

## **Reconceptualizing Teacher Knowledge and Belief based on Social Constructivism**

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### **I. Introduction**

All educational settings, but particularly language teaching contexts, demand preservice teachers to accommodate themselves to discipline-specific language and culture (Hawkins, 2004; Oprandy, 1999, p. 123). For the accommodation to be successful, Oprandy (1999) asserts that preservice teachers need to explore their personal connection to teaching in depth prior to their actual teaching experience. In other words, it is crucial for preservice teachers to discover not only who they are as professionals but also who they are as persons in order that they do not fail the accommodation process. Thus, teacher-educators' prime role is to help preservice teachers develop awareness<sup>i</sup> and attitude, and provide ample opportunities to explore their individual "Self" (Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999; Mori, 2003). This assumption, however, may augment teacher-educators' concerns regarding the way of differentiating and balancing the focus on knowledge and belief in teacher education programs.

Since the early 1990s, numerous studies have been conducted to clarify teacher knowledge and belief (S. Borg, 2003; Smith, 1996). In such studies as well as in actual teacher education settings, teacher knowledge and belief have been vaguely defined and separately conceptualized.<sup>ii</sup> Drawing upon social constructivism,<sup>iii</sup> this article, therefore, makes an attempt to reconceptualize teacher knowledge and belief and examine some rationales underlying traditional as well as current approaches to English teacher education in the TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) field. This is an argument in support of the applicability of a social constructivist approach to English teacher education.

## II. A Social Constructivist Approach to English Teacher Education

In light of the social constructivist view of knowledge, Schram (2003) and Schwandt (2001) argue that people's interpretations of phenomena are not always subjective; we sum up or average our interpretations, constantly comparing and contrasting them with reference to those of other people. It can be said that one's interpretation of phenomena is basically intersubjective (Schram, 2003; Schwandt, 2001). Such an intersubjective nature of knowledge further implies that the constant testing and modifying of previously constructed knowledge (i.e., firm beliefs) should be done "in light of new experience" (Schwandt, 2001, p. 30).

Because a social constructivist approach is based on the premise that teacher knowledge is a socially-constructed experiential entity, teacher education needs to entail the process of negotiation among preservice teachers (cf., Ellis, 2006; Hawkins, 2004). Thus, a social constructivist approach to teacher education necessitates teacher-educators to develop awareness-raising activities in which the process of negotiation among preservice teachers can be promoted. In the negotiation process with others, preservice teachers can share biases and prejudices about English learning and teaching, reflect upon their interpretations and perspectives, and possibly generate some change in their teaching practices. Such negotiation processes are constructive and reciprocal in nature (Au, 1990; Clark & Peterson, 1986). Preservice teachers are thus required to work constructively with others (including teacher-educators) to generate meanings in context, determining what is true or preferable in a particular English learning or teaching setting. In doing so, they are expected to discover who they are as persons and who they are as professionals. If applied properly, a social constructivist approach, particularly its epistemology, empowers preservice teachers to explore their individual, authentic "Self" in depth. Furthermore, as will be demonstrated, the social constructivist view of knowledge also enables teacher-educators to reconceptualize teacher knowledge and belief from different angles.

## III. Traditional and Current Approaches: Training vs. Development

Today's ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher-educators put much emphasis on the developmental aspects of teacher learning (Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 2001): teacher education in ESL settings is implemented with the focus on the process of teacher learning (e.g., Freeman, 1989; Gebhard, 1990; Gebhard &

Oprandy, 1999; Johnson, 1999). On the other hand, most EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teacher education programs in Japan have been criticized for emphasizing the product of teacher learning (i.e., the acquisition of teaching skills and pedagogical knowledge) (cf., Nagamine, in press-a; Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004). It seems that the renewed conceptualization of teacher learning currently observed in ESL teacher education has not been realized or reflected upon in EFL teacher education. Before reconceptualizing teacher knowledge and belief, let us now touch upon a controversial dichotomy between teacher training and development, for debates over the dichotomy between teacher training and development center around a new perspective to see teacher knowledge and its relation with the knowledge construction process.

Teacher education through training is based on the presupposition that all preservice teachers are trainable. They often receive discrete, decontextualized knowledge or skills to master by the end of training. They are also instructed in such a way that they can accomplish the acquisition of predetermined skills through “imitation, recitation, and assimilation” (Britzman, 2003, p. 46). Thus, the outcomes of such teacher learning are evaluated by teacher-educators on the basis of externally observable and often quantifiable teachers’ changes in terms of competence or performance. Quantifiable changes are generally a one-time event; when training ends, such quantifiable changes are likely to end as well.

There are a number of limitations in the training-oriented approach (cf., Johnson, 1999). For instance, Richards (1989) points out that the training-oriented approach is rooted in the assumption that preservice teachers are deficient. In addition, Johnson (1999) claims that what they acquire through training is “inert knowledge”<sup>iv</sup> (Whitehead, 1929 as cited in Johnson, 1999, p. 8). According to Bailey et al. (2001), the preservice teachers cannot rely upon this type of knowledge when their extemporaneous action is needed in context-specific, problem solving situations (cf., Dewey, 1997; Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999). Moreover, in the educational literature, Britzman (2003) adds that the training-oriented approaches underestimate preservice teachers’ capability of “changing or constructing knowledge” (p. 46). This view of preservice teachers’ capability has changed over the last few decades in the TESOL field, and a new view serves as the backbone for both theory and practice in current ESL teacher education.

Teacher education through development is based on the presupposition that all preservice teachers can develop attitude and awareness to change or reconstruct acquired knowledge and skills at their disposal (Freeman, 1989; Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999; Johnson, 1999). Preservice teachers are thus led by teacher-educators to gain awareness through various contextualized activities so that preservice teachers can begin the processes of “reflection, critique, and refinement” (Freeman, 1989, p. 40) of teaching practices and independent decision-making (Gebhard, 1984, 2005). Because they are often internal and invisible, the outcomes of such teacher learning, as well as expected changes in teacher beliefs and teaching practices, are not always observable or quantifiable (cf., Freeman, 1989; Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999; Johnson, 1999). Furthermore, since teacher education through teacher development initiates career-long teacher learning, some changes in preservice teachers’ awareness may occur over time (Freeman, 1989). Richards (1989) asserts that if teacher education is to equip teachers with “conceptual and analytical tools” (p. 83) and direct them to continual growth and development, the training-oriented approach to teacher education is not sufficient. Freeman (1989) claims that both teacher training and development are thus necessary in teacher education, preserving the term “education” as “the superordinate” (p. 37) that embraces both training and development.’

#### **IV. Teacher Knowledge and Belief**

Richards and Farrell (2005), among others, indicate that the prime goal of teacher education is to help preservice teachers achieve a career-long professional development. Rather than emphasizing the acquisition of teaching skills and pedagogical knowledge, Japanese EFL teacher-educators need to focus their attention on developing preservice teachers’ awareness and attitude for a successful, career-long professional development (cf., Freeman, 1989; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Johnson, 1999; Richards, 1989). To achieve this prime goal, however, such nebulous terms as teacher knowledge and belief should be reconceptualized so that teacher-educators can approach teacher education from a different angle. As previously implied, the social constructivist view of knowledge helps us in this regard.

In traditional training-based approaches to ESL teacher education, teacher

knowledge was conceived as external, quantifiable knowledge that could be transferred to preservice teachers through training (cf., Johnson, 1999). This view stemmed from epistemological influences of applied linguistics (e.g., empirical research on second language acquisition) (Mori, 2003). In this view, preservice teachers were considered, so called “blank slates” (Johnson, 1999, p. 18; see also Pinker, 2002); external knowledge and skills were expected to be imprinted in them through training (cf., Johnson, 1999). As Bailey et al. (2001), Britzman (2003), Freeman (1989), Johnson (1999), Johnson and Golombek (2002), and Richards (1989) argue, this view clearly had drawbacks in terms of the quality of teacher education.

Recently, this traditional view has drastically changed: teacher knowledge is now regarded as an internal, socially-constructed experiential entity (e.g., Britzman, 2003; Ellis, 2006; Golombek, 1998; Hawkins, 2004; Johnson, 1999; Johnson & Golombek, 2002). This new view allows teacher-educators to value preservice teachers' agency in constructing or reconstructing knowledge in context (Au, 1990; Britzman, 2003; Sharkey, 2004). In contrast to the traditional view of teacher knowledge, as evident in training-based approaches to ESL teacher education, teacher knowledge is seen as an entity that is closely connected with one's “personhood” (Mori, 2003, p. 14) and is reconstructable throughout one's professional career (cf., Bailey et al., 2001; Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999; Johnson, 1999). Thus, Almarza (1996), Fanselow (1997), and Sharkey (2004) advocate that even preservice teachers are considered to have already acquired such personalized, socially-constructed experiential knowledge when they start learning to teach.

Teacher knowledge, according to Johnson (1999), includes subject matter knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge (i.e., general knowledge about teaching), pedagogical content knowledge (i.e., teachers' understanding of the relationships between content and pedagogy), and knowledge of context (i.e., context-specific knowledge that teachers use to serve learners in a particular context). Johnson argues that all types of teacher knowledge are inseparable from teachers' prior experiences, values, and individual goals and thus, teacher knowledge can be defined as a combined form of experiential and professional knowledge deeply rooted in teacher belief (cf., Golombek, 1998; Johnson, 1999; Johnson & Golombek, 2002; Mori, 2003; Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004). Therefore, it

can be said that teacher's "received knowledge" (Ellis, 2006) from academic sources, when highly personalized and internalized by an individual teacher, becomes one's firm belief, which in turn shapes and forms received knowledge further (Nagamine, in press-a, in press-b).

From the social constructivist view, there is no clear-cut distinction between teacher knowledge and belief (cf., Woods, 1996). This point may be exemplified by the definition of teacher knowledge proposed by James (2001): teacher knowledge is defined as a set of beliefs, understandings, and assumptions that evolve further through teachers' learning and teaching experiences (cf., Britzman, 2003; Tann, 1993). Based on the work of M. Borg (2001) and S. Borg (2003), the term "teacher belief" can be defined with reference to the other literature (e.g., Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Richards, Gallo, & Renandya, 2001) as follows:

- (a) A context-specific proposition unconsciously or consciously held by a teacher in relation to the individual's teaching;
- (b) It is evaluative and emotive in nature, in that it is personally accepted as true or preferable by an individual teacher;
- (c) It guides teacher's thinking, action, and further sense-making of learning and/or teaching experiences; and
- (d) It is always reconstructable as a teacher interprets or reinterprets one's learning and/or teaching experiences.

The list above shows major features that collectively represent a possible conceptualization of teacher belief. This conceptualization embraces personalized, socially-constructed experiential knowledge (e.g., Almarza, 1996) as well as teachers' pedagogical beliefs (e.g., Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999; Golombek, 1998). Furthermore, teacher knowledge and beliefs can be reasonably taken as "a problem of interpretation" (Britzman, 2003, p. 23). Drawing upon social constructivism, teachers' personalized, socially-constructed experiential knowledge can be regarded as teachers' firm beliefs (cf., Au, 1990; Woods, 1996).

According to Johnson (1999), teacher belief is formed by the "accumulation of experiences" (p. 30). It is structured by episodic memories of prior learning and/or teaching experiences (M. Borg, 2001; Pajares, 1992). Thus, it is necessary for teacher-educators, as well as for preservice teachers, to understand what their

beliefs are and how they are formed or shaped in, or outside of, teacher education programs because their beliefs affect the processes of (re-)construction of knowledge and overall development as professionals (Nagamine, in press-a, in press-b). Johnson (1999) thus describes that teacher belief functions as a filter “through which teachers make sense of new information about teaching” (p. 30). When preservice teachers engage in the sense-making process of new information (i.e., knowledge), what they consider as true or preferable comes into play and determines the knowledge construction process (cf., Johnson, 1999; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004). Stated another way, it is the teacher belief that determines the overall quality of teacher development (Nagamine, in press-b).

Some crucial characteristics of teacher belief have been identified in the past. Nespor (1987), for example, claims that teacher belief is affective and evaluative in nature. Johnson (1999) adds that since teacher belief is deeply rooted in prior learning and/or teaching experiences, this particular cognitive entity is likely to create images that control, and sometimes restrict (cf., Bailey et al., 2001; Johnson, 1999; Lortie, 1975), teachers’ instructional practices, thinking or reasoning, and perceptions in classrooms (M. Borg, 2001; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Richards, 1998; Richardson, 1996).

As previously argued, teacher knowledge and belief are intricately intertwined; they are both meaning-driven and thus, there is no clear-cut distinction between them, especially when we draw upon the framework of social constructivism (cf., M. Borg, 2001; S. Borg, 2003; Grossman, Wilson, & Shulman, 1989; Verloop, Van Driel, & Meijer, 2001). The crux of the matter, however, is that teacher belief plays a crucial role in determining the overall quality of teacher development. Richards et al. (2001, p. 41) summarize the interrelationships between teacher belief and teacher development as follows:

- (a) Teacher belief plays a central role in the process of teacher development;
- (b) Changes in teacher’s practice are the result of changes in teacher belief;  
and
- (c) The notion of “teacher change” is multidimensional and is triggered by personal factors as well as by the professional contexts in which teachers work.

Much of the literature on teacher belief has shown that this particular cognitive entity in question should be examined in relation with teachers' action or behaviors in real teaching situations (e.g., Au, 1990; Clark & Peterson, 1986). Basturkmen, Loewen, and Ellis (2004), M. Borg (2001), Nespor (1987), and Pajares (1992) all agree on this point, alerting to the great impact of teacher belief on teacher's spontaneous reasoning and decision-making, affect, and overall behavior. To capture and understand the changes on development processes manifested in teacher learning, it is thus necessary for preservice teachers to explore and examine their beliefs about language teaching and learning (see Nagamine, in press-a). In their year-long qualitative study, Sato and Kleinsasser (2004) remark on the lack of such opportunities given to preservice teachers in Japan.

## V. Concluding Remarks

Teacher-educators in English teacher education programs are now expected to help preservice teachers develop awareness and attitude; preservice teachers are required to explore their individual "Self" in relation with their socio-culturally situated knowledge and beliefs. Although the main role of teacher-educators is recognized as such, there have been growing concerns about the way of differentiating between and balancing the focus on knowledge and belief in teacher learning. One of the major reasons might be that two entities (i.e., teacher knowledge and belief) have been vaguely defined and separately conceptualized. On the basis of these observations, this article reconceptualized these two aspects of teacher cognition (i.e., teacher knowledge and belief), drawing upon the social constructivist view of knowledge and knowledge construction.

Teacher-educators can focus primarily on teacher belief when they approach English teacher education because it is the teacher belief that determines the overall quality of teacher development. Nevertheless, Bailey et al. (2001), Gebhard and Oprandy (1999), and Johnson (1999) report that it is hard, if not impossible, for preservice teachers to realize how much influence they have been receiving from their own beliefs: even if one can identify what kind of belief he/she possesses, it is difficult to change such "epistemic beliefs" (Johnson, 1999, p. 38) or their overall belief structure. As previously implied, however, a social constructivist approach to teacher education enables teacher-educators to develop and implement some awareness-raising activities in which preservice teachers can



engage themselves in the negotiation process, which is essential to enhance reflectivity and generate change in their beliefs and practices (e.g., Nagamine, in press-a).

There are, in fact, a number of practical options available. In education literature, for instance, Collay, Dunlap, Enloe, and Gagnon (1998) advocate the idea of developing learning circles among preservice teachers. They explain practical as well as theoretical issues in depth. As for ESL/EFL teacher education, recent works of Richards and Farrell (2005) and Gebhard (2006) detail the procedures of alternative collaborative awareness-raising activities. Furthermore, to date, albeit the number is still limited, both qualitative and quantitative studies have been conducted to elucidate the knowledge (re-)construction processes, the nature of teacher belief, and its transformative development processes (e.g., with the use of collaborative teaching journals) within the framework of social constructivism (cf., Cole, Raffier, Rogan, & Schleicher, 1998; Gebhard & Nagamine, 2005; Matsuda & Matsuda, 2004).

### Notes

- i The author's understanding of "awareness" is in line with Bailey, Curtis, and Nunan (2001), who claim that there are levels of teachers' consciousness composed of four different stages: Global Intransitive Consciousness, Awareness, Metaconsciousness, and Critical Awareness. Thus, the term "awareness" should be taken here as transitive consciousness, which consists of attention and focusing on teaching; this is the level where teachers begin to pay particular attention to and focus themselves primarily on teaching practices.
- ii S. Borg (2003) reports sixteen different terms that have been used to signify teacher knowledge and belief over the past decade (cf., Ellis, 2006).
- iii In general, there are two strands of social constructivist thought. One strand is regarded as a strong version of social constructivism, which denies any ontology; the other is regarded as a weak version, which does not deny other ontologies. The author's use of social constructivism is in concordance with the second strand that accepts other fundamental ontologies (cf., Schwandt, 2001).
- iv This term refers to the knowledge understood and/or produced by learners, but not to the extent where the knowledge can be utilized for effective problem solving outside the classroom (i.e., the inert knowledge problem).

A number of studies have shown that traditional approaches to instruction (such as readings, lectures, and demonstrations of key points which focus on declarative and procedural information) often produce inert knowledge (e.g., Bransford, Franks, Vye, & Sherwood, 1989).

- v Although the focus on development is critical, Gebhard (2005) notes that the idea of development needs to go beyond the idea of improvement.

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