

EXPLORING FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER BELIEFS AND PRACTICES IN TURKEY: A CASE STUDY



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Abstract

This case study explores the relationship between an Italian as a foreign language teacher's beliefs and online teaching practices in a tertiary education setting during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic. It aims to find out the teachers' beliefs with regard to their professional identities, and their roles in foreign language teaching classrooms. Besides, it was discussed if the teachers' beliefs concerning their role identities are related to their classroom practices. Data were collected over an academic term through one semi-structured interview and two observations conducted at beginning and at the end of the semester in order to see if there are any differences according to the professional roles of the instructor in the course of time depending on the learners' enhanced Italian language competence. The findings of the study revealed that the instructor acted out as a manager, facilitator, input provider, motivator and a translator in two observations, showing a slight difference in degree of synchronous interaction among the instructor and the students with the printed text, video tape or Web site. The interview responses revealing the instructor's beliefs were correlated with the roles observed in synchronous communication. This study is limited to the online foreign language classroom. It would be interesting to observe what other roles the teachers play in the face-to-face classroom. It may be suggested that the studies investigating those of teachers instructing foreign languages other than English may enlighten the research on teachers' beliefs and their professional role identities and contribute to the professional development of foreign language teachers. Last but not least, for professional growth of pre-service foreign language teachers, preliminary studies on teacher cognition should be included in the curriculum of teaching practicum.

1. Introduction

In the last few years, language teachers' beliefs have drawn particular attention to academic research. The research has mainly employed case study methodology e.g. one of the volumes of System edited by Barcelos and Kalaja (2011) is mainly composed of case studies investigating teacher beliefs. Research on teachers' beliefs has different foci one of which is correspondence (or lack of it) between their beliefs and practices.

The explorations on teacher's beliefs and their classroom practices have revealed a great impact of the former on the latter (Basturkmen, 2012; Farrell & Bennis, 2013; Farrell & Ives,

2014). According to Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver, and Thwaite (2001) teachers' way of organizing teacher, learner, and subject matter using certain resources in certain context is mainly impacted by their beliefs. Kagan (1992), for example, claims that teacher beliefs are mainly built on unaware suppositions concerning students, classroom and teaching materials, and these beliefs had better be raised to the conscious level.

The research has also reflected on language teachers' professional role identity. Role identities are "central to the beliefs, assumptions, values, and practices that guide teacher actions both inside and outside the classroom" (Farrel, 2011). Therefore, the

research on teachers' professional role identity is of particular significance for encouraging professional development of language teachers (Farrell, 2011).

Against this background, this study aims at exploring the relationship between teachers' beliefs on teachers' professional role identities and their teaching practices. To this end, the study will address the following research questions:

What are teachers' beliefs concerning their role identities in foreign language classrooms?

What roles do teachers perform in foreign language classrooms?

Are the teachers' beliefs concerning their role identities related to their classroom practices?

2. Review of Literature

Teachers' beliefs have been defined in various ways so far, but the definition proposed by Borg (2001) is widely recognized one which refers to teachers' conscious or unconscious evaluative propositions, and their recognition of differing beliefs of other teachers on the same topic while adhering to the ones they hold. These beliefs "influence how the teacher orchestrates the interaction between learner, teacher, and subject matter in a particular classroom context with particular resources" (Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver & Thwaite, 2001).

The idea that teachers' beliefs guide their actions is a widely accepted one (Borg, 2011). The relationship between teachers' beliefs and their actions seems to be interactive in a way that even though actions are directed by beliefs, teachers' experiences and their reflection on actions may result in alteration in or supplementation to those beliefs (Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004; Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver & Thwaite, 2001).

Research also reveals lack of correspondence between teacher beliefs and practices (Farrell & Lim, 2005; Richards, 1996). One reason behind the lack of correspondence is found to be situational constraints which prevent teachers from implementing their beliefs in practice (Borg, 2003; Liao, 2003; Fang, 1996). Another reason is explained by Richardson, Anders, Tidwell and Lloyd (1991) with alteration process in beliefs which is yet to be reflected in a teacher's practices. In addition, Graden (1996) accounts for the lack of correspondence by existence of teacher's multiple belief systems, i.e. belief in one system may be at odds with belief in another system. Phipps and Borg (2009), moreover, suggests 'core beliefs' and 'peripheral beliefs', and explains the lack of correspondence with possible 'tensions' between teachers' these types of beliefs.

Teachers' role identity research has mainly focused on that of novice teachers, but it is equally important to investigate experience professional language teachers in order for supporting them while they take part in professional development (Farrell, 2011). Teachers' role identity is mainly about "how teachers recognize their roles within their world and involves their beliefs, values, and assumptions about teaching and being a teacher" (Farrell, 2011).

Together with their professional role identity there are different other roles which teachers believe to be in balance with one another (Volkman & Anderson, 1998). These roles may involve those which are of functional nature performed by teacher as a part of their duties, those which teachers believe with respect to being a teacher, and those which were formed as a result of changes in teachers' philosophy of teaching (Walkington, 2005). They include all the functional roles a teacher takes while performing his or her tasks, what they feel and believe about teaching and being a teacher, and how these are shaped by the teacher's evolving philosophy of teaching (Walkington, 2005). As an illustration, Farrell (2011) suggests several well-known roles anecdotally attributed to ESL teachers, such as entertainer, cross-cultural expert, oral interviewer, language expert, language model, disciplinarian, counsellor, curriculum planner, curriculum evaluator, storyteller, team builder, materials developer, friend, surrogate parent, interaction manager, needs assessor, and joke teller.

3. Methodology

Recently, teachers' beliefs have drawn particular attention of researchers, and in the research has mainly employed case study methodology. The present study is also based on a case study. This methodology has been selected due to its potential for facilitating formation of in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under consideration, and its adeptness in dealing with the intricate nature of events in real life (Farrell & Ives, 2014; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994).

3.1. The Participant

The participant of this research, Margaret is a language specialist having long years of experience as a linguist, an EFL teacher and foreign language teacher trainer, and holding a high academic rank at one of the public universities in Turkey. Besides academic courses that she provides for undergraduate and postgraduate ELT students, she teaches Italian as a foreign language as an elective course for students of the university. She is considered by the students as the most creative and innovative teacher in terms of both teaching and assessment.

3.2. The Context

In the course of study, Margaret was instructing Italian as a foreign language (IFL) for students at a university, who were at a beginner level of language proficiency. She was using an IFL textbook for beginner level learners as a main resource.

3.3. Data Collection

Data in this study were collected over an academic term through one semi-structured interview and two observations. A semi-structured interview was chosen specifically for allowing the participant to express her beliefs on the roles of teacher and learners in FL classrooms more freely and comprehensively. The interview was held by phone call, recorded and transcribed with the permission of the instructor. The beliefs expressed in the interview were categorized and used to structure the observation. The observations were held in the teachers' home while she was teaching the course online. Each observation lasted for one hour. The observations were covert non-participant, i.e. the observer sat at the back of the room where his observations were least noticeable. The video recordings of the online sessions were acquired and transcribed.

4. Findings and Discussion

The data analysis has revealed various aspects of the teachers' beliefs and their practices. The findings of the data analysis are presented below in relation to the research questions.

4.1. What are teachers' beliefs concerning their role identities in foreign language classrooms?

In terms of teachers' roles in foreign language classrooms, Margaret has expressed her beliefs very enthusiastically as if she were talking about the most valuable aspects of her thinking by diving into her memory for supporting these beliefs. Her beliefs have been coded and categorized in Table 1. below.

As Table 1. indicates, Margaret sees teachers as managers in the foreign language classes. She offers different ideas about managing class considering it as a collaborative process involving teachers and learners' mutual efforts, and an authoritative act where teacher holds the control in his/her hand exclusively. For instance, regarding the former type of class management, Margaret states that:

I don't call classroom management as "sınıf yönetimi", I call it, "sınıf yönetişimi", Iskender, in translation, ... I don't prefer translation "sınıf yönetimi", classroom management, but management is something reciprocal, I think.

Table 1. The teachers' beliefs concerning teachers' roles in foreign language classroom.

Roles	Beliefs
Manager	... and directing all, director of all stage play but the same the students are the actors.
Facilitator	... sometimes I am their facilitators.
Input provider	... they have to let the students hear themselves.
Motivator	They try to encourage the spontaneous use of foreign language.

As the above given example shows, Margaret considers management as a reciprocal effort provided by both teachers and learners. On the other hand, she has pointed out another type of management where the teacher holds most of the ties in his/her hand. Her metaphors expressed in terms of class management can illustrate the point clearly e.g. "yeah, yeah, I'm a bus driver. But my learners, I let my learners use breaks". The metaphors show that the learners' only role in this process is their right to control breaks in the way of learning. Nevertheless, it is a teacher who decides on the rote and speed. Margaret tries to justify her desire for tight control as, "if I follow what's happening around me, then I can take necessary steps in order to avoid undesired things, and welcome things which might be better for my students".

Foreign language teachers, according to Margaret, are facilitators at the same time. She expressed this belief during the interview both explicitly and implicitly. Explicitly, Margaret simply stated, "sometimes I am their facilitator". Implicitly, moreover, Margaret said, "I mean, I feel I need to prepare them for a better learning process. You know this is not something easy".

Furthermore, being an online instructor in Italian course at the University, she was able to facilitate the students' comprehension skills through synchronous interaction among the instructor and the students with the printed text, video tape or Web site.

In terms of being input provider, Margaret meant language input in the foreign language. She considers it essential as a role of foreign language teacher by arguing that "teacher is a primary source, again as an audiolingual because trying to be model they have to let the students hear themselves, OK?" She metaphorically asserted this belief by claiming, "then here in that way teacher must be a singer". In other words, teacher "sings" in foreign language for providing firsthand input for his/her learners.

Last but not least, Margaret considers foreign language teachers as motivators. She stated that teachers “try to encourage the spontaneous use of foreign language” by carrying out their roles as motivators. However, she voiced this belief more expressively as, “but I thought I know how to touch my learners’ hearts”.

4.2. What roles do teachers perform in foreign language classrooms?

4.2.1. Observation 1

The first observation took place at the beginning of the semester, and it was the second lesson that Margaret was teaching. In the observation, the observer specifically focused on the roles she plays while teaching. Analysis of the observation data has revealed that Margaret plays almost the same roles in her classroom which she indicated in the interview.

Regarding the role of manager, Margaret assigned turns to each student and asked them to follow her instructions. She instructed the students as, “you are going to spell your name”. She also said, “Elif, tocca a te, it is your turn” to manage the turns. For eliciting the answers, moreover, she asked directly, “can you repeat?” or “can you read the last one?”

As a facilitator, Margaret mostly tried to create a learning environment for learners to be reflective on their linguistic experiences. To this end, she explained some phonological rules of Italian to achieve the learners’ accurate pronunciation. To illustrate, she described how the letter “ç” is pronounced by explaining as, “we do not say [dʒ], but [tʃ] when we pronounce the one with tale”. Similarly, she explained how to pronounce words with [z] sound as follows:

Look, guys, as I have already said, in Italian before sound [z] the sound [t] is pronounced. As one says [pitsa] not [pizza]. Pizza written as p, i, z, z, a but is pronounced as [pitsa], isn’t it?”

Margaret also performed the role of input provider, by directly addressing the learners in Italian without translation. She addressed the learners simply “tocca a te” which means “it is your turn”, or asked the learner to spell her surname in Italian just as “cognome?”. Moreover, Margaret provided language input for her students by asking about the color of their clothes they wear as “che colore che l’hai?”

In terms of being a motivator, furthermore, Margaret, played her role by praising the learners when they provided correct answers for her questions. For this purpose, she used words both in Italian and Turkish which can be translated as, “very good”, “great”, or praised the learner jokingly as, “you are great, are you Italian?”

In addition to the above-mentioned roles, Margaret played the role of a translator by translating almost all instructions, explanations, words, chunks, and sentences.

4.2.2. Observation 2

The second observation took place at the end of the semester. It was again in Margaret’s home where she gave the course online. At this time too, the observer sat at the back not to cause any distraction. The field notes have been taken, and a video recording of the course has been acquired and transcribed. Analysis of the observation data has revealed that Margaret plays the same roles which she did in the first observation and which she identified during the interview. However, this time she played some roles at a much higher level.

During this observation, Margaret was more of an input provider than anything else. She mostly spoke in Italian and started the session, by giving instructions without translating into Turkish. She said, for example, “va bene, pagina ventinove” pointing out the page number twenty-nine, so that the learners could look at it. Moreover, she performed the role of manager by instructing and directing the learners to express certain sentences in Italian. For instance, in the following example, Margaret managed the learner as:

Can you see a woman putting her hand on her head? You are going to say that she has a headache. Find a female name in Italian, come on.

Or in another case, she asked the student directly as, “now there is a man, come on, find a male name for him”, by which she organized the classroom and elicited answers from her students. Later, during the above-mentioned interaction, Margaret motivated the same student whom she asked to find a female name, by praising and encouraging her to do so as, “very nice. Well done. You are so clever! Come on, say that Sandra has a headache”.

Likewise, she facilitated the student’s response by giving her the correct form as, “Sandra ha mal di testa”. In another instance, she facilitated a learner’s response by giving her a clue saying, “Marco has a stomachache, i.e. ‘pancia’. Yes?” Seeing that the learner could not find the correct grammatical form to construct the sentence, she explained the form by asking her, “let’s remember, ‘ho’, ‘hai’, ‘ha’, ‘abbiamo’, ‘avete’, ‘hanno’” which are the verb conjugation of “have” according to the subject pronouns. After this explanation, the learner immediately uttered the correct sentence as, “Marco ha mal di pancia”.

As these examples show, Margaret performed almost the same roles which she mentioned at the interview, except translation. She performed the role of a translator throughout the session, but less than she did during the first observation.

4.2. Are the teachers' beliefs concerning their role identities related to their classroom practices?

Analysis of both interview and observation data have revealed that, Margaret's beliefs regarding teachers' roles and the roles which she performed in her online Italian course as a foreign language are almost identical. Table 2 indicates the relationships of her beliefs revealed in the interview with her classroom practices displayed during the observations.

Table 2. Relationship between teachers' beliefs concerning teachers' roles and their classroom practices.

Roles Mentioned at Interview	Observation 1	Observation 2
Manager	✓	✓
Facilitator	✓	✓
Input provider	✓	✓
Motivator	✓	✓

Apart from the roles which she stated as beliefs, Margaret performed the role of a translator. This fact encouraged the researcher to think about the reasons behind the lack of correspondence between Margaret's beliefs and her classroom practices. Therefore, following up after the interview, Margaret answered the question of the researcher about the professional role identity as a translator as, "I would call it as an interpreter, and I do not only interpret sentences, but also culture." It seems that the follow-up interview encouraged Margaret to articulate this belief to herself and the interviewer (Farrel, 2008), and thus raise it to the level of conscious awareness (Farrel & Ives, 2014). To the questions about the sources of her beliefs, moreover, Margaret responded as "our experiences are our great teachers", and later as "history" which reinforces the previous response, "scientific research", "environment", "partners" and at last, "anything else around us". These responses clearly show that Margaret's beliefs are mainly influenced by her experiences. In the same vein, Richards and Lockhart (1994) asserted, "teachers' beliefs about learning may be based on their training, their teaching experience, or may go back to their own experience as language learners".

Moreover, when the researcher asked about dominant use of Turkish, traditional methods, and a textbook as an exclusive resource, she explained these facts by referring to limitations of online education. This finding is in line with the results of Borg (2003), Liao (2003), Fang, (1996) in which lack of correspondence between teachers' beliefs and practices are explained with situational constraints.

Generally, Margaret's beliefs regarding professional role identities converged with her teaching practices. This finding is in harmony with Basturkmen's (2012) conclusion to her review of studies on teacher beliefs and practices which can be stated as "more experienced teachers are likely to have more experientially informed beliefs than relative novices, and principles or beliefs informed by teaching experiences might be expected to correspond clearly with teaching practices".

5. Conclusion

This case study explored teachers' beliefs regarding their professional role identities, and their teaching practices in foreign language classrooms. To this end, an experienced foreign language teacher, holding higher academic position at one of the public universities of Turkey has been interviewed and her Italian as a foreign language classroom has been observed. The data from both sources have been transcribed and analyzed. The findings have revealed that the roles which the participant believes teachers perform and the ones she actually performs in the foreign language classroom converge with each other. Although one of the roles which she played in the classroom was not indicated during the first interview, it was elicited in the follow-up interview. The participant might previously have held unconscious assumptions about that role, but after articulating this belief she raised it to the level of conscious awareness. The results of this study indicate that foreign language teachers' beliefs and practices regarding their roles in FL classrooms can be closely related to each other. Although it is hardly possible to generalize this study, it can be helpful for encouraging reflection in and professional development of experienced language teachers.

6. Limitations

This case study has some limitations concerning both interview and observation. The interview was held through phone call. It would have been better if we had held it face to face. As a result of the response of the public education to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic, distance learning was adapted, and thus the online class which was observed was held in virtual classroom. It would be interesting to observe what other roles the participant plays in the face-to-face classroom.

7. Suggestions

Generally, the studies investigating teachers' beliefs and practices as well as their professional role identities were conducted with English as a second language teachers. The studies investigating those of teachers instructing foreign languages other than English may enlighten the research on teachers' beliefs and their professional role identities and contribute to the professional development of foreign language teachers. Last but not least, for professional growth of pre-service foreign language teachers, preliminary studies on teacher's cognition should be included in the curriculum of teaching practicum.

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