

The Effect of the Past on the Present: Cook Islands Teachers' Perceptions of Language Teaching

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In many countries where English is taught as a second language, the majority of the language teachers are NNS (non-native speakers) of English. Little research based on the experience of NNS teachers in a Pacific Islands context seems to be available. This article explores the knowledge, beliefs, and insights of three Cook Islands teachers and the generative role that their language learning histories play in their approach and practice to English language teaching. Their own English language learning experiences (in both formal and informal contexts), as well as their community's responses to English language, have clearly affected these teachers' language teaching philosophies and practices. These findings give rise to considerations necessary when planning future initiatives aimed at improving language teacher practice.

Keywords: teachers' beliefs, language teaching, education, NNS (non-native speakers), teaching practice

Introduction

Teacher's theories, beliefs, and insights are important as they have been shown to play an important role in many aspects of teaching and teacher decision-making (Ellis, 2006). English language teachers are but one group of educators for whom this is true. However, little research that privileges the voices of NNS (non-native speaker) English teachers working in their own countries is available (Hayes, 2009). This study seeks to contribute to the redress of this imbalance.

Given the complexity of the job of a teacher and the multiplicity of factors influencing them in their work, teachers draw on knowledge, beliefs, assumptions, and insights in their decision-making processes (Ellis, 2006; Woods & Cakir, 2011). This article focuses on the explanations and commentary given by Pacific Islands NNS of English teachers with respect to their practice of teaching English language.

The Importance of Teachers' Theories and Beliefs

According to Clark and Petersen (1986), the process of teaching involves two major domains: (1) teachers' actions and their observable effects; and (2) teachers' thought processes. Teachers' thought processes occur inside teachers' heads and are therefore only observable indirectly. They can be categorized as follows: teacher planning, teachers' interactive thoughts and decisions, and teachers' theories and beliefs. These thought processes can be described individually, but interact with each other. Teachers' theories and beliefs derive from an amalgam of sources and inform teacher decision-making. It is important to consider how the knowledge, theories, beliefs, and insights that teachers hold affect their practice, as there is considerable evidence that this occurs in significant and sometimes unexpected ways. "Beliefs and attitudes are not only reflected in (teacher)

decisions and actions, there is evidence that teachers' beliefs and attitudes drive important decisions and classroom practice" (Renzaglia, Hutchins, & Lee, 1997, p. 361).

It is generally agreed that beliefs are formed through a process of enculturation and social construction (Pajares, 1992). Enculturation includes the assimilation by individual observation, participation, and imitation of all the cultural elements present in their personal world. Therefore, beliefs are formed over a period of time within the context of the individual and seem to be difficult to change. Because these have a filtering effect on thinking and information processing, their effects need to be considered. Borg's (2001) description of a belief is useful in the context of this study when she writes "...a belief is a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by the individual, and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further, it serves as a guide to thought and behaviour" (Borg, 2001, p. 186).

Burns (1992) described English language teachers' beliefs as complex and interrelated. Sources of beliefs are wide-ranging but include teachers' personality factors, as well as their experience of what works best, and the established practice within a teaching institution (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). These sources also include the individual's own experience as a second language learner referred to by Lortie (1975) as the apprenticeship of observation. Language learning is an important contributor to professional practice and it has been shown that "experiential knowledge formed by (language) learning forms a powerful resource underpinning ESL (English as a second language) teachers' professional knowledge and beliefs about language teaching" (Ellis, 2006, p. 1). The teachers in this study are all NNS and bilingual and are likely to be affected by their own English language learning experience.

Context of the Study

The context of this study was the work of teachers in Rarotonga, Cook Islands. Cook Islands is a self-governing country (in free association with NZ (New Zealand)) in the South Pacific, comprising of 15 small islands (total land area of 241 sq. km²) scattered over approximately two million sq. km² of ocean. Rarotonga is the main island in the group with a population of approximately 8,000. Cook Islanders are Polynesians and speak either a dialect of Cook Islands Maori, Pukapukan and/or English. Cook Islands Maori is the first language of almost all Cook Islanders. Most teachers in the Cook Islands have learnt the English language during their own schooling or whilst living in NZ or Australia.

An additive bilingualism model is used in Cook Islands' schools to promote bilingualism (Herrman, 2005; Mangubhai, 2002). Most schools deliver instruction in their own island's dialect until students reach grades 3 or 4, so early literacy is established in the children's own first language. English is then introduced gradually over grades 5–8 until English becomes the medium of instruction at high school level. In Rarotonga, a few schools deliver most or all instruction in English.

A qualitative naturalistic-interpretive piece of research was completed in which three Cook Islands' teachers were invited to share their understandings and perspectives on English language teaching through participation in semi-structured interviews. The approach had a focus on understanding the meaning of events had for those teachers, congruent with an indwelling orientation. This approach values context and it recognises that the understanding of a phenomenon in all its complexity occurs within a particular situation and environment (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Data were examined by recursive readings and tentative commonalities were documented. By grouping these, over-arching themes, and key ideas were identified.

Three teachers were involved: Mata, Tu, and Tama (pseudonyms). They were identified as excellent

language teachers by their school principals.

Mata was a secondary English teacher in her 50s who was teaching English to 13-18 years old in a secondary school on Rarotonga. Mata was born and educated in the Cook Islands. Her mother worked as a servant to expatriate New Zealanders in the 1960-1970s. Mata was awarded a scholarship to travel to New Zealand to complete her secondary education and train as a secondary school English teacher. After returning to the Cook Islands, Mata taught in a range of schools.

Tu was a woman in her mid-twenties, teaching 6-7-year-olds in a primary school on Rarotonga. Tu was born in Rarotonga and raised by her grandparents (a common practice), learning Cook Islands Maori as her first language. She struggled to learn English at school but was successful in her studies and completed a three-year teacher education programme in Fiji and Hawaii. She taught in her own village and so she had intimate knowledge of most of her students and familial connections with a number of them.

Tama was a teacher in her 30s and described herself as ambitious in her teaching career. She was born in Aitutaki (a small outer island with a population of approx. 2000). Her schooling was spread between Aitutaki and NZ. She trained as a teacher through the locally provided two-year teacher education programme in Rarotonga and had taught in Aitutaki, coming to Rarotonga to commence in a one-year teaching position before the research commenced. As an outer island teacher, almost all of Tama's life experience had been in an environment where Maori was the normal medium for communication and where English, although taught in schools, was not the language of village life.

Findings

The three teachers discussed wide ranging issues to do with their language teaching in the Cook Islands. There were surprising commonalities in the themes that emerged as a result of analysis, and in particular, the impact of their English language learning experience was often raised when teachers explained and justified their methods of teaching. All quotes in the findings section below from the teachers Tama, Tu, and Mata are sourced from Edwards (2003).

Nature, Status, and the Use of Languages

All the three teachers strongly believed that Cook Islands' children need to be proficient in Cook Islands Maori. They recognized that culture and language are linked and talked about their own identity as Cook Islanders.

It is a way of identifying an individual... that is the only way to identify yourself—through language. Without language how can you have a culture? You have got to have some sort of language to see everything would link with language or the other way round. Language and culture are everywhere. (Tama)

Mata talked about her upbringing when there was a policy in place that meant Maori was not allowed to be spoken at school.

We were forced to speak English. I came through a school system where no Maori was allowed... we were punished for speaking Maori... you got punished. You had to go and weed the garden you go and clean the toilet, pick up the leaves. It was never-ending. It is what I can remember about Maori speaking... smacked on the thing, go outside and pick those... go outside and pull those bloody weeds, or collect the rocks off the stadium. (Mata)

The teachers talked about this policy at length. They recognised that it was very hard on children, but they also attributed the better level of English fluency in older Cook Islanders (such as respected politicians) to this

policy. They all felt that the relinquishing of the “No, Maori spoken at school” policy resulted in students having a poorer grasp of both languages.

English was seen as the language of power and of the future by all of the teachers interviewed, so they took their jobs as English language teachers seriously. They felt considerable pressure from parents to prepare their children for the global workplace, which meant prioritising English. However, at one level, they spoke of their desire to resist ongoing colonial influences, especially from overseas language experts who advised their country leaders on language policy. For example, when discussing the approach of a NZ, language expert working in a school on an outer island, Mata said:

Speak more Maori?... I was quite insulted and I felt offended because he was telling me to speak more Maori... I got beaten by my local teachers for doing something natural (speaking Maori while a student at school) and here I have this foreigner telling me in my own... that is how I felt. I really was. I am just bitter because here is this foreigner telling me to speak in Maori when I live here... I can speak the language. Who is he to tell me that I should my own, that I should practise? (Mata)

There was an obvious tension for these teachers caused by their recognition of English as a language of power in the Cook Islands, in contrast to their personal beliefs about the importance of their first language.

Language Learning Process

The teachers interviewed in this study had strong views about how English language was learnt and how it should be taught. They linked their identified features of language teaching to their own experiences as language learners.

Importance of language input. All three teachers placed a heavy emphasis on providing good input for English language learners. They each recounted a number of stories from their own experiences of learning English, and linked these to their classroom decisions as teachers.

A model, you know, someone who speaks good English... and then, um, copy it. I think that was... I would say that that was the best for me, although when you were at school you tried to imitate the... you know the teachers and it was not until I left for NZ I realized that I actually spoke like some of my teachers... and I made the same mistakes as my teachers. (Mata)

Mata felt that she was able to learn a lot from listening to the way that NZ mothers spoke to their children when she moved there on scholarship as a secondary student. Tama recounted her language learning experiences when she was moved to NZ as a 9-year-old with no English. She discovered what she could learn by reading, and she talked about the way she read all the shop signs on her way to and from school. She saw this input as vital to her learning. Tu (2003) talked about how she wanted to be able to be friends with the English-speaking expat children, and how she would sneak away to listen to these children speaking in English. Based on their own experiences, all three teachers emphasised the need for a teaching environment that is saturated with English language input, in order to help children learn the language.

Just full surrounding environment with language, words. Surround them, let them see, hear, read... all the senses of... you know, of the language. (Tu)

Evidence of English was visible in the learning environments set up by these teachers, e.g., posters displayed in English, books, and music.

Need for phonics. Both teachers working in the primary sector (Tu and Tama) were adamant that a phonics based system worked best for teaching English. They had learnt to read and write Cook Islands Maori

and English through a phonics-based approach during their own schooling. With the emphasis on phonics came a parallel emphasis on the use of language drills.

Definitely phonics. Phonics, the alphabet recognizing, the structure of sentences a lot of oral, just oral speaking... (The most important first things are) sounding. Sounds. Phonics I mean. Yeah. Recognition, yeah, very important. (Tu)
So after all those things... you have to drill it in for you to remember them. (Tama)

Place of reading. Reading was identified as having an important role in the learning of English. Again, the teachers recalled their own English language learning experiences, and the centrality that reading played in this.

I always remember being told off for reading stupid books when I was about twelve or thirteen, and of course the more I was, you know, reading, the more I got told, the more I read them... out of sight of course. Yeah, but ah... I have actually learnt quite a lot of new words and phrases and expressions... um ... sometimes I marvel at the way some of these authors describe human emotions. It is incredible how they describe... some of them. (Mata)

When Tama talked about her classroom priorities, she similarly recalled the importance of reading in her language learning experience. She read shop signs and beginner books, and then more advanced material.

Reading helps in fluency. It had made me really fluent in English. I got read in class, after school, in break... and it helped me more fluent in my language. (Tama)

Both Mata and Tama believed that reading could play a part in extension of vocabulary and language skills.

Every time when I talk to someone I always remember some of the sentences in books I have read. Maybe you try to be more sophisticated in your language. (Tama)

So because of the benefits, each of these teachers gained from reading they placed high priority on structured reading programmes in their classes.

Focus on grammar. Mata felt it was unimportant to teach formal grammar in her English classes. She felt that if she modeled English accurately, then her students would similarly pick up the grammar they needed. This stemmed from her own experience of being able to pick grammar up from the language she heard around her when she moved to NZ.

When I got there (NZ) I thought they spoke a different tongue... language... oohh it was wicked... no wonder we... you never seen anyone cry so much... we wept and just wept... the whole place was so alien...

I found that the children talking to their parents was one of the... easier way I could... picking up grammar, correct grammar, and correct pronunciation... because when some mothers repeat words then we have got the correct pronunciation... and I was very aware of that. That is what I preferred and I guess that is what led me into teaching. (Mata)

Mata said she saw grammar as something “picked up” during the process of language acquisition and felt that it was unimportant to spend class time on grammar. She said she would not plan a grammar lesson by choice, but was sometimes forced to because of the syllabus she had to use.

Mata and Tama believed that grammar should not be an important focus in school, whereas Tu thought it was important. It is interesting to note here that both Mata and Tama largely learnt their English as a result of an immersion experience during their adolescence, whereas Tu learnt English more formally through schooling in the Cook Islands.

The Place of Motivation

All three teachers believed that Cook Islanders are naturally good language learners, but that there are specific barriers that they need to overcome in order to realise their potential.

At a younger age children catches it, you know, learn languages easily. I think the Cook Islands' children are doing pretty good learning both languages. (Tama)

All three teachers talked in depth about the need for motivation from Cook Islands students who wanted to become fluent in English. Each related their own successful language learning experience to the fact that they were determined to learn. Mata talked of her upbringing by her mother who was a servant for an ex-pat family, and how she did not want to follow in her footsteps.

I always maintained I have got to be able to speak in English, not so much as a house girl but just so I can feel slightly better than these blooming ex-pats.

Mum felt comfortable as a servant and you always had that impression of servitude instilled because there were four of us girls and umm... but I was determined I was not going to be and I thought that, well that one of the ways I could overcome was to speak their language. (Mata)

Tu was also very motivated to learn English, even though she admitted to struggling with the subject at school.

But then when we take off—me in my corner with my friends, we want English... she or he is determined English... I am. (Tu)

The ex-pat students in Rarotonga gave Tu motivation to learn English. Tu believed that motivation and determination meant that learners would eventually reach their language learning goals.

Tama recollected her horror in being placed in a “special needs” class when she arrived in NZ, and her determination to learn English in order to be able to get out of that class! Since then, she has worked hard to improve her English as she commented several times on the way language can be used to project an image.

Anyway, I hear a lot of people say that to me, “Ohhh”, my accent sometimes comes like American, you know, a bit of a twang. You have got to give your language a style. (Tama)

Learner readiness was also discussed in relation to motivation. Teachers felt that learners are not always ready at the same time, and that means that they have to be patient and wait for some children. Tu compared this to her difficulties in learning English when she was younger, and added that when the time for learning is right students will learn.

... it eventually comes out. (Tu)

However, teachers saw conflict between what is seen as best practice in second language teaching (establishment of literacy in L1 and implementing an additive bilingualism model) and the pressure from parents and community members to have earlier introduction of English in schools.

The Challenge of Risk Taking

Because of the cultural norms in Cook Islands, it can be difficult for children to take risks with their learning. As the participants described, this is because people are likely to make fun of children who make mistakes. All three teachers spoke about this with a certain amount of emotion, as they reflected on their own experiences. They spoke about put-downs being common practice of teachers, as well as amongst people in the general community.

... even some teachers would umm laugh at the... humiliate the kids when they make mistakes and of course umm

that sometimes we speak in English and then we do not know the English word for a certain thing... We punctuate it with Maori and away we go. It is the humiliation, embarrassment... you know generally Polynesians are timid and shy... generally. (Mata)

Tu conceded that what happened outside the classroom was beyond her control and she felt that sometimes criticism directed at children by parents did little to encourage learning or risk-taking in children. Tu knew she was limited in what she could do to combat this, except encourage the children to take a positive stance. The effects of criticism meant that children were often shy in class and unwilling to speak in English for fear of being laughed at. The teachers all saw that one of their key roles was to make sure the learning environment was positive and safe for children. When talking about risk-taking, the three teachers all mentioned their personal characters—They saw themselves as risk-takers and being resilient. However, they also saw that many of the learners that they worked with did not have the personal strength to deal with put-downs.

Affective aspects. Teachers in this study spoke with emotion when describing their own language learning experiences. The affective aspect of the language learning experience should not be overlooked when considering NNS. Affect is an important in the area of teachers' conceptions of subject matter, and in their approach to teaching (Burns, 1992). This aspect was especially obvious when the teachers talked about their need to support learners to take risks in class. In the case of NNS who learned English within a colonial setting another layer of "feeling" was evident when they saw language linked to colonial practices.

Discussion

The teachers involved in this study were successful NNS language teachers. Their views are valuable in providing some insight into how Pacific Islands NNS teachers think about their language teaching practice. All three teachers identified specific significant experiences in their pasts that impacted their learning of English, and which continued to influence their decisions as teachers. They identified their own experiences as learners both in formal and informal settings (including a phonics-based learning system), and their use of input (especially modelling and reading) as reasons for their approach to teaching and learning. They attributed few of their teaching practices to their initial teacher education, but were instead informed by their own language learning experiences.

The findings of this study demonstrate that teachers' personal life experiences have a direct impact on their language teaching decisions through the development of their theories, beliefs, and insights. The "apprenticeship of observation" described by Lortie (1975) influences the formation of knowledge, theories, beliefs, and patterns of action that language teachers accumulate. So, the mix of the teachers own observation of language teachers whilst at school, plus their experience as NNS learners have contributed to the complex store of knowledge, theories, beliefs, and insights from which they draw when working as English language teachers.

The late-exit transitional model for bilingualism promoted through Cook Islands national education policy was reinterpreted by these teachers through their own experiences as language learners. This study found that the impact of their past experiences was strongly reflected in these teachers' decisions about how to teach English.

Implications

This study shows how early learning experiences lead to theories, beliefs, and insights that teachers

develop and later draw on when approaching their own language teaching. Findings complement other studies which focus on NNS teachers (Ellis, 2006).

Teachers' experiential knowledge as well as their cultural background and history give them perspectives from which they base their decision-making. Any professional development programme put in place for NNS language teachers needs to take cognisance of the effect the teachers' past language learning experiences on their theories and beliefs about language teaching and learning. Proper acknowledgement needs to be made of these theories, beliefs, and insights. The strong impact of early language learning experiences and influence of context on teachers' beliefs make it clear that professional development programmes may have limited success unless the theories, beliefs, and insights lying behind teachers' decision-making are uncovered.

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