Introduction

Within the broader field of teacher cognition, the study of teachers’ beliefs has been a feature of educational research for more than 30 years, and for well over 20 years in the specific field of language teaching. Different motivations have driven the emergence and sustained growth of this work but two recurring justifications have been that studying beliefs allows us to better understand teachers and teaching and also facilitates educational reform (Skott, 2014). I would add that insights into teachers’ beliefs also contribute positively to the process of supporting teacher learning. In their overview, Phipps and Borg (2009) note that teachers’ beliefs:

- may be powerfully influenced (positively or negatively) by teachers’ own experiences as learners and are well established by the time teachers go to university
- act as a filter through which teachers interpret new information and experience
- may outweigh the effects of teacher education in influencing what teachers do in the classroom
- can exert a persistent long-term influence on teachers’ instructional practices
- are, at the same time, not always reflected in what teachers do in the classroom
- interact bi-directionally with experience (i.e. beliefs influence practices and practices can also lead to changes in beliefs)
- influence how teachers react to educational change.

This chapter is concerned with the fourth, fifth and sixth points in this list – those that refer to the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and their actions. As noted in these points, this relationship has been characterized in the literature by both consistency and inconsistency (i.e. some studies show that beliefs and practices are aligned while others provide evidence that they are not); while I will dedicate some space here to illustrating this issue, it is one that is well established in the literature and need not take up too much space here. What is more interesting, I feel, is an analysis of a range of issues that
shape the way the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and practices is conceptualized and studied. For example:

- What is the justification for studying relationships between teachers’ beliefs and practices?
- How does the way ‘belief’ is defined influence the way the beliefs-practices relationship is conceived?
- How might inconsistency between teachers’ beliefs and practices be interpreted?
- What research methods and tools have been used to study the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and classroom practices?
- To what extent are the results of research into the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and practices a product of the research tools that are used?

This chapter, then, is not a literature review and, although it does outline key current understandings of the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and practices, I would like to go beyond the general finding that the relationship is a variable one and to probe further into issues of definition, conceptualization, purpose and methodology that I will argue have a significant bearing on how beliefs and practices have been studied and on the results emerging from this work.

The analysis I present is very relevant to the theme of language awareness as the latter encompasses both teachers’ beliefs about language and the pedagogical strategies they adopt in promoting learners’ knowledge about language. Much of the early work in language teacher cognition did focus on language awareness (e.g. Borg, 1998), and interest in teachers’ beliefs and practices in relation to specific areas of language awareness such as grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation continues to be strong today (e.g. Baker, 2014; Bell, 2016; Hestetræet, 2012).

**Defining Beliefs**

The term ‘belief’ can be defined in different ways, some simple and others more complex; for example, Pajares’ (1992: 316) widely cited definition is that beliefs are “an individual’s judgement of the truth or falsity of a proposition”, while Murphy and Mason (2006: 306) say beliefs are simply “all that one accepts or wants to be true”. Based on an analysis of various perspectives, Skott (2014), suggests that different definitions of belief highlight four core elements:

- they refer to ideas that individuals consider to be true
- they have cognitive and affective dimensions
- they are stable and result from substantial social experiences
- they influence practice.

The final point in this list is of particular interest here and the author notes that “beliefs are expected to significantly influence the ways in which teachers interpret and engage with the problems of practice” (p. 19). The direction of this expectation – that beliefs shape practice – is, as we shall see, not uncontested. In fact, in social psychology, the study of attitudes (of which beliefs form a part) has demonstrated that these are often not good indicators of behaviour (Stainton Rogers, 2011). One rather obvious reason for this is that beliefs are only of one many determinants of behaviour. Critical
social psychologists go further; they actually reject the assumption that attitudes and behaviours should be consistent and see inconsistency as a more normal state of affairs (Gross, 2015).

It is also important to acknowledge that teachers hold beliefs about many issues such as teachers, teaching, students, learning and the subject matter (especially relevant in the field of language awareness), and studies will typically focus on specific areas, such as teachers’ beliefs about learner autonomy (Borg and Al-Busaidi, 2012), teaching reading (Kuzborska, 2011) or vocabulary (Gao and Ma, 2011). And the multitude of beliefs a teacher holds are organized into networks or belief systems, and within and across these tensions (Phipps and Borg, 2009) will arise between beliefs that are incompatible yet simultaneously held. Different beliefs will also carry different ‘weight’, and when tensions arise, those that are more central or core will prevail over those that are peripheral. Beliefs may be held consciously or tacitly, another variable that adds to the challenge of studying the beliefs/practice relationship. Overall, then, belief is a complex, multidimensional concept and one general criticism that can be levelled at research into the beliefs/practice relationship in language teaching is that this complexity is often dismissed through simplistic conceptualizations and research designs.

Additionally, beliefs are not directly observable and it is therefore necessary, often as part of a definition, to stipulate what their visible manifestation will be. An important distinction in this respect – and one that has significant implications for research into the beliefs/practice relationship – is that between professed or espoused beliefs (what teachers say they believe) and enacted beliefs (beliefs inferred from what teachers do, also called ‘attributed beliefs’ or ‘beliefs in action’). Most research that has examined the beliefs/practice relationship has focused on stated beliefs and how these compare to observations of what teachers do (e.g. Hos and Kekec, 2014); in such cases, as I discuss later in this chapter, discrepancies between beliefs and practices are not wholly surprising and can be explained at least partly with reference to the way beliefs have been defined and studied. In contrast, where beliefs in action are being studied (i.e. where beliefs are being examined to explicate practice, not simply for comparative purposes – e.g. Watson, 2015a), the desire to assess congruence between beliefs and practices is less dominant because the focus is on eliciting beliefs as a way of making sense of what teachers do.

Even from the necessarily brief comments above, it should be clear that in studies of the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and practices it is vital for researchers to be explicit about how ‘belief’ is being defined, what particular kinds of beliefs are being examined and what (if any) the presumed relationship between beliefs and practices is. Such conceptual matters have significant implications for both how the research is done and for the interpretation of its results. It is also important that researchers (both in the field of language awareness and more generally) have a clear sense of purpose when examining teachers’ beliefs and practices, and this is the focus of the next section.

Why Study Beliefs and Practices?

We need to have a clear rationale for the study of teachers’ beliefs and practices – while clearly research on teachers’ beliefs is fashionable, that is inadequate as a basis for justifying empirical enquiry. It should not be assumed, either, that the importance of such work is obvious and need not be explained. This is often the case with studies that explicitly compare stated beliefs and observed practices, and it can be difficult to discern in
such work what precisely the justification for the research is (beyond concluding that there is a gap between beliefs and practices). What, then, might the arguments be for studying the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and practices? Here are some possibilities (with examples that relate to language awareness):

• Helping teachers recognize gaps between their beliefs and practices promotes the cognitive dissonance (a negative state of psychological tension) that can stimulate teacher change. For example, when teachers become aware that their stated beliefs about the importance of explicitly teaching pronunciation are not reflected in the limited attention they give pronunciation in their teaching, the resulting tension may stimulate change in their practices.

• Insight into teachers’ beliefs and practices can highlight the extent to which teachers’ cognitions and work reflect good practice as defined in the literature. For example, if the literature argues that some explicit awareness of language is beneficial for learners but teachers do not believe this is the case and fail to promote such awareness in class, then this might suggest the need for professional development that targets this issue.

• As part of educational innovation, studying beliefs and practices (and the factors that may create gaps between them) provides insight into the extent to which the innovation is having the intended impact. For example, if a new curriculum includes added emphasis on explicit knowledge of word formation for learners but this is not reflected in what teachers do, an analysis of their beliefs about learning vocabulary could be of value.

• Where teachers’ practices are considered ineffective, studying their beliefs can help understand the reasons for these practices. For example, if teachers spend most of their lessons explaining grammar explicitly (and this is considered an ineffective strategy for teaching a foreign language) then an analysis of the beliefs underpinning such behaviour could provide a starting point in beginning to promote change in what teachers do.

• An appreciation of the relationship between beliefs and practices has implications for the design of pre-service teacher education programmes. For example, if we know that teachers avoid teaching pronunciation explicitly because they have limited confidence (i.e. a belief about self) in their own pronunciation, then that would suggest greater attention be paid at pre-service level in developing appropriate levels of teacher confidence in specific areas of language awareness.

I am not suggesting these are the only or even the best possibilities; the point is that clear justification is needed for why one might decide to study the beliefs/practice relationship and the examples here do this in relation to benefits for classroom practice, teacher education and development and educational innovation. Additionally, one might also justify research into beliefs and practices in more theoretical terms:

• The relationship between beliefs and behaviour is important in its own right and needs to be understood more fully.

I do have reservations about this as an exclusive rationale but it should not of course be ruled out, particularly if combined with the kind of more practical justification illustrated above.
One further argument that may underpin the study of beliefs and practices is that teaching will be more effective when the two are consistent, and therefore identifying inconsistency allows for it to be rectified. Of course, how we define ‘effective’ in this context matters, but the issue more broadly is whether consistency between beliefs and practices is a pre-requisite for effective practice. Intuitively, we would feel that consistency helps (and one of the goals of reflective practice is to align beliefs and practices more effectively – Larrivee, 2000), but caution is needed in basing a study of beliefs and practices on such an assumption. Beliefs and practices, after all, may be strongly aligned even where practice is ineffective.

The point of this section has been to emphasize the importance of having a clear rationale for studying the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and practices – ideally one that extends beyond the need to address a perceived gap in research knowledge and which is driven by more concrete concerns too.

Insights from the Literature

As noted above, my purpose here is not to provide a detailed review of literature but to engage in a deeper analysis of underlying issues that shape how the study of teachers’ beliefs and practices is conducted and interpreted. Nonetheless, it is necessary to comment here on general trends in the literature, both in education generally, then in language teaching. These general trends apply to research in specific areas of language awareness too.

Interest in the beliefs/practice relationship is by no means new, as the review by Fang (1996) illustrates (and where evidence of both consistency and inconsistency between beliefs and practices was already being highlighted). Sercu and St. John (2007) is another relevant analysis, though I find somewhat overly optimistic their claim that “a reasonably close relationship appears to exist” (p. 49) between beliefs and teaching behaviour. More recently, a key reference in the study of teachers’ beliefs is the International Handbook of Research on Teachers’ Beliefs (Fives and Gill, 2014). In this volume, one chapter focuses specifically on the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and their practices (Buehl and Beck, 2014). Based on a review of empirical research, four forms this relationship may take are defined:

• beliefs influence (i.e. are precursors to) practice
• practice influences beliefs
• beliefs are disconnected from practices
• beliefs and practices influence one another reciprocally.

While evidence for each of these positions can be found in the literature, it is the last of these – the reciprocal option – that captures most appropriately the complex manner in which beliefs and practices interact over the course of a teacher’s professional life. One methodological problem has been that much research into beliefs and practices has been cross-sectional – one-shot (and often quantitative) analyses of what teachers say and/or do – and has not been able to go beyond conclusions about whether practices reflect beliefs. A full appreciation of the dialectical relationship between beliefs and practices requires longitudinal research designs that examine what teachers believe and do in a broader socio-historic manner.

The direction of the relationship between beliefs and practices is particularly relevant in the context of teacher professional development initiatives. The goal of such
initiatives is typically to promote change in what teachers do in the classroom, and traditionally the view has been that by first changing teachers’ beliefs (or other dimensions of their cognitions such as knowledge), changes in practice would follow. This assumption is reflected in the design of professional development that adopts a training model (Lieberman and Miller, 2014): teachers attend seminars or workshops and are given new ideas (e.g. strategies for teaching grammar), which it is assumed they will then apply in the classroom. Serious doubts exist, though, about the extent to which this model works in practice and it has been criticized for its lack of impact on what teachers do (Borg, 2015a). An alternative position exists that suggests that belief change will follow once teachers have changed their practices and experienced success as a result of doing so (Guskey, 2002). This has implications for the design of professional development initiatives and emphasizes the need for these to have a practice-based component which allows teachers to see innovation working. The reality is that the precise manner in which professional development impacts on teachers’ beliefs and practices will vary across contexts depending on teacher profiles (e.g. motivation, prior beliefs and experience, professional needs), the focus and design of the professional development, and the competence of the teacher educator; in some cases, prior belief change will stimulate subsequent changes in practice, while in others it is only successful practical experience that will motivate changes in beliefs.

Specifically in the field of language teaching, Basturkmen (2012) provides a review of research into the relationship between teachers’ stated beliefs and practices. The focus on stated beliefs here should be noted, and this analysis considered comparative work where explicitly declared (i.e. espoused) beliefs were compared with observations (either reported or studied first-hand).

Early in this review the contradictory nature of research into language teachers’ beliefs and practices is noted and one reason suggested for this is that much of this research has been based on case studies. The purpose of the review was thus to seek more generalizable understandings of the factors that mediate the beliefs/practice relationship. It is positive to note that “the review was not premised on a view that teachers’ beliefs should correspond with their practices, or that any lack of correspondence represents an undesirable state of affairs” (p. 93), though this assumption may not have necessarily been shared by the original studies included in the review.

The review examines a number of studies in order to examine the impact that particular factors have on the beliefs/practice relationship: context (specifically constraints, teacher experience and planned aspects of teaching), and the choice of research methodology. The review, though, did not focus on how incongruence between beliefs and practices might be explained by the existence of different beliefs or belief systems – an important explanatory factor I noted earlier.

The selection of studies included in this review should also be highlighted. Only studies from 2000 onwards that examined both correspondence and lack of correspondence between beliefs and practices were included, and the body of material reviewed included 13 doctoral theses, three journal articles and a book chapter (this is a rather unusual basis for a literature review given the unpublished status of doctoral theses and the subsequent questions this raises about quality). The material included suggests that the selection criteria employed for this analysis were too narrow.

Overall, the review concludes that “although findings from some of the studies highlighted correspondences between teachers’ beliefs and their practices, findings from most of the studies showed only limited correspondence” (p. 285). In examining this
conclusion further, the three factors noted above were considered, and the conclusions were as follows:

- situational constraints often prevent teachers from putting their beliefs into practice
- correspondence between beliefs and practices was more evident in teachers with more experience
- very tentatively, stated beliefs were found to correspond to planned aspects of teaching (e.g. choice of activities).

The analysis also considered whether differences in research methodology might have explained the degree of correspondence found between stated beliefs and practices. The conclusion here was that there was no evidence that this was the case (but see my discussion of methodological issues further below).

As noted in the review itself, the conclusions presented in this analysis must be treated very cautiously given the small selection of studies analysed and the fact that many were doctoral theses. For example, it would be wrong to conclude in any general sense that teaching experience correlates with greater consistency between beliefs and practices and, despite the conclusions of this review I am quite firmly of the belief that issues of research methodology do impinge significantly on the results that any particular study will produce.

Based on existing reviews of the literature in education generally and language teaching specifically, closer analysis of specific individual studies (see the next section) and my own experience of researching teacher cognition for over 20 years, my conclusion is that attempts to identify generalizable relationships between beliefs and practices are unlikely to extend our current understandings much further. We know that very often teachers’ stated beliefs are not reflected in their classroom practices, that exceptions to this trend can be identified, and that variations in the relationship between beliefs and practices can be explained with reference to both internal factors in the teachers themselves (e.g. biography, awareness, motivation, experience) and external factors (e.g. curricula, time, institutional policy), which may constrain what teachers do. Variations in the conceptual and methodological bases of studies will also account significantly for the kinds of results they generate, and this is the focus of the next section.

Methodological Issues

It is vital for anyone wishing to conduct research on teachers’ beliefs and practices to fully appreciate the impact on their results that particular conceptual and methodological decisions will inevitably have, and in this section I elaborate on this point with reference to specific recent studies of relevance.

Fundamental decisions (or, very often, assumptions) already highlighted above relate to:

- the direction in the relationship between beliefs and practices that is being assumed (e.g. does the researcher start from the position that beliefs do influence practices?)
- the perceived desirability of consistency between beliefs and practices
- the manner in which ‘belief’ is being defined (particularly the distinction between stated beliefs and enacted beliefs)
• the rationale for the investigation (e.g. measuring beliefs/practice consistency or understanding practice through the study of beliefs)
• the extent to which beliefs are seen to be an individual construct or more socially defined (most existing research in education and psychology examines beliefs at the level of individuals)
• the broader real-world purposes of the study (e.g. supporting teacher development).

A further set of methodological decisions will also impinge on eventual outcomes of any study of the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and practices:

• the sample of teachers studied and their characteristics
• the research method(s) used, including the data collection instruments
• whether reported practices (what teachers say they do) or observed practices (seen first-hand by the researchers) are studied
• for multiple methods, the order in which different kinds of data are collected (and hence the connections between them).

One other decision that will be significant is the particular issue(s) that beliefs/practice research examines – some studies may cover beliefs about language teaching generally while others, as noted above, will focus on specific issues, such as corrective feedback in oral communication (Rahimi and Zhang, 2015) or (and of particular relevance to language awareness) teaching grammar (Nishimuro and Borg, 2013). Where a specific issue is being examined, the extent to which this is familiar to teachers will impact on the outcomes of the research (Zeng, 2012, for example, examines novice EFL teachers’ beliefs and practices about ‘post method teaching practice’, a concept which will have been novel for them).

I will now illustrate variations across the issues above (and the implications of these variations) in four recent studies where there is a concern with the relationship between the beliefs and practices of language teachers (not just with reference to language awareness, though the analysis is generally relevant to this domain too). I have chosen these particular studies because they are recent, they illustrate diverse methodological approaches and they highlight both strengths and weaknesses in how beliefs and practices can be studied.

Gu (2016) is entitled ‘Assessment of intercultural communicative competence in FL education: A survey on EFL teachers’ perception and practice in China’. This hints at an interest in both teachers’ beliefs and practices (one difficulty in identifying relevant studies of ‘beliefs’ is that alternative terms such as ‘perceptions’ or ‘views’ are often used), though on closer inspection a comparison of the two does not emerge as a major concern here. So one immediate point to make, then, is that not every study that examines teachers’ beliefs and practices is concerned with exploring the relationship between the two. Data were collected via a survey from 1,044 university teachers of English as a foreign language in China. Thus in this case, evidence was collected about stated beliefs and reported practices only, and this limits the extent to which this study can contribute to an understanding of the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and practices. A key finding in this paper is that, while most teachers believed that intercultural communicative competence (ICC) should be assessed, fewer than half of them said they did so in their teaching.
The researcher acknowledges the limitations of this approach to studying beliefs and practices: teachers may respond to questionnaires by choosing the answer they feel is desirable (in such cases responses will not reflect their actual beliefs), while the study tells us nothing about what actually happens in classrooms. The author also notes that teachers’ responses suggested that their own understandings of what ICC is are limited. This raises further concerns about the meaningfulness of the results obtained (if respondents did not understand what ICC is, how could they comment meaningfully on whether they assess it?).

Watson (2015a) is a qualitative study of a first-language English teacher’s beliefs and practices about grammar, as reflected in her approach to teaching writing. The rationale for the study is that “while there is a developing body of work which explores teachers’ attitudes to grammar, there have been limited attempts to investigate how these attitudes influence pedagogy” (p. 334). The study is also driven by broader policy concerns – namely, a desire to show that, in the absence of clear policy on teaching grammar, teachers will develop pedagogy based on their own beliefs. Theoretically, espoused beliefs are distinguished from pedagogical practices, while methodologically a case-study approach was adopted; data were collected through observations, stimulated-recall interviews and think-aloud tasks during which the teacher marked pieces of writing. In terms of the beliefs/practice relationship, the study “shows a close match between espoused beliefs and pedagogical practices” (p. 342) but qualifies this conclusion with reference to several potential influential factors:

- the teacher designed the lessons observed specifically for the purposes of the study (so perhaps they were not typical)
- the teacher was relatively free in deciding how to teach (no pressure from school or assessment)
- the design of the study elicited beliefs from practices (and thus correspondence was more likely).

The contrast in the design and conduct of this study and that above from China are substantial and capture very clearly the manner in which methodological decisions do shape the results of research into the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and practices. Watson’s work also reminds us of an important but perhaps under-studied domain of language teacher cognition – the beliefs that teachers have about language itself (rather than about how to teach it – see also Bell, 2016; Watson, 2015b).

A third recent study that examines connections between language teachers’ beliefs and practices is Muñoz and Ramirez (2015). This mixed methods project focused on teachers’ beliefs and practices in relation to motivational teaching (specifically in relation to the notions of autonomy, competence and relatedness). Data were collected through questionnaires (from 65 teachers of English in a private institution in Colombia) and subsequent interviews and observations with 11 of these teachers. The overall conclusion from this paper is that teachers’ observed lessons did not reflect their stated beliefs about motivational practices (questionnaires suggested that the teachers valued motivational teaching but they were not seen to apply it in their work). The design of the study merits closer attention as once again it has a significant impact on the findings that emerged.
Data were first collected through a questionnaire which “was aimed at exploring teachers’ beliefs with respect to motivation through six yes/no questions, each accompanied by a follow-up question” (p. 205). The full instrument is provided in Appendix 1 of the paper and is reproduced below:

Which of the following behaviors are important in influencing student motivation?
If you believe the behavior is important for student motivation, circle YES and then answer the follow-up question. If you do not believe the behavior is important for student motivation, circle NO and move on to the next behavior.

1 … explaining to students why certain activities are worth doing … YES NO
How can drawing students’ attention to the objectives affect their motivation?
2 … letting students decide on some aspects of the class … YES
How can giving students different choices affect their motivation?
3 … respecting and caring for students … YES NO
How can respect and care affect student motivation?
4 … providing clear instructions YES NO
How can clarity of instruction affect student motivation?
5 … giving students positive and descriptive feedback (encouraging and informing them of their progress and how they can further improve)
6 Think of your most successful classroom activity. What makes it so successful?

A yes/no answer format is rather blunt when it comes to exploring beliefs, but that limitation aside, one would expect most teachers to agree with these statements (as was in fact the case in the study). The point has been made various times in the literature on teachers’ beliefs (e.g. Borg, 2015b) that decontextualized statements such as those above typically elicit theoretical, idealistic or socially desirable answers which are not necessarily indicative of what teachers do in class. Thus it should be no surprise at all to find that, while teachers tended to say ‘yes’ to the above statements, these espoused beliefs were not enacted in their lessons. Unintentionally perhaps, the entire design of the study was always likely to lead to that conclusion (and that may have also been the conclusion the researchers were hoping for).

In considering the discrepancy between stated beliefs and observed practices, the authors identify a common range of contextual factors such as curriculum constraints. However, teacher knowledge also seems to be a very relevant factor here, especially when we read that “50% of the teachers in the sample come from non-teaching backgrounds” (p. 212). If half of the individuals in the study had not been trained to teach, then the lack of consistency between their stated beliefs and observed practices is perhaps even less surprising and questions also arise about the extent to which they could fully make sense of the issues they were being asked about in the questionnaire and interview. None of the limitations I have noted here are given much explicit consideration in the paper. The impact of teacher knowledge on teachers’ practices also reminds us again that, although beliefs may shape what teachers do, they are just one of many influential factors (and not always necessarily the most important).

One final recent example of research into language teachers’ beliefs and practices I will consider here is Farrell and Ives (2015). This article examines the relationship
between the beliefs and classroom practices of one novice English as a second language (ESL) teacher of second language reading (L2 reading), but there is a clear focus on professional development here too: that is, the project that is described sought to help the teacher become more aware of their beliefs by engaging them in a process of reflection. This feature gives the study a strong practical rationale.

Methodologically, this was a qualitative case study and data were collected through interviews, six hours of classroom observations, and a teacher journal. The teachers’ professed beliefs about language teaching, language learning and teaching L2 reading were elicited through an initial interview. These were then matched against the practices observed during L2 reading classes that he taught. Professed beliefs about language teaching were generally consistent with observed teaching, though there were some inconsistencies. In the case of beliefs about teaching L2 reading and language learning, beliefs and practices were found to be consistent. One factor that may have facilitated this was that the prescribed textbook the teacher used allowed him to teach in a way that reflected his beliefs. One question that surfaces here is the extent to which the textbook may have actually defined those beliefs (thus making consistency inevitable). In other words, when teachers work with specific materials, and are expected to follow them closely, could it be that over time the practices embedded in those materials come to define teachers’ beliefs about L2 teaching and learning, generally or in relation to particular language skills or areas of language awareness? Conversely, where materials neglect certain areas (e.g. pronunciation) might it be that over time teachers using those materials come to believe that these areas are not important?

One interesting point to emerge from this study is that the analysis of the teacher’s classroom practices identified consistent behaviours which had not been highlighted in the prior elicitation of professed beliefs. For example, it was noted that the teacher regularly used humour, but this had not been a belief he mentioned earlier in the study. This raises further questions about the extent to which eliciting teachers’ beliefs in isolation of an analysis of their teaching is meaningful (because, for example, beliefs may often be held tacitly).

In reflecting on their findings, the authors note:

So the question remains as to what is the relationship between beliefs and practice and which drives which? Perhaps the best answer is that there is an interactive relationship in which beliefs influence classroom actions while classroom experiences and more importantly conscious reflection (as was reported on in this article) on those experiences in turn can influence and even change those beliefs.

Farrell and Ives, 2015: 604

This confirms the dialogical relationship between beliefs and practices that is already well established in the literature, and additionally emphasizes the role that reflection can play in shaping that relationship.

In addition to the articles I have examined closely here, readers will also find interesting the analyses of language teachers’ practices and beliefs in Tamimy (2015), Roothoof (2014), Hos and Kekec (2014), Graham, Santos and Francis-Brophy (2014) and Li (2013). These studies provide further examples of, and support for, many of the points I have raised in this chapter.
Studying Teachers’ Beliefs and Practices

My two purposes so far here have been to highlight current understandings of the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and practices and to provide a critical analysis of current approaches to the study of this relationship. I will now first briefly summarize key points I have made before formulating some guidelines which can guide the continuing study of this issue.

Key Points

The key points from my discussion above that I want to restate here are:

1. It is well established that teachers’ beliefs can shape their behaviours but the relationship is reciprocal rather than deterministic (experience also shapes beliefs, more so perhaps when it is reflected on).
2. Much research comparing teachers’ stated beliefs and their observed (or sometimes reported) practices concludes that these are often (at least to some degree) inconsistent. This is not surprising and is a phenomenon noted for some time in social psychology research on the relationship between attitudes and behaviours.
3. This inconsistency is typically explained with reference to external factors (e.g. a prescribed curriculum) that limit teachers’ ability to enact their beliefs, though gaps in teachers’ knowledge (subject matter and pedagogical) are also influential.
4. Research examining the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and practices has tended to focus on comparing prior stated beliefs with subsequent observed practices; work which elicits beliefs to explicate previously observed practices is less common.
5. The outcomes of research into the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and practices are significantly shaped by the way this relationship is conceptualized, how beliefs are defined, and the design and conduct of these studies, particularly the choice of research methods.
6. Individualist approaches to the study of language teachers’ beliefs and practices dominate in comparison to those which conceptualize beliefs more socially and collectively.
7. Beyond claims about the existence of gaps in knowledge that the research is aiming to address, studies of the relationship between beliefs and knowledge often lack a clear purpose.

Guidelines

In response to these observations, I present here some guidelines for analyses of teachers’ beliefs and practices which can enhance the quality of continuing research of this kind. These guidelines apply to research on language awareness as well as to the study of language teachers’ beliefs and practices more generally.

Define a Clear Rationale

It is important at the outset to define why a decision has been made to study the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and practices. The common argument that research is needed because little is known about this relationship (typically with reference to a
particular area of language teaching) is insufficient. A clear argument needs to be outlined as to what the value of the research will be. Earlier in this chapter I gave examples of possible arguments and some of the papers I have discussed here do justify their work persuasively. For example, examining teachers’ beliefs and practices to support teacher professional development and productive changes in what teachers do is clearly of value, as is a desire to understand whether policy or curricular advice is informing teachers’ practices. On the other hand, a simple interest in whether there is a gap between teachers’ beliefs and practices is, in my view, inadequate; why such a gap might be of interest or value needs to be explained.

**Problematize ‘Belief’**

Studies of beliefs and practices should recognize the complex nature of beliefs and avoid simplistic and unproblematic conceptualizations of them. Researchers need to explain how beliefs are being defined in their work and acknowledge pertinent theoretical distinctions among different kinds of beliefs. The distinction between stated (professed or espoused) beliefs and enacted beliefs (beliefs in action) is a vital one here. So too is the concept of belief systems and the distinction between core and peripheral beliefs. The latter is important because when a stated belief is found to clash with an observed practice, it is often the case that that practice is in fact consistent with another belief which has more influence in the teachers’ overall belief system. ‘Belief’ cannot be reduced to the yes/no answer a teacher gives to a decontextualized statement about some aspect of language teaching. Researchers also need to be explicit about whether they consider beliefs to be stable and/or dynamic (i.e. subject to change over time in response to experience). The socially constructed nature of beliefs also merits much more attention (e.g. the impact on individuals of beliefs that are held by the social groups they are part of).

**Problematize the Beliefs/Practice Relationship**

Simplistic linear assumptions about the relationship between beliefs and practices also need to be avoided. The evidence from the educational and language teaching literature is clear: beliefs and practices are mutually informing and mediated by the sociocultural contexts teachers are part of. Studies that imply that beliefs inform practices in a unidirectional manner or that minimize the impact of the wider social or biographical context are thus based on incorrect or partially flawed assumptions. It is largely indisputable, too, that stated beliefs elicited without close reference to practice (i.e. through questionnaires) will very often diverge from the beliefs enacted in what teachers actually do. As I have already implied here, I am not convinced of the value of research that simply sets out to demonstrate that gaps between stated beliefs and observed practices exist – that should no longer come as a surprise or be considered, per se, of empirical interest. Understanding the nature of any such gaps and finding theoretically sound ways of explaining them, in contrast, are worthwhile endeavours.

The manner in which the beliefs/practice relationship is conceived also has implications for the design of research. Projects that focus on the gap between beliefs and practices tend to study beliefs first before examining practices and comparing the two. In contrast, where the focus is on understanding practices through the study of beliefs, then what teachers do is more likely to be the starting point.
Emerging social perspectives on the study of language teacher cognition also have implications for the way relationships between beliefs and practices are studied. Existing research on this relationship adopts what has been described as an individualist and cognitivist view of teachers’ minds and work (Burns, Freeman and Edwards, 2015). In contrast, social perspectives on the study of teacher cognition argue that teachers’ beliefs and practices are socially and historically constructed and dynamic and that it is not possible to adequately understand them without reference to interactions the teacher has with students, colleagues, professional learning, and institutional structures more generally over time. Similar arguments have been made in other subjects (e.g. Skott, 2009 in mathematics education). Such perspectives question the extent to which beliefs can (in the isolated and often quantitative manner in which they have typically been studied) provide a basis for the understanding of practice (which from a social perspective has also been studied very narrowly – e.g. limited observations of what happens in classrooms). The separation between beliefs and practices, which I have already noted here as a feature of much current research, also becomes problematic when a more sociocultural perspective is applied to the study of teacher cognition.

Maximize Methodological Rigour

Ample methodological advice exists on the study of teachers’ beliefs in both the educational literature (e.g. Schraw and Olafson, 2014 discuss ten strategies for assessing teachers’ beliefs) and in the language teaching literature (Borg, 2006, 2015b). Exciting developments in language teacher cognition research suggest further methodological possibilities (see the special issue of the *Modern Language Journal*, 99/3). Research into the beliefs/practice relationship will be enhanced when it demonstrates an awareness of, and is informed by, this literature. For example, the limitations of self-report pencil and paper instruments in the study of teachers’ beliefs have been noted for many years. This does not mean that such instruments should be completely avoided; but it does mean that instruments must be well-designed and results interpreted critically. One shortcoming of conventional belief questionnaires is that they consist of short decontextualized statements that elicit a limited range of socially desirable or idealistic responses. Instruments and prompts that provide a fuller context (e.g. an extract from a coursebook or piece of student work) for eliciting teachers’ beliefs thus have the potential to uncover beliefs that are more grounded in a concrete reality.

I do not want to give the impression that methodological sophistication simply means designing questionnaires well (though the uncritical use of questionnaires is by far the most problematic aspect of research on teachers’ beliefs and practices). Methodological expansion beyond the conventional triumvirate of questionnaires, interviews and observations is also desirable (see Margolis and Pauwels, 2011; Williams and Vogt, 2014 for innovative research methods). And within these conventional approaches, common problems that arise and can confound results also need to be noted:

- teachers’ lack of knowledge (and perhaps even interest) in the topics they are being asked to express beliefs about
- reliance on reported practices rather than actual observations
- observing teachers for a short time (e.g. one lesson) then extrapolating from that to their practices generally
• assuming that one short interview with a teacher will suffice to reveal their beliefs
• the assumption that teachers are aware of their beliefs and can readily articulate them in a coherent manner (interviews often make this assumption).

Conclusion

Twenty years ago research into language teachers’ beliefs and practices was scarce and such work could be justified largely on the grounds of theory-building and the need to add to the limited volume of existing empirical work. Today, though, it should no longer be assumed that invoking ‘beliefs’ is sufficient justification for empirical activity, and clear arguments must be constructed to explain why a study of the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and practices is necessary. Beyond that, there are several conceptual and methodological issues that arise in studying this relationship and, as I have explained in this chapter, an explicit and critical stance towards these is essential if research into teachers’ beliefs and practices is to generate findings that inspire confidence. The decontextualized study of professed beliefs and their purposeful contrast with what teachers are seen to do does now feel like a somewhat outdated mode of enquiry that does little to take our understandings of teaching and learning forward. Alternative ways – conceptually and methodologically – of conceiving the relationship between beliefs and practices are, however, available and it is hoped that researchers in the field of language teaching will increasingly begin to avail themselves of these.

Related Topics

Teacher development; research methods; teacher cognition; teachers’ beliefs

References


