 90 minutes and speak slowly so they understand what I’m saying and give them 90 minutes of comprehensible input, but a lot of them would just fall asleep.”

6. Learning experience, beliefs and practice

In a couple of cases, teachers’ comments link their beliefs both to their own learning experience and their practice as teachers.

As well as culture being important in her own experience, Teacher B suggests cultural awareness as an important language goal: “I want to give them great curiosity or interest not

just of the language they are learning but the whole cultural (.) the field in which those languages are spoken. In case of English I want them to have great interest in American culture or English culture, Australian culture or Asian culture. Not just the grammar.” She says later, “before teaching foreign languages, I think the most important thing is to make them have some kind of curiosity or interest in the culture of that country or people, otherwise it is useless.”

For Teacher C, “Learning grammar is something that should happen outside the classroom because you can just read it for yourself [. . .] grammar’s something that can be written out on the page in a way that makes it pretty much accessible without a teacher. You don’t need a teacher to explain it to you. If you need someone to stand in front of you and take you through it, you’re lazy.” This comes from his impression as a student that the teachers looked upon him “as a professional linguist. You’ve done this training in school and you’ve learnt how to learn languages so they didn’t have to waste their time explaining grammar to you. They would have seen that as pointless. Why would you want them to explain grammar? You just get yourself a book. It’s in the book, you don’t need someone to explain that.”

Teacher C also believes that there are limits to what can be accomplished by studying grammar textbooks. “With English, say the definite article, you’d need a grammar book as thick as a phone directory.” Teacher C says that with all languages, “there are some very simple rules and some very subtle and complicated rules. We can get the basic rules down in a text book. But we can’t get all the subtle and difficult ones down—I mean linguists are still working at them now—the only way you can get those rules, the subtle, complicated end of it, is by doing lots of reading. Your brain can get them, they can be programmed in.” The interviewer continues, “there are a lot of rules that we can pick up very easily but would take hours and hours to explain.” Teacher C goes on to talk about people who are very good at writing. “How do they get so good? It’s not because they’ve learnt rules [. . .] they have a definite code [. . .] that their brain has acquired, and they haven’t acquired it by reading the rules as rules, they’ve acquired it unconsciously by reading.”

7. Practice

In a few cases, teachers are simply talking about teaching practice. Teacher A mentions the importance of understanding students’ needs. “Every time I finish one semester, I conduct a questionnaire from students.” Design of future semesters is then based on the PDCA process: plan; do; check; act. Teacher A says that trying new things is an important part of language teaching, and if she were not interested in teaching language, she would probably do the same things again and again. “I continuously have to communicate with my students when I design my lessons. If I lose such enthusiasm then that will be a big failure for the teacher I think.” Teacher A also says teachers must develop flexibility to deal with students.

Teacher C

Teacher C says that teachers need social skills to manage class dynamics. He also mentions communication skills, including, in the case where the target language is used as the classroom language, the ability to simplify what they're saying, so the class will understand, and to gauge whether the message has been understood. This can amount to thirty conversations taking place simultaneously, and can be quite tiring.

Teacher C also says "part of the skill of teaching is knowing when to interject and maybe speak for 90 seconds or something so they get the input and they get it in some kind of meaningful context because you give them a task to do, and then when to leave them and get out of their face and let them go back into their social mode again. The act of teaching is juggling, moving between these modes and knowing when to move from one to another without tiring them out."

"The important thing is to keep everyone engaged," says Teacher C, "and that the people who are listening are really listening." He suggests "ways to trick them into listening: get them to [. . .] make notes or answer questions about what they're listening to. They are listening better than otherwise." To see if the teacher has been successful, he suggests: "If you think that for them the 90 minutes has gone really quickly, then it was probably a good class. If the last 40 minutes were a real drag, it probably wasn't that good. That's the kind of thing I aim for which probably isn't really that academic. Presumably a lot of people, whether they're conscious of it or not, that's the kind of approach they take."

8. Teacher interviews and faculty development

While the intention was for semi-structured interviews, in which the questions lead to discussion, due to time constraints among busy teachers there was sometimes a tendency towards structured interviews, in which interviewees gave brief replies to each question. More expansive answers to fewer questions may have revealed more about teachers' beliefs and practice. A clear weakness of this research is the lack of a clear direction and a focus for the questions. However, the strength of semi-structured interviews also lies in their ability to follow the interviewees as they define for themselves what their own beliefs are.

Semi-structured interviews can generate a considerable amount of information helping researchers, curriculum developers and the teachers themselves discover the hows and whys of teaching and learning. In the context of faculty development, in an environment where the majority of teachers either work part-time or are primarily interested in non-pedagogical research areas, an important issue is time. Each interview took up approximately an hour of the interviewee's time, an hour of the interviewer's time, three or four hours for transcription and perhaps another hour for analysis.

One possibility for reducing the time is a paired teacher discussion. This could be seen as a semi-structured interview with no interviewer. Two teachers would be given a list of questions

to discuss and their speech recorded. Interviewer time would be reduced and data on two teachers would be obtained with little more transcription than a single semi-structured interviewer. In addition, this approach would remove potential problems with the semi-structured interview centring around the question: “who does the respondent think the investigator is?” (McCracken, 1988: 25). The interview is, by its nature, a hierarchical speech event in which the interviewee must answer the interviewer’s questions. The interviewee may see the interviewer as a representative of the institution and responses may be constrained or embellished in line with the institution’s perceived policies. A paired teacher discussion would be more egalitarian and teachers may be freer to express opinions. Another issue with interviews is transparency and the extent to which research aims can be made explicit without the researcher jeopardising the chance of meeting these aims. In a paired discussion, we can explicitly state that we are trying to establish teacher beliefs and we hope the teachers would share this aim. There is a potential problem with such an approach as there is no interviewer to guide the discussion back on topic if it strays. This kind of discussion may also work as a kind of peer review, especially if linked to observation of classes (similar to stimulated recall interviews, Borg, 2006: 209).

To improve the design of this interview, questions on technology and motivation may be expanded and used in separate interviews. More focus could then be given to the teacher’s own experience and opinions relating to language acquisition. Additional questions that may be fruitful in interviews on language acquisition came out during some of the interviews, for example: “How is first language learning and second language learning different?” and “What do you think of the textbook you are using?”

10. Conclusion

Using relatively little of teachers’ valuable time, these interviews have produced three pictures integrating how teachers acquired a foreign language, what they believe about the language process and how they teach language. For example, culture played an important part in Teacher B’s exposure to foreign languages, and it has become a goal in her own classes. Reading was critical in both Teacher B and Teacher C’s language learning, and they both advocate extensive reading for their students. For Teacher A, the school learning environment and teachers seem to have been inadequate and she took control of her own language learning when it was important to her. She now emphasises motivation and showing students the way to learn. This may be seen in a negative way: that her beliefs and then teaching practice have been shaped by trying to compensate for what was missing in her own experience of the education system. Similarly Teacher C’s desire to avoid students’ feeling of inadequacy and failure may go back to feelings he had studying French at school.

The teachers we interviewed expressed or implied some of the following beliefs, which are not necessarily compatible with each other:

- Motivation is essential for language learning.
- Reading extensively is the best way to learn a language.
- Interest in the foreign culture should precede language teaching.
- Frequency of study is essential.
- Students must study grammar on their own.
- Teachers should always be trying new things.

Research suggests teachers' beliefs are unlikely to change. Teachers will not modify their beliefs to fit into the curriculum, rather they will interpret the curriculum to suit their existing beliefs. Conflicts or contradictions between teacher beliefs and the curriculum may lead to frustration for teachers and failure to meet goals, or teachers may simply become more resilient and better at navigating around obstacles in the curriculum.

In this paper, we have demonstrated that the semi-structured interview is a powerful tool in investigating teacher cognition. We hope future interviews and discussions can be carried out to the mutual benefit of teachers and the institution, in developing more effective curricula, more satisfied teachers, and a deeper understanding of the mystery of language learning.

11. Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Sayuri Uchikawa and Kenta Omae for assistance in the laborious task of transcribing the interviews and Dr. John Adamson for invaluable advice on the semi-structured interview. Our deep appreciation also goes to the anonymous interviewees who gave up their valuable time to help with this research.

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31/ Jan. / 2011 Received 7/ Feb. / 2011 Accepted