

What Governs Their Practices? A Study on Pre-service English Language Teachers' Beliefs

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Abstract

Pre-service teachers undergo an important phase, called teaching practice, before plunging in the 'real' teaching. Thus, the experiences and what they do during the practice can be an interesting subject to study. In this light, this case study attempts to gain more understanding on the beliefs of some pre-service teachers with regard to learning and teaching, as well as to see the influence of their beliefs on their practices. The data were gathered from reflective journals and observations. The findings show that the participants held some beliefs in regard to teaching and learning. First, they believed that mutual respect should be maintained in classroom. Second, interrelated with the previous belief, for the participants, meaningful learning requires active participation. Third, the participants believed that learning should be motivating. Fourth, the participants held a belief that as a teacher they have flexible roles. Hopefully, the results of this study will be beneficial in informing teacher training education in order to prepare and assist their students better as future teachers.

Keywords: pre-service teacher, teaching practice, teachers' belief

Introduction

For years, Universitas Sanata Dharma has become a reputable and notable university offering teachers training and education. Formerly founded as PTPG (Perguruan Tinggi Pendidikan Guru) Sanata Dharma in 1955 and transformed to FKIP (Fakultas Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan) in 1958 and to IKIP in 1965, the institution has finally transformed to be a university since 1993. In its development as a university, Universitas Sanata Dharma has opened up 29 study programs, including three Master's programs. Form the 29 study programs, eleven (11) are under Teachers Training and Education Faculty. It implies that teachers training and education remain to be the heart of the institution in reinforcing its role among higher education providers in Yogyakarta in particular and Indonesia in general. Therefore, aiming to be a teacher, one might opt to pursue his/her studies in Universitas Sanata Dharma. In the same vein, parents who wish their children to become teachers may be interested in sending their children to Universitas Sanata Dharma to gain knowledge and skills to be future teachers.

Of eleven study programs offering teachers training and education in different subjects, the English Language Education Study Program (ELESP) has become one of the most well-known study programs in Universitas Sanata Dharma. The study program itself has been established since 1955, confirming its position as one of the oldest study programs in Universitas Sanata Dharma. A number of its

graduates have now served as teachers across Indonesia. Some of them even have worked overseas in the educational field, such as being teachers or lecturers.

Undoubtedly, pre-service teaching practice becomes one of the important phases that a teacher candidate should undergo. However, in light of the preparation provided by teacher education, Stuart and Thurlow (2000) argue that novice teachers were not adequately prepared in their undergraduate programs to face varieties of challenges in classrooms. Thus, pre-service teachers may find difficulties in their teaching practice.

As a result, a number of studies have been conducted to capture the complexities happening in that phase, such as research on pre-service teachers' experiences, the gap between theory and practice, and pre-service teachers' beliefs. In this regard, studies on beliefs have resulted in significant contribution in teacher training education. Clark-Goff (2008, p. 42) argues that "studying pre-service teachers' beliefs is also important because it has received insufficient attention in empirical educational research."

Considering that the omnipresent studies on teachers' beliefs have made a significant contribution, the researcher believes that there should be more studies on pre-service teachers' beliefs and practices done among pre-service teachers from Universitas Sanata Dharma. Such studies may gain more knowledge on how student teachers cope with their pre-service teaching practice and thus the university can assist them better. Therefore, this research aims at answering 1) What are the beliefs held by some pre-service English language teachers' with regards to teaching and learning? and 2) How do their beliefs influence their teaching practice?

This literature review sets out some important constructs and theories with regards to pre-service teachers' beliefs to help the researcher answers the research questions. This part is divided into three sections: (1) the concept of belief and the importance of experience, (2) review of related studies on pre-service teachers' beliefs, and (3) categories of pre-service teachers' beliefs.

Clark-Goff (2008) states that studies on teachers' way of thinking started in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Since 1990s, it has become more widespread in educational research. However, it is tough to define the word 'belief' clearly. Because beliefs are so inherent to teacher behavior and student learning, beliefs have become a common framework of exploration in educational research. Even so, a widely accepted explanation of "beliefs" is still rather indefinite. Beliefs are typically defined in relation to knowledge and behavior and are recognized as value-laden (Borg, 2001, as cited in Clark-Goff, 2008, p.3).

In line with the above mentioned argument, Pajares (1992, p. 1, as cited in Clark-Goff, 2008, p. 23) states that belief is a "messy construct" and as a result, the term belief is often used interchangeably with attitudes, values, perceptions, theories, and world view. Zheng (2009) states that "beliefs are often defined as psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions felt to be true" (p. 74). Inceciay (2011, p. 29) states that "beliefs govern people's behaviors". In other words, beliefs can determine someone's actions. With regard to teachers' beliefs, 'belief' can be defined as what directs teachers to do certain actions in their teaching practices. Furthermore, Vartuli (2005) maintain that "for teachers, beliefs

hold such influence because they are “the heart of teaching” (p. 82, as cited in Clark-Goff, 2008, p. 4).

Although Cabaroglu and Roberts (2000, as cited in Clark-Goff, 2008, p. 7) contend that “beliefs are inflexible”, beliefs connect to experience in two ways. Clark-Goff (2008) maintains that “while experiences are fundamental to initial belief development, they are also critical to belief change” (p. 38). Past experience might have certain impact on people’s beliefs. As a consequence, their beliefs may govern people’s subsequent behaviours. The beliefs may be maintained until ones experience fundamental occurrence that results in belief change. Thus, experience becomes a crucial part in belief formation.

In this vein, pre-service teaching practice gives an opportunity to student teachers to experience what ‘real’ classroom teaching is like. Prior to the teaching program, they have had a set of beliefs which will be reflected from the way they teach. In this regards, Fullan (1991, p. 296 as cited in Stuart & Thurlow, 2000, p. 119) state that “the relationship between prior beliefs and program experience is crucial, complex, and not straightforward.”

A number of studies have been conducted to explore pre-service teachers’ beliefs’. Johnson (1994, as cited in Incecay, 2011) argues that there are three assumptions that have underlain research on teachers’ beliefs. First of all, teachers’ beliefs have an impact on their perception and judgment. Therefore, they will affect their actions as well as what they say in the classroom. Second, beliefs influence how teachers teach in the classroom. Third, it is essential to understand teachers’ beliefs’ in order to enhance teaching practices and teacher education programs.

Teachers are hoped to be agents of change as they play an important role in helping educate students. In this vein, Pajares (1992) and Richardson (1996) argue that in order to prepare teachers as agents of change, teacher educators need to start with an understanding of the beliefs that become the grounds of their decision making (as cited in Stuart & Thurlow, 2000).

Stuart and Thurlow (2000) argue that pre-service teachers’ beliefs about what it takes to be successful teachers seem erroneous and simplistic. They state further that pre-service teachers “frequently do not understand the importance of challenging their beliefs” (Stuart & Thurlow, 2000, p. 114). For them, “liking children is sufficient” (Lasley, 1980 as cited in Stuart & Thurlow, 2000, p. 114). Also, teaching is seen as merely a process of knowledge transmission (Pajares, 1992, as cited in Stuart & Thurlow, 2000, p.114).

Thus, pre-service teachers should question their beliefs critically. Failure in doing so will result in the maintenance of the status quo. It has to be noted also that student population and condition have altered, and thus existing beliefs regarding teaching and learning may not fit well any longer (Stuart & Thurlow, 2000). Hence, pre-service teachers need to revisit their beliefs and keep reflecting on their beliefs.

A study done by Incecay (2011) on teachers’ beliefs reveals some findings related to ideal language learner, ideal language teacher, and ideal English classrooms. With regards to ideal language learner, the participants emphasize on social characteristics of language learner. For the participants, an ideal language

teacher plays his role as a supporter, facilitator, and moderator. When asked about ideal language classrooms, the participants emphasize the authentic materials.

Another categorization has been set by Calderhead (1996, as cited in Zheng, 2009). The categories include beliefs about learners and learning, beliefs about teaching, beliefs about subject, beliefs about learning to teach, and beliefs about self and about teaching role.

Method

This study mainly adopted qualitative research. In particular, the researcher adopted a case study. Mertens (2010) states that as part of qualitative approach, a case study is defined by the object of the study rather than by a certain methodology. In addition, case studies “may be defined by the characteristics of the group” (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 182). Thus, a case study seems to fit this study well. All the participants share similar characteristics in a sense that they all were pre-service English language teachers from Universitas Sanata Dharma. Also, they were doing teaching practice in the same high school.

This research was conducted in the English Language Education of Sanata Dharma University in the even semester of 2014/2015 academic year. The participants were four students (three females and one male) conducting *Microteaching II* or *Program Pelatihan Lapangan* at SMA Bopkri 2 Yogyakarta in the even semester of 2014/2015 academic year.

This research employed some instruments. The first instrument was reflective journals. Each of the participants had to write the journal after they finished teaching. They could also write their journal anytime after an observation or other school activities. The second instrument is observation. As their advisor, the researcher observed the participants’ teaching practices and assessed them. Each of them was observed once. The observations were conducted in February and May. The third instrument was planned to be a focus group discussion. However, due to the time restriction – the researcher took a maternity leave and the participants were out of town for holiday and KKN (*Kuliah Kerja Nyata*) – the focus group discussion has not been done. As a substitute, the researcher emailed them some questions as a follow up to the reflective journals. The steps were as follows. First, each time the participants finished teaching, they wrote a reflective journal. Guided questions were provided. Next, students submitted the journals to the researcher. After that, the researcher observed the teaching practice of each participant. Then, the participants wrote the answers to the reflective questions given by the researcher via email as a follow-up to the reflective journals. Lastly, the researcher analyzed the data from both the reflective journals and the observation notes.

Findings and Discussion

Before presenting the findings, the researcher would like to give short descriptions of the teaching practice programs done by the participants. All the four participants undertook their teaching practice or PPL (*Program Pengalaman Lapangan*) at SMA Bopkri 2 Yogyakarta. The participants’ teaching practice period differed from one to another depending on the duration that they had

chosen. Two participants, Jingga and Delima (pseudonyms), did their full time practice from January – March 2015 and the other two, Surya and Dara, did their part time teaching practice in January – April. As they were enrolled in full time teaching practice, Jingga and Delima went to the school six days a week, while Surya and Dara went to the school three days a week and thus their teaching period was longer than Jingga and Delima's.

During their PPL, the participants not only taught English lessons but also did some administrative work. They should also allocate time to be teachers on duty and also to get involved in school activities, such as students' contest/competitions. In short, they were to experience what a 'real' teacher does at school.

After reading their reflections and observing their teaching performance, the researcher did thematic analysis to figure out common and significant themes regarding their beliefs and the influence to the teaching as explained in the following section.

Mutual Respect Should be Maintained in Classroom

In their reflective journals, the participants illustrated their nerves as ones who had not had any formal teaching experiences before. Most of the participants still struggled with tension in the class since they faced various characteristics of students. One of the pre-service teachers, Jingga, thought the situation in the class was 'very tense', yet she was finally accustomed to it. She also acknowledged the role of the English teacher as a figure that the students respected.

"At first, the class situation was very tense for me but I was finally used to it. The students were quite active and some of them loved to make noise so the class became very noisy. However, I could still handle the class because the English teacher was there." (Jingga)

Besides respect for teachers, Jingga also underlined that in teaching and learning process, students should respect each other. She would think that if a student performs in front of the class, the others should pay full attention. Therefore, when this ideal image did not exist, she considered that things were not right. It was also experienced by Surya who reminded the students to pay attention to what he said.

"A challenge that I faced in this meeting was the fact that there were some students who did not pay attention to their friends who were presenting. I also advised all the students to respect their friends' performances." (Jingga)

"The challenge for me was that some students were busy with their cell phones. There were students who fell asleep in the middle of the lesson. I should try my best to make them pay attention to the lesson I give." (Surya)

While Jingga put an emphasis on respect for teachers and respect for others, Delima emphasized on her responsibility to respect and appreciate the students' performances. She thought that she at first focused too much on the evaluation so that she forgot to pay attention to the students.

“The challenge I faced today was that I focused too much on the evaluation rubric, so I often merely heard their voices but I did not pay attention to them..... I faced the challenge by minimizing to jot down unnecessary things in the evaluation and by respecting and appreciating what they were presenting.... What I learned from today’s activities is to appreciate the students’ performances by paying attention to those who were telling stories and clapping my hands for their hard work.” (Delima)

Respect seems to be a big issue when discussing pre-service teachers. At times, as pre-service teachers, the participants often felt powerless as they were ‘just’ pre-service teachers who did not have full control over the class. They saw themselves as inferiors compared to the in-service teachers. As a result, they did not dare to set strict rules and give punishment to the students if the students misbehaved in the classroom. In light of this, Dara enunciated her disappointment to the students’ behaviours.

“Because they knew I was a pre-service teacher, they did not pay attention to me and looked down on me” (Dara)

Dara’s feeling of disappointment was understandable. During the observation, the researcher found some students do inappropriate deeds in the class. For example, many of the students were busy with their cell phones when the participants were teaching. When I confronted one of the participants (Dara) about this situation, she told me that it was certainly uncomfortable for her to see that the students did not respect her. However, she could not do anything because their in-service teacher tolerated such behaviours. It put her in inconvenience because in one hand she wanted to forbid the students to do anything but to listen to her. On the other hand, she seemed powerless and thought that she did not have the capacity to do that because she was ‘just’ a pre-service teacher. In other words, the class was not hers to control. She did not own the stage as she was just a stunt woman.

Learning Should Be Motivating

Motivation is a familiar notion that becomes a huge concern in teaching and learning. Considering that the participants taught English language as a foreign language, it was then become more challenging for them to make the students motivated and interested in learning the language. The participants agreed that as teachers, they should raise the students’ motivation so that the students could engage better in the teaching and learning process. Thus, avoiding boredom was considered crucial. Most of the participants attempted to motivate the students by providing interesting and engaging materials and activities.

“I have provided some explanation on news item. Furthermore, I also provided some exercises and films to interest them.” (Dara)

Surya, who was the only male pre-service teacher among the participants, tried to maintain the students’ interest by playing some songs before the lesson started and asking the students to fill in the blanks using the words they heard.

"I asked the students to listen to a song and do 'fill in the blanks' task. Then, I asked the students to read the lyrics altogether and gave models to students on how to pronounce the words correctly." (Surya)

During the observation, I also witnessed that the participants tried to make use of multimodality. In addition to visual aids, they provided aural resources, too. The participants used attractive *Power Point* slides, videos, songs, and games so that the students were involved in their teaching and learning activities. When the students were motivated, the participants themselves felt that the class atmosphere was 'alive' and it was substantial for the success of teaching and learning, as stated by Jingga.

"The learning atmosphere became alive because the students were enthusiastic about the media" (Jingga)

Based on what the participants wrote and the observation, the belief that motivation is the key to teaching and learning was clear. However, some of the participants seemed to simply think that giving the students some fun was good to make the students motivated. The findings reflected Stuart and Thurlow's (2000) argument, stating that pre-service teachers' beliefs about what it takes to be successful teachers seem erroneous and simplistic. What seemed simplistic from the teaching activities was that 'fun teaching is ultimately important in successful teaching'. Yet, they did not directly relate 'the fun' to the materials/topic the students were learning. For instance, before teaching, Surya always played some songs, gave a sheet of paper containing missing lyrics, and asked the students to fill in the blanks with the words they heard. To some point, the activities were quite fun and could increase the students' motivation. The activity, however, was not followed up by another activity which connected anything in the song (the language, the story, etc) to the lesson. Therefore, there seemed to be a missing link which might make the students fail in understanding the lesson better. The fun activity then became less meaningful. In short, although all the participants agreed that motivation was a key in successful learning, not all succeeded in creating meaningful activities.

Learning Requires Active Participation

Closely related to motivation, active participation was highlighted by the participants as one substantial element. Most of the participants complained about the noisy class when they were teaching. The fact that the participants were pre-service teachers who seemed not to have full authority to control the class made the situation worse. As a result, instead of paying attention and participating actively, the students opted to talk with their friends.

"As usual, the situation in class XD was not conducive at all to study. Lots of them were busy with their cell phones and only a few paid attention to me." (Dara)

In line with Dara's remarks, Surya and Delima considered that it was challenging for them to make the students participate actively.

“What’s challenging for me was that some of the students were busy with their mobile phones. Some even fell asleep. The students refused to keep their mobiles away. (Surya)

“What’s challenging was to see that some of the students were just lying down and did not do their tasks.” (Delima)

The noise that the students made and their reluctance to engage in the learning process might be due to the status of the participants as pre-service teachers. In her journal, Jingga articulated that the students were not noisy when their teacher was in the class with the participants. Yet, if their teacher was not present and it was only the participant who taught them, they began to be very noisy.

For Delima, however, the absence of noise in the class was not always a good and expected situation.

“Today the class was silent. Nonetheless, the meaning of silence was ambiguous. Were they silent because they understood what I explained? Or were they silent because they did not understand what I delivered.... When I asked the students, no one answered.” (Delima)

It becomes apparent that silence was not the only thing the participants expected in the class and it was not a sign of successful teaching and learning. The participants saw that active participation, where students were engaged in the class discussion and answered the teachers’ questions, to be an interesting experience.

“What’s interesting for me was that the students actively participated in the learning process.” (Delima)

“What’s interesting was that the students became more active (in the learning process).” (Jingga)

Teachers Have Flexible Roles

“I was not being my true self when I was teaching.” (Dara)

What Dara stated represented different roles and positioning that the participants had as pre-service teachers. For the participants, in a way, teaching was like acting. When they were in the class, they acted as if they were on the stage. Thus, what they did to the students depended on the roles that they were playing.

Most of the participants believed that teachers are not just academic-bound. Instead, teachers should also nurture aspects such as teacher-student relationship. The participants have an ideal image of how their relationship with students should be. They believed that they should be able to make friends with the students.

“As usual, I started the lesson with having chit-chats with the students of XE and being closer to them.” (Dara)

Dara wrote that kind of reflections many times in her journals. For her, it was important to begin the lesson with activities that would put the students at ease and not tense. She attempted to position herself as a friend to the students. By doing so, the students would feel that Dara was not a stranger and therefore the students would be more likely to get involved in the lesson. Another participant, Surya, also affirmed that positioning himself as the students' friend would also give him benefits in return. The students would not feel intimidated by the teacher and the teacher could win the students' heart.

"We can win the students' hearts by not behaving as a teacher, but as their friend." (Surya)

Similar to Dara's remarks, Jingga's reflections also depicted how she tried to be a friend to her students. She thought that it was fascinating to know various characteristics that the students had.

"What's interesting was to know different characteristics of the students." (Jingga)

However, at times, the participants experienced conflicting identities or roles when teaching. Dara, for example, wrote in her journals that she insistently tried to be close to the students as a friend. Yet she also admitted that she needed to be firm so that the students paid attention to her.

"I needed to be firm so that the students did not look down on me." (Dara)

For her, playing with different roles was a must depending on the situation. To ill-mannered students, she had to be firm. However, she was also friendly and fostered the students.

"Firmness is needed by a teacher. However, not being too strict should be in a teacher's soul. Too wide gap between a teacher and her students will make the students reluctant to ask." (Delima)

"I've learned a lot to be a patient and not authoritative teacher. Yet, I have to remain firm and discipline." (Dara)

At last, the participants maintained their flexibility in the class. Depending on the situations, a teacher should wear different 'masks' and play various roles. It strengthens the study done by Incecay (2011) which found that an ideal language teacher plays his role as supporter, facilitator, and moderator.

Conclusion

In their journey to be teachers, the participants undertook a compulsory program called PPL (*Program Pengalaman Lapangan*), where they taught at schools as pre-service teachers. During the program, the participants applied what they had learned in the classes. Thus, it was interesting to study the beliefs that the participants had since what they did in the classroom might be reflections of certain beliefs.

The findings showed that the participants held some beliefs in regard to teaching and learning. First, they believed that mutual respect should be maintained in classroom. As pre-service teachers, they seemed not to gain respect from some of the students. The participants were reluctant to force the students to abide by the rules because they felt that they did not have the authority. As a result, instead of paying attention their teachers, the students were busy with their mobile phones. Not only that the students should respect the participants as their teachers, but the students should also be respected by the teachers. If there are any students performing in front of the classroom, the teacher should pay attention to them and give feedback as appreciation.

Second, the participants believed that learning should be motivating. Thus, when teaching, they provided the students with various media that could appeal the students. Third, for the participants, meaningful learning requires active participation. The participants expected the students to engage in their learning and not to keep silent and be occupied by their mobiles. Fourth, the participants held a belief that as a teacher they have flexible roles. Theirs should be sensitive to the situation in the class. On one hand, they attempted to be close to the students as friends. On the other hand, they should also be strict and firm with regard to classroom rules.

To sum up, this small-scale study has sought to understand the beliefs of some pre-service teachers and the influence on their teaching. It is hoped that the results can inform the study program to prepare the students better before undertaking their teaching practice program. To gain more insight in the area of teachers' beliefs, future researchers may focus on how pre-service teachers continually revisit their beliefs.

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