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Raising Awareness of Mentors' and Trainees' Beliefs

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According to Astolfi, beliefs are «the conceptions which prevail within each age group and prior constructs which prevent the transmission of the teacher's knowledge to his students through automatic input/output operations»¹. For foreign language trainees on an initial training course as well as for their trainers/mentors, representations or beliefs on the teaching/learning process form a reference framework all the more pregnant as they are adults who have invested most of their time and abilities in learning. Thus their representations result from their diverse learning experiences. They depend on the success or failure of these experiences in cognitive as well as in affective terms. In other words, their beliefs are linked to their performance in the foreign language and to the feelings of self-esteem or failure they experienced when learning or teaching the foreign language. They also reflect the expectations and values of the cultural community the participants (i.e. mentors/trainees) belong to as Bruner points out in *The Culture of Education*.

As these beliefs are well-developed mental constructs which have had a significant impact on the participants' career choices, they also function as action plans. As such, according to the promoters of the theory of voluntary action, they have a predictive and stimulating effect on the individual's activity. Consequently, they play a decisive role in the development of new knowledge, skills and attitudes.

From this perspective, raising awareness of participants' beliefs can be considered as the preliminary stage of the training process since they determine how the latter interpret and appropriate new ideas from the training experience. It also contributes to the very construction of the concept itself and represents a major source of information for trainers.

¹ Astolfi, 1992.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A TRAINING TOOL

An investigation into beliefs concerning teaching and learning can be achieved through such activities as interviews, the examination of video-taped lessons, the analysis of classroom tasks or the completion of questionnaires. The selection of a closed questionnaire was determined by the fact this type of tool can be used with large classes and at the beginning of a training course within the time constraints of a single training session. It can also be used with mentors in mentor-training sessions, and subsequently by mentors when training initial trainees. Although the data obtained from the responses are not as refined as with the other tools, they provide a reliable source of information and a starting-point for raising awareness among participants.

The initial 20-item questionnaire was originally developed to elicit and assess French trainees' opinions on a variety of issues related to teacher training and foreign language teaching and learning. It was tested for clarity and comprehensiveness with foreign language teacher trainers in a workshop run at the Aquitaine teacher training Institute (IUFM), France, within the framework of the European Lingua programme on the training of teacher trainers. The resulting list includes 20 statements. The wording of each item is deliberately provocative in order to cause participants to react more spontaneously. It is meant to identify their views on four major areas: personal abilities for foreign language teaching (items 1 and 5), the training process (2, 3, 4, 6), the relationships between teaching and learning strategies (7, 8, 9, 10, 14, 15, 19, 20) and the relative emphasis placed on the development of linguistic knowledge and skills (11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18). Some of the items, for example 7 and 8, address the same issues so that the answers to these questions can be cross-checked. The purpose of the questionnaire is not to identify correct or incorrect opinions; instead, it seeks to make them aware of them and to make them discuss their expectations and the impact of their beliefs on teaching strategies.

THE PROCEDURE

The procedure suggested to use this tool includes four stages. Firstly, participants are asked to read each item, select four of them and rank them from 1 to 4 so that they become aware of their priorities in the various areas. Secondly, they are expected to share their views with one partner so that they can discuss and analyse them in depth by articulating them and confronting them with those of their partners. Thirdly, every group reports to the class in plenary session about the outcome of their discussion. Finally the discussion opens out into a con-

sideration of differences in approach in terms of training, teaching and learning strategies. Thus, this activity raises trainees' awareness and promotes learning through interaction between participants. It is based on a participant-centred approach since it focuses on the elicitation of their beliefs.

DISCUSSION OF THE RESPONSES

The questionnaire was used with groups of German, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Swedish and French trainees attending initial teacher training courses in their own countries. Unexpectedly perhaps, the trainees from the various countries selected the same items, i.e. 4, 10, 13, 15, in spite of cultural differences in their training environment. This similarity can be accounted for by the fact that trainees share the same expectations and objectives whatever their country of origin and training background. It can also be interpreted as evidence of the dissemination of current ideas about foreign language training and teaching approaches. Clearly these same topics will need to be focussed on in any mentor-training programme.

Item 4 addresses the issue of training approaches («Initial training involves relating foreign language acquisition theories to teaching practice»). A vast majority of trainees support a training approach based on the interaction between theory and practice. On one hand, this choice implies that they reject initial training programmes focussing only on the imitation of classroom techniques, however effective they may be. On the other hand, it indicates that foreign language acquisition theories, however enlightening they may be, must be put into perspective through confrontation with classroom practice.

Item 10 concerns the role of error management in the learning process. Overwhelmingly, the responses endorse the idea that students learn from the errors they make. Several trainees referred to their experience as language learners to stress how inhibiting it was for them to have all their errors corrected by their teachers.

Item 13 refers to the objective of foreign language teaching/learning. Most trainees agree that « what is important is to give the students the opportunity to understand and speak the foreign language as often as possible ». This shows that they believe the development of communicative competence is the major objective of language teaching and that this aim is achieved through practice. In other words, learning a language is not only a matter of learning vocabulary, grammar and phonology.

Item 15 relates to the interaction between language and culture. A majority of trainees support the view that language and culture are closely linked. They emphasised in the ensuing

discussion that the discovery of the foreign culture developed students' motivation for learning the foreign language.

CONCLUSION

Although there may be a gap between trainees' beliefs and what they will actually do in the language classroom, this questionnaire has proved useful in raising awareness of participants' beliefs on language teaching. Some FL trainers may be surprised by the results reported here. Nevertheless these findings provide trainers with good indications about potential tensions between participants' beliefs and new ideas and about the difficulties the latter may have in accommodating them. They also help trainers identify the views they can rely on to promote expanded awareness of teaching principles and strategies. These results proved useful in developing a similar questionnaire for determining the specific areas trainers may wish to deal with in a trainer training programme. Finally, it is hoped that this activity will enable trainers and trainees to construct the very concept of «belief» experientially.

References

- Astolfi, J.P., *L'Ecole pour apprendre*, Paris, ESF, 1992.
Bruner, J., *The Culture of Education*, Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1995

QUESTIONNAIRE

Below are beliefs that some people have about teaching foreign languages and teacher training.

- 1 – Select four of them and rank them from 1 to 4.*
- 2 – Share your answers with a partner, discuss any differences and the reasons for them.*
- 3 – Each pair will report to the class about their discussion*
- 4 – The discussion will open out into a consideration of differences in approach and teaching style and the reasons for these.*

- 1 – Some people have a special ability for teaching.
- 2 – Trainees must give language classes,
 - from the beginning of initial training.
 - after observation sessions.
- 3 – During initial training, teacher trainees must first of all learn effective classroom techniques.
- 4 – Initial training involves relating foreign language acquisition theories to teaching practice.
- 5 – I think I have a special ability for teaching.
- 6 – Foreign language acquisition theories are an integral part of the initial training programme.
- 7 – Successful learning depends entirely on effective teaching.
- 8 – Learning is a process depending on learners' mental activity.
- 9 – When students make errors, – systematic feedback must be provided. – selective feedback must be provided.
- 10 – Making errors is part of the learning process.
- 11 – The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning grammar and vocabulary.
- 12 – It is essential to know about the foreign culture when you learn a foreign language.
- 13 – What is important is to give the students the opportunity to understand and speak the foreign language as often as possible.
- 14 – FL teachers must keep the initiative of all class exchanges.
- 15 – Teaching the foreign language and culture cannot be dissociated.

- 16 – FL communication must be assessed in terms of grammar.
- 17 – Pronunciation must be a constant concern for FL teachers.
- 18 – The most important part of teaching a foreign language is giving the students the opportunity to speak it as much as possible in class.
- 19 – LI must be banned in class.
- 20 – Learning depends only on students' motivation.