

Influencing pre-service teachers' beliefs and practices: a case for an experimental teaching experience

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Abstract

Previous research has indicated that experience is a more effective tool than theory in changing the teaching beliefs of prospective teachers. This qualitative case study includes the perspectives of stakeholders of a teacher training programme in order to determine the influence of its practical components on pre-service teachers' beliefs and practices. The qualitative study corroborates the findings of earlier studies that showed the limited impact of theoretical knowledge, but also shows that even a comparatively limited experiential component can have a substantial influence on pre-service teachers' beliefs and practices. Additionally, the study includes a number of implications for teacher training curricula.

Keywords: teaching belief; teaching practice; pre-service teacher; teacher training; experiential learning.

1. Introduction: A Changing Educational Context in Flanders

This paper presents a qualitative case study in the Dutch-speaking region of Flanders, where the monolingual, monocultural classroom has become a thing of the past and a mixed-language student population has become the norm (Agirdag 2009; Van Avermaet 2012). During the same period, however, teaching practices have remained quite fixed. Dutch as a second language is just sketchily mentioned in theoretical classes on language didactics and not a required part of the teacher training curriculum. Moreover, transmission teaching is still the norm and innovative practices are the exception, even though innovation is what is called for when dealing with the multilingual context of heterogeneous groups (Vieluf et al. 2013). By and large, Flemish teaching practice has not kept pace with societal changes (Agirdag et al. 2014). One could wonder then, to what extent teacher training is able to prepare aspiring teachers for the multilingual classroom of today and to deal with the increasing need for teachers familiar with second language acquisition and cultural diversity in the classroom.

2. Context of this Study

In Flanders, the training that prepares aspiring teachers for the classroom encompasses both bachelor-level vocational programs and master-level specialization courses, called SLOs (*Specifieke LerarenOpleiding*, literal translation: Specific Teacher Training). An SLO is a one-year program for which universities have a large degree of independence when designing their curricula. This study is set in the context of one SLO in Flanders, but for reasons of confidentiality its name has been replaced with the pseudonym *Flemish University*.

Since 2009 pre-service teachers of Dutch at Flemish University can sign up to achieve 20 hours of the 60 hours compulsory teaching practice by teaching during workshops of Dutch for Academic Purposes (hereafter: DAP workshops) for the student population with Dutch as a second language (hereafter: L2 students). These DAP workshops form an opportunity to experiment with innovative pedagogic approaches and second language acquisition. Every DAP workshop has fifteen to twenty L2 students and is led by four pre-service teachers (hereafter: PST), allowing the larger group to be divided into four smaller ones. The student-teacher ratio has been kept small to stimulate meaningful interaction (Blatchford et al. 2011) and to allow for a didactic flexibility that benefits not only the

Following abbreviations will be used throughout this paper (in alphabetical order): DAP (Dutch for Academic Purposes), IST (in-service teachers), HSLO (head of the teacher training programme), L2 (second language or non-native speakers of Dutch), PST (pre-service teachers or teachers in training), SLO (*Specifieke LerarenOpleiding*, literal translation: teacher training specifically for Dutch).

stronger but also the weaker learners (Hattie 2005; Harfitt 2012). Since the L2 students attending the workshops have a clear goal – i.e. communicative mastery of the academic idiom in an academic context - the DAP workshops have adopted a task-based approach. Task-based language teaching focuses on interactive practice (Ortega 2007) based on learner needs (Long & Norris 2000; Van den Branden 2006). Examples of typical tasks include taking class notes based on video recordings of their classes; formulating hypotheses, based on scientific observations within their field of interest and writing a formal e-mail to a member of the academic staff. Additionally, the relaxed, communicative atmosphere serves to reduce any sense of hierarchy between the L2 students and the PSTs (Busch 2010; De Mets 2013).

The DAP workshops serve first to assist L2 students in strengthening their academic linguistic skills, and would still proceed without the involvement of pre-service teachers. During the PST's collaboration in the DAP workshops, they work together with two mentors to shape every aspect of the workshops, the only prerequisites being communicative language teaching and learner-centeredness. The PST's receive weekly feedback on the material they produce and on their didactic approach by the mentors and by their peers.

3. Literature on Learning to Teach: A Matter of Practice

Being a teacher requires more than passing on factual information as it also means balancing one's didactic and subject-specific knowledge with beliefs, contextual sensitivity and experience (Scheerens 2007), and translating those facets into educational practice (Basturkmen 2012, Sato & Kleinsasser 2004). Learning to be a teacher means changing perspectives. It means critically questioning one's own beliefs and it implies integrating new skills, rules and knowledge and making them one's own. Simply receiving useful information is not enough to stimulate this dialectic process, since new information does not become actual knowledge until it is internalized. In fact, there does not appear to be a direct relationship between the information that is offered and the way the recipient interprets that information (Timperley et al. 2007). Similarly, Woods & Çakır (2011) argue that new information offered during teacher training is not simply absorbed, but is weighed against existing beliefs in a self-validating dynamic that accepts belief-reinforcing knowledge but rejects information that contradicts existing beliefs (Kagan, 1992; Cabaroglu & Roberts 2000; Mattheoudakis 2007). Consequently, without offering prospective teachers a chance to practice and reflect on teaching, it does not appear possible to transform information into knowledge or instil new pedagogic insights into the minds of prospective teachers (Putnam & Borko 2000; Timperley et al. 2007).

The findings from the aforementioned literature has major implications for the theoretical component of teacher training and has led to a number of studies that address the importance of experiential learning (Busch 2010) and hands-on instructional activities (Hiebert & Morris 2012) in teacher training. It leads Borg (2011) to conclude that teacher education may have a limited impact on pre-service teachers if it focuses more on knowledge transmission than on experiential learning. Wang and Odell (2002) too consider practice as the catalyst for an aspiring teacher to critically assess her own teaching and to examine her pedagogic knowledge. How much practice is needed for it to have a lasting impact, is unknown.

Teaching beliefs, however, are slow to change. Firstly, the beliefs and practices of experienced teachers who act as mentors for aspiring teachers are often quite resistant to change (Vescio et al. 2008). Secondly, the teaching beliefs of pre-service teachers are primarily based on their experiences as learners rather than on their experiences as teachers (Zeichner, 1981; Raths 2001). Society may change faster than educational practices, but if future teachers are to keep pace with these changes and their impact in the diverse classroom, teacher training should prepare aspiring teachers for diverse, multilingual and evolving contexts and should give them the tools to do so (Timperley et al. 2007).

This study determines how effective teacher training is in preparing prospective teachers for classrooms in which an increasing number of pupils and students are L2 speakers of Dutch and consequently, classrooms that ask for an innovative approach. Since teacher training at *Flemish university* relies strongly on theory, the effectiveness of a experiential teaching practice with L2 speakers of Dutch will be examined, as will the perception of in-service teachers on the effectiveness of the theoretical approach.

4. Research Questions

The qualitative case study presented in this paper is set within the context of the teacher training at Flemish University, where theory makes up for more than two thirds of the credits. It seems relevant to determine whether the dominance of theory in the curriculum is reflected in the views and actions of the prospective teachers.

RQ1: How do stakeholders of the teacher training programme perceive the effectiveness of the theoretical teacher training component in offering innovative didactic knowledge?

The literature review indicates the need for pre-service teachers to critically examine their own beliefs, which can be facilitated by experiencing a context that deviates from the educational norm. At *Flemish University*, pre-service teachers usually gain experience in secondary schools where transmission teaching and hierachic student-teacher relationships

are the norm, where there is very little cultural and linguistic diversity and where there is no involvement with second language acquisition didactics. RQ2 focuses on the effects of gaining experience in an alternative context, as a part of the teacher training programme, are examined.

RQ2: Do stakeholders of the teacher training programme consider an alternative experience in a multilingual and diverse context an effective method in offering innovative didactic knowledge for teaching Dutch?

5. Methods

This qualitative study is based on information obtained from three groups of respondents: (1) five pre-service teachers who worked as PSTs in the DAP workshops during the data collection, (2) eighteen in-service teachers (ISTs) who worked as PSTs in the DAP workshops during teacher training and (3) the head of the teacher training programme for Dutch at Flemish University.

From October 2012 until May 2013 the five pre-service teachers participated in five focus groups, held in October 2012, November 2012, December 2012, March 2013 and May 2013.

In order to determine whether the outcomes of the focus groups were generalizable to a wider population, eighteen former workshop PSTs, currently working as teachers, were also consulted through a short online questionnaire, they filled out in March 2013.

The head of the SLO at Flemish University was interviewed in June 2013. He was consulted about the approach of the teacher training programme, about its theoretical component and the nature of teaching practice within the SLO.

The focus groups and the interview were video recorded and transcribed. All data was analysed and coded using the NVivo 10 qualitative research software to generate ideas and help identify patterns.

All quotes used in this study have been translated from the original Dutch transcriptions by the main author and have been checked for accuracy by the second author.

6. Discussion

One might expect the comparatively limited time spent teaching working in a different pedagogic context to have relatively little impact. Still, the 20 hours spent teaching in the workshops has influenced the teaching beliefs and practices of nearly all respondents on an intercultural and pedagogical level.

Interculturally, the workshops were an eye-opener for prospective teachers. The ISTs state that the experience “shaped” their view on L2 learners while the pre-service teachers testify to a change in their deficit view on L2 learners. All PSTs used to associate L2 speakers with low proficiency and low socio-economic status.

At *Flemish University* the student population of colleges of education primarily consists of middle-class students from the dominant culture. In the four years the DAP project has been running, no ethnic minority student registered for the Dutch teacher training programme. Simultaneously, the teacher training programme spent no time on intercultural sensitivity, on L2 pedagogy or on training prospective teachers how to work with L2 students, even though it is of primary importance to offer L1 prospective teachers ample opportunity to interact with non-native speakers (Busch 2010).

The pedagogical experience the PSTs gained in the DAP workshops contrasted with their experiences as learners and with the pedagogy they were to embrace in the secondary school context, where transmission teaching was the norm and interactive teaching was out of the question. Still, the DAP experience has influenced the PSTs enough to make them embrace different pedagogic approaches.

The influence of the DAP experience is visible in two ways that can both be seen as different expressions of the same underlying observation: the DAP workshops allow pre-service teachers to gain experience in a new, non-threatening context where they can interact with students instead of instructing them. This experience caused the PSTs to doubt traditional teaching beliefs and, to move away from transmission teaching while allowing for spontaneity in the classroom.

At the start of the workshops, the PSTs intuitively preferred lecturing to interaction, but after a few DAP workshops, they began using more innovative approaches in secondary education too - only to be rebuffed by their mentors. For the pre-service teachers involved in this study, teaching in a way that appealed to the learners was a theoretical concept they had never applied before. All respondents shared stories about teaching classes in secondary schools where they were required to lecture in front of the class. For the pre-service teachers, working from their students’ interest was a new, but transformative experience. The in-service teachers confirm the influence of the workshops. Sixteen of the eighteen ISTs still use the approach in their daily teaching, indicating that it is indeed possible to work in an interactive way in secondary education.

Similarly, the pre-service teachers are not convinced that a hierarchic relationship between teachers and pupils is the best way to approach teaching. On the other hand, like the head of the SLO, the pre-service teachers are not sure whether the existing school culture allows for

such an approach. Indeed, when consulting the former workshop PSTs, classroom hierarchy appears to be the most problematic workshop characteristic to maintain in mainstream education. Eleven out of eighteen former PSTs maintain a collaborative approach to teaching in their daily practice. Those who do not use a collaborative teaching model, refer to the school culture as an explanation.

7. Results

The respondents in this study testify to the belief and practice-altering potential of experience-based teacher training. Additionally, they show the theoretical component of teacher training to be largely ineffective if it is unsupported by a diverse experiential component (Busch 2010; Hiebert & Morris 2012). Consequently, even though the respondents in this study received ample theoretical knowledge, knowledge alone did not appear to influence their teaching (Woods & Çakır 2011). This research has no data to support a theory-driven approach to teacher training, but it does indicate that classroom experiences during teacher training have the potential of altering prospective teachers' beliefs and practices (Basturkmen 2012). Even a comparatively limited 20-hour experience in an atypical context influenced the teaching beliefs and practices of the five pre-service teachers and the eighteen in-service teachers in the short term and during the first years of teaching.

If teacher training practice is at its most effective when it is of an experiential nature (Borg 2006), it seems advisable to provide pre-service teachers with a wide array of approaches and contexts of practice to challenge or expand their beliefs. If prospective teachers gain experience only in traditional, belief-reaffirming contexts, it is unlikely that teacher training programmes will become a vehicle for educational and societal change.

The testimonials of the head of Flemish University's teacher training programme and those of the former and current workshop PSTs highlight the influence of experience over knowledge in changing teaching beliefs and practices. Additionally, they affirm the need for a teacher training that is in tune with educational and social realities.

In the Flemish educational system one's academic success is largely determined by one's L1 and one's socio-economic status (Smet 2013). In such a context it seems self-evident that teacher training should offer prospective teachers the tools to help them empower students at risk. Preparing prospective teachers for an educational reality that is no longer the case, seems irrelevant at best.

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