

University Students' Beliefs about Teaching and Teachers

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Introduction

Different researchers have noted that students' beliefs and attitudes about English and teaching English impact directly upon their learning. Furthermore, the study of their beliefs and attitudes towards English, the teacher's role, and their own role in the classroom provide opportunities to understand their actions in learning situations.

In effect, their beliefs impact powerfully on the ways in which students learn and use English in a given context. At the same time, they provide a basis for the quality of the interactions that takes place in a learning environment. Research suggests that the relationship between beliefs and learning is cyclic. On one hand, the experience that the student brings into the learning environment, when he attempts to learn English, provokes different reactions and influences the formation of his beliefs. On the other hand, the beliefs that an individual holds have a direct impact on his reactions in learning situations and also on his capacity to learn. The focus in this paper will be placed on university students beliefs about teaching and teachers, and related issues that emerged from their experiences in the language classroom.

Students' perceptions and beliefs: an overview of studies

Traditionally, the field of SLA has been dominated by accountable quantitative models based on empirical studies that claim that the individual difference between learners is what ultimately predicts the learner's success. These theories have been considered sufficient to explain the learner's differences in learning outcomes and have rarely been questioned. During the last few years, a group of scholars (Pavlenko & Lantolf 2000, Pennycook 2001, Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001, Norton 2004) has noted the importance of turning to theories that view the field not as the development of accountable quantitative models

based on empirical studies but rather *on models that account for the language learner* as a member of complex social networks encompassing multiple identities.

The preoccupation for voicing educational actors' perceptions and beliefs has found echo in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). This type of studies emerged out of the recognition of the diversity of language learners in terms not only of their purpose for learning the language but also of the ways they learn (Benson and Nunan, 2005). Furthermore, they emerged due to the complex endeavour that learning a language implies. Benson (2005) provides an excellent account on how the approach to researching language learning has shifted along the years to a current tendency on the learning experiences of learners. Chik (2005) has rightly pointed out that learners' stories have always been buried under classroom routines, unnoticed, highlighting the usefulness of paying close attention to students' stories since these may show that learning is a process of transforming individual differences into learner individuality and identity, both inside and outside the classroom.

Consequently, an increasing number of researchers have focused on language learning beliefs. Scholars have recognised the set of assumptions and interpretations that learners bring with them to the language classroom. These researchers have argued that learners have positive contributions to make to the language lesson. Understanding their contributions is essential for effective teaching and learning because they are likely to influence the learning process. The significance of investigating language learning beliefs has been related to i) students' use of language learning strategies (Horwitz, 1987; Wenden, 1987), ii) learners' anxiety (Horwitz, 1990), and iii) autonomous learning (Cotterall, 1995). The majority of these studies has centred on language learners' beliefs about learning languages and has drawn relationships between their beliefs and their influence on learners' approach to learning.

In the classroom context, the perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and metacognitive knowledge that students bring with them to the learning situation have been recognized as a significant contributory factor in the learning process and ultimate success (Breen, 2001). For example, second language students may hold strong beliefs about the process of its acquisition, their own expectations about achievement and teaching methodologies. Identification of these beliefs and reflection on their potential impact on language learning and teaching in general, as well as in more specific areas such as the learners' expectations, can inform teacher practice in the course.

Preconceived beliefs may directly influence or even determine a learner's attitude or motivation, and precondition the learner's success or lack of success (Kuntz, 1996). Supportive and positive beliefs help to overcome problems and thus sustain motivation, while negative or unrealistic beliefs can lead to decreased motivation, frustration and anxiety (Kern, 1995; Oh, 1996). Many successful learners develop insightful beliefs about language learning processes, their own abilities, and the use of effective learning strategies, which may have a facilitative effect on learning.

On the other hand, students can have 'mistaken', uninformed, or negative beliefs that may lead to a reliance on less effective strategies, resulting in a negative attitude towards learning and autonomy (Victori and Lockhart, 1995), and classroom anxiety (Horwitz et al. 1986). Students who believe, for example, that teachers have to explain everything clearly will experience high levels of anxiety when teachers implement self-discovery techniques. Such beliefs can also inhibit learners' perceptiveness to the ideas and activities presented in the classroom, particularly when the approach is not consonant with the learners' experience (Cotterall, 1995). As negative beliefs can lead to dissatisfaction with the course and anxiety, Mantle-Bromley (1995) suggests that if teachers attend to the affective and cognitive components of students' attitudes as well as develop defensible pedagogical techniques, they may be able to increase both the length of time students commit to language study and their chances of success in it. However, Stevick (1980) argues that success depends less on the materials and teaching techniques in the classroom and more on what goes on inside the learner.

Learners' perceptions of classroom learning in foreign language settings have also been investigated. David Block (1992) investigated the extent to which students and teachers agree in their views on classroom roles. Data from both groups showed that whereas teachers express their ideas in accordance with the literature in applied linguistics, learners had developed their own conceptualizations. He concluded that the gap between teachers and students' visions of the classroom might bring negative consequences. In 1994, he focused on the micro skills of classroom activity showing that teachers and students also had different perceptions on the intention and salience of particular activities. Block (1996) again found considerable variation between teacher and individual learner perceptions on what they thought was happening in class on a daily basis. Block described in detail one student's reactions and examined the extent to which his views were analogous or dissimilar from those of the teacher. He concluded that students in this study had unclear ideas on the goals of activities

they were asked to do in class and as a result felt that they were wasting their time. In his study in 1998, he adopted a longitudinal approach in documenting a learner's efforts to learn English. He interviewed the learner to obtain his dynamic and evolving evaluation of the course in which he was enrolled. He concluded that the learner's elaborated reactions to the course could not have been captured by any formal evaluation form, questioning the validity of using such forms.

Other researchers have explored learners' perceptions of language learning in order to learn (from their stories) about their language learning experiences, and how these can inform teaching processes and learning theories. These researchers consider the opportunity to have a voice in the learning process as intimately related to learner autonomy. In order to access students' voices they have employed Narrative Inquiry methodologies, which allow language learning to be considered from different perspectives. For example, Carter (2005), using autobiographical accounts, discusses learners' stories in three contexts linked to higher education, providing rich insights into language learning which resonate beyond the individuals in her research. She concludes that giving voice to the learners' experience has enriched foreign language education for all her participants (teachers and students alike). Karlson (2005) investigates how learners construct and tackle self-evaluation in an autonomous learning environment. She focuses on learners' self-evaluation and face-to-face counselling to highlight the importance of learner histories due to the richness of experiences, beliefs and personal theories that students bring to any course. According to Karlsson, it is evident in her study that learners' ways of conceptualising language and language learning form an integral part of their histories. In Benson and Nunan's collection (2005) issues dealt by the authors range from psychological factors –motivation, affect, age, learner strategies and identity– to discussion of how learners experience learning in three different settings or learning modes; that is, how social factors influence their learning, all addressed from an (auto)biographical perspective.

These studies have mostly been concerned with the description of diversity in a more holistic sense rather than focused on variable proficiency outcomes. This has led to the production of individual learner's stories which have broadened our understanding of issues affecting (positively or negatively) learning that would otherwise remain hidden. This information has started to accumulate, from both second and foreign language contexts, informing theories of language learning.

Despite the growing number of investigation in the field, few studies have examined how university students interpret the experience of learning English as a foreign language in a foreign language setting. In Mexico, the issue of students' beliefs has recently been incorporated into the research agenda. Nonetheless, the few studies that have investigated this have mostly used questionnaires or inventories, which make it difficult to understand the process from an *emic* perspective. The use of such instruments reinforces an abstract idea of beliefs by disconnecting them from actions and students' real contexts and experiences, a point made by Block (1998). Other studies have employed more interpretative frameworks but have failed to consider how students interpret actual institutional and teaching practices and how these influence students' behaviour.

Discovering students' attitudes and beliefs is possible, as it is generally accepted that language learners are capable of bringing this knowledge to consciousness and articulating it (Willing, 1988). No doubt, such dialogues are important since they form an essential component to gain firsthand insight into learners' conceptual frameworks in foreign language learning.

Research Methodology and Procedure

This chapter is the result of an investigation on students' perception of school practices undertaken at a Mexican university English Department (Narvaez, 2007). The participants were members of a BA degree in English cohort in their early twenties. The study was concerned with creating understanding from the perspective of the informants' own frame of reference. A *Voiced Research* approach was employed (Narvaez, 2006) in search of understanding the factors influencing students' perceptions of school practices in order to raise awareness of the issues involved.

Methods of data generation employed

In order to address the issue in depth, it was necessary to employ a multi-method approach. Thus, the research design resulted in three sources and several interconnected stages of data generation over the 18 months spent in the field. The methods of data generation evolved as the field research progressed; these included:

- **Involvement and Participation.** My involvement with and participation in the student circles let me perceive students' behaviour to school;

this became rich 'experiential data'.

- Purposeful Conversations. Successive conversations with students and dropouts provided invaluable oral accounts of their perceptions of school practices.
- Diary analysis. Diarists provided a different type of account of school life, a version more intimately linked to events within the classroom. Analysis of diary entries helped me sharpen the focus of subsequent conversations.
- In-depth conversations. These were more targeted discussions of the issues brought up (or perceived) at initial stages. I used this type of conversations to seek for details, to follow up the gaps, to clarify issues and to sound hunches out.

Although classroom observation was to be used as a method to obtain data, this was omitted as the research progressed because of the following reasons:

- Data generated with methods in use was consistent and rich enough to draw interpretations and generate theory;
- There were many interesting issues emerging in student voice obtained;
- Diaries provided an unobtrusive way of obtaining students' interpretations of classroom practices;
- The presence of 'an observer' might have altered both teachers and students' behaviour.

Thus, the data informing this study took the form of and was limited to the following:

- 'experiential data'
- oral accounts of students' school experiences
- written accounts of classroom practices

What follows is a detailed description of the strategies employed to generate data. This section may appear to be rather lengthy as compared with the simplistic, reduced description of how data is collected in traditional research. In ethnographic research of the type used in this investigation, data is not 'there' waiting to be collected; it is the result of the research encounter between the researcher and the researchees; more to the point, hardly ever do we have the

chance to read how ethnographic research is actually done in real life contexts. It is my aim to illustrate how this might be carried out.

Experiential data

Experiential data (Strauss, 1987:10) was generated from my involvement with students during the time indwelling their circles. I spent innumerable hours involved with students, joining casual conversations with them during breaks in the class schedule or after-school gatherings. I was always open to them, sharing my own history. This sharing that I brought to the interactions with students not only created opportunities for successive casual conversations and revealing purposeful conversations but also helped in creating appropriate conditions of trust and rapport. All encounters fostered a sense of trust between me and the students, which allowed for the development of personalized relationships with some of them (see Narvaez, 2009 for issues of power, validity and ethics when using Voiced Research).

Conversations and informal interviews

It was suggested above that research of this kind needed to be approached from a perspective in which both language and behaviour could be captured. One of the simplest ways to achieve this is by consulting the people involved. Drever, puts it succinctly, 'In the teaching profession, when you want to get information, canvass opinion or exchange ideas, the natural thing to do is to talk to people' (Drever, 2003:1).

One of the most prominent methods of data collection in the ethnographic tradition is that of 'interview'. This technique was used in this study to infer perceptions from students' statements and intentions. The ethnographic 'interview' has been recognised as the most direct method of gaining knowledge on and about the research setting (Gillham 2000, Kvale 1996, Drever 2003). Qualitative research literature has tended to differentiate between different kinds of interview strategy such as structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews (Hammersly and Atkinson, 1995, Roberts 2002) which indicate the level of control the interviewer takes over the content and direction of the interviews. However, a more extended variety of 'interviews' takes place in fieldwork than researchers often recognize. The closest classification in which to locate the exchanges that took place during this research is Burgess' (1998) definition of 'conversations with a purpose'.

The study comprised fifty (50) recorded conversations. Most of them took place on a one to one basis but there were also some other conversations with groups of students (4-6) or in pairs. These were conducted in Spanish, as I was mindful of students to be able to express their ideas without risking getting short of language had they been in English. My main objective in these encounters was to find out about issues that could not be directly perceived in their behaviour. The exchanges were also used for crosschecking 'facts' and for checking hypotheses formulated in the course of previous conversations, involvement with their social circles and from reading diary entries.

Students seemed to have lots of free time and being at *their* places let me take advantage of that, initiating conversations with them or participating in their own. I tried to talk informally with as many participants as I could; these were opportunistic exchanges that mostly arose at the students' private places: in hallways during recess, at the school cafeteria in 'sandwich hours', while they were waiting for a teacher or, simply, when they decided to skip a lesson.

In accordance with the conventions of Voice Research (Narvaez, 2006), I used a non-directive style. I gave priority to what the participants wanted to say. I made every effort not to dominate the interaction so that researchees could talk about issues that they considered interested or significant. I was concerned with listening to and learning from them. When I was able to talk to a person in privacy and at length, I had more opportunity to insert questions into the conversation, thus steering the interaction towards my research interests. Nevertheless, even then, I tried to phrase questions in an open-ended manner, so that the informants could pursue their own areas of interest and express themselves in their very own way.

Doing the transcriptions and early analysis while still in the field helped me sharpen the purpose of questions in later encounters. These interwoven activities proved very important in pursuing the issues in deeper detail as it made me frequently review and update the questions so that even when I was not preparing for a conversation, the questions were always fresh in my mind. In the later phase of the fieldwork, more 'targeted' conversations were used, meaning that a set of themes around which I wanted the participants to talk, and some possible questions within each theme were prepared.

One interesting issue in the data was that students often said they did not have enough opportunities to talk to someone about their learning; when they are provided with these opportunities, they find the experience helpful. They like to discuss their problems and progress in private on a one-to-one basis with somebody they feel confident. Students like talking to teachers who

show real concern for them, not only as students but also as individuals. A desire to speak, a need to be heard was found in all informants. I was able to witness that when someone cares to listen, students open up and speak out their concerns, struggles, aspirations and dreams, their voice flows easily.

Students' diaries

The way the investigation progressed made me aware of the potentialities of using a research tool that could provide more insightful information. Although not a method intimately linked to Voiced Research, I decided to ask some students to keep a diary as a way of accessing what was happening within the classroom without obstructing the regular flow of classroom dynamics. In other words, I wanted to access the classroom without possibly affecting both teacher and students' behaviour.

In social research, sociologists have seriously taken the idea of using personal documents to construct pictures of social reality from the actor's perspective. Diaries are used as research instruments to collect detailed information about behaviour, events and other aspects of an individual's daily lives. Diaries present certain advantages over other data generation methods. Self-completion diaries (Corti, 1993) can provide a trustworthy alternative to the traditional interview for events that are difficult to recall accurately or that are easily forgotten. They can also help to surmount the problems associated with collecting sensitive information by personal interview when not sufficient trust and rapport has been established. Pole and Morrison (2003:58) recognise the value of using diaries in ethnographic research:

Diary provides access to particular, parochial and time bound data. ... often provide a level of personal detail not available through other methods. ... it may also offer a degree of reflexivity on the part of those responsible for writing the diary.

In ELT, diaries have been widely used as a pedagogic device aimed at encouraging authentic language practice and in initiating learning autonomy by means of increasing students' reflection on their learning. Nunan (1992:118) considers diaries, logs, and journals as 'important introspective tools in language research'. Furthermore, diaries can be used to supplement interview data to

provide a rich source of information on researchees' behaviour and experiences on a daily basis. Other researchers have highlighted the value of keeping diaries in language learning environments (for example Nunan, 1992; Bailey 1980; Schumann, 1980; Howell-Richardson and Parkinson, 1988; Carroll, 1994; Halbach 2000). Using diaries may bring an added benefit to diarists, that of becoming more critical thinkers (Moon, 1999) and more aware of their learning (Nunan, 1992).

In this study, diary keeping constituted first-person descriptions of learning experiences. The diaries provided a window through which I could access their classroom without possibly affecting its natural environment and thus provoking the so-called observer's paradox. Diaries written for research purposes will usually focus on particular activities or occurrences involving guidance by the researcher as opposed to those written for personal reasons. In this case, I asked diarists to record their views, opinions and feelings about classroom practices. As it turned out, later discussion of the diary entries with informants proved an invaluable source of first-hand information. This collection of diaries became invaluable to my research.

One of the risks of having people writing diaries is that of lost of interest or lack of time to write, as well as attrition (people who stop writing because of the reasons above). Out of the seven people requested to write a diary only four gave them back.

The table below presents the data collection phases and research participants used in the generation of research data.

Table 1: Data collection and processing research phases

Phase	Who	What
Finding the voices	15 upper semester students, about 60 freshers	successive informal conversations, involvement with student community
Finding // capturing the voices	10 conversational partners & 6 diarists	35 recorded purposeful conversations, diaries, incalculable hours of involvement,
Examining the voices	Xochitl, Rubi, Juana, Maria, Ramon, Dizzy	15 targeted conversations, 6 diaries, countless hours of involvement

Data Analysis Procedure

It must be considered that methods of data generation and data analysis did not constitute different phases in the research process. On the contrary, generating data and analysing it were two interrelated procedures that intimately informed each other all the way throughout the fieldwork. Following this system of data generation/analysis helped me make decisions in order to take further action; it enriched the subsequent steps of the research design. In what follows, an explanation of the procedures for analysing the data generated will be presented.

Data analysis for this study can be divided in two distinctive but interrelated phases. The first one occurred while still in the field as a simultaneous activity with data generation. The second stage occurred after departure from the field. This was a more systematic approach to data analysis than that done during the first stage as it implied analysis of the three different types of data obtained.

A grounded theory approach to data analysis was followed (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987). The essential idea in grounded theory is that theory will be developed inductively from data. Theory is grounded when it emerges from the data through 'successively evolving interpretations made during the course of the study' (Strauss, 1987:10). Grounded theory is conceptually dense, with lots of concepts and internal linkages, and it is filtered through researchers' own experiences and understandings as 'experiential data'. The use of a grounded methodology is justified because such a methodology is not concerned with logical truth but with a dependability of representation and explanation. This dependability is defined by the ability of the grounded model to fit the data, while also being recognised, understood and hence agreed on by participants of the process.

The grounded theory approach adopted for analysing the data allowed identification of significant themes and 'a constant comparative method' was used to integrate the data from each conversation into categories identified in earlier ones. The themes were therefore developed inductively from the data through a cyclical process of coding and revisiting the interview transcripts and diary entries. The experiential data gained during my involvement with the student community helped in shaping my understanding of the issues.

The procedure used to conduct data analysis included the following seven steps:

1. Recording the voices
2. Turning voices into text

3. Reading and proofreading transcriptions
4. Highlighting emerging themes
5. Coding and classifying issues
6. Peer checking
7. Constructing categories

The grounded theory mode suggests that researchers necessarily interpret data through the lens of their own experience and values and that this needs to be stated. Regarding this, I was constantly vigilant not to over-interpret the data. Both positive and negative comments from participants regarding school practices and/or teaching styles were included, although in the narratives the negative remarks were much more frequent than the positive. I benefited from early discussions with colleagues; however, all the interpretations presented below are my own and I take responsibility for any errors in interpretation.

Limitations

It would be naïve to assume that the successive conversations sufficiently captured the range of student voice or that they provided opportunity for student voice to carry equal legitimacy. The voices captured are assumed necessarily partial, they express a particular position on the world that might make possible certain understandings and constrain others. Consequently, students' voices must not only be affirmed, but also questioned.

I do not presume to have identified and/or rationalized omissions or distortions in students' accounts. The extent of this study was limited to manifest what students' beliefs are, as verbalised during the successive conversations and as expressed in their diaries. I have decided to emphasise this because students hardly ever get a fair chance to express their perceptions in educational research. Student voice has largely been ignored despite being well-informed witnesses of what happens in schools.

Findings

This section focuses on providing the actual student voice on their beliefs about teaching and teachers. The verbatim quotations portrayed in this section serve as illustration and derive from the analysis of the totality of the interviews and diaries. Yet, the data must be reduced to a manageable representation. Implicit

in the quotations are the beliefs these students hold, these are made evident in the interpretation of them. For the sake of confidentiality, pseudonyms are used.

One of the students, Maria, provides an excellent point of departure with the following entry,

270404. The lesson was good, after a long time the teacher taught us something today; not because she hadn't come but because she stood up and explained the topic at the blackboard and all that. (Maria, diary entry)

Maria highlights the issue of having her expectations of teachers' roles met. Her beliefs about 'teaching', and by extension of 'a teacher', imply certain activity on the part of the teacher. She equals a good lesson with the fact that not only did the teacher stand up *and* explain something but also the teacher behaved precisely as she expects; besides, the teacher did *all that* that a teacher is supposed to do. Maria is just one of the many students who consider the role of the teacher as responsible for promoting learning.

"I like it when she stands up and explains..." (Ramon)

The idea here portrayed by Ramon expands the notion of a teacher's action zone: standing up and explaining. To Ramon and Maria, this seems to mean that something is happening in the classroom; by standing up and explaining, teachers create the impression of 'teaching' that students believe is part of a teacher's job. Dizzy, in the following extract adds something to the equation,

First semester was OK, the teacher prepared lots of exercises. She was committed to the group. (Dizzy, conversation)

To Dizzy, teachers are believed to take a leading role in students' learning, be responsible for everything that happens within the classroom and promote learning. Dizzy considers the attitude of his first semester teacher to be superior because she provided many opportunities for them to practice. He relates her bringing materials to the classroom to being dedicated to their learning. Again, this teacher was performing according to what students believe is an appropriate role.

The teacher as central figure

The influence of the teacher on students' views of instruction is so strong that curriculum and content matter come second place. To students, motivation to attend lessons depends very much on the way teachers deliver them. Dizzy puts it quite bluntly:

It is not too much the topic or the subject but the teacher [which makes things interesting], the way she teaches the lesson ... she is a good teacher... (Dizzy, conversation)

Xochitl shares the same ideas as Dizzy, positing a great deal of the 'interesting' dimension in the hands of the teacher, even if the teachers' age would indicate the contrary. She highlights the knowledge of the teachers as something to be considered too.

010304. The new teacher is very cool, old but good, he knows a lot, even though the topics are boring, he makes them interesting. (Xochitl, diary entry)

Maria, with the following two entries, draws attention to the same point, taking a critical view of her teachers. This reinforces the influence of the teacher on whether students pay attention to the lesson or not, regardless of the topic or level of difficulty. By adopting a textbook-dictated approach to teaching, this teacher makes students switch off. Attention is reduced and boredom sets place. Maria makes clear that good lessons have nothing to do with a topic being difficult to understand to make it boring or *vice versa*. To her, the teacher makes a difference in putting the message across; the teacher determines how interesting a lesson is perceived. Once more, the teacher took an active role within the classroom by explaining. On the second entry, she blames the teacher for not making the lesson interesting by letting the book dictate the lesson, which turns the lesson dull.

100604 The lesson was very difficult but very good. As usual, the teacher explains in such a good way that even the dumbest person understands. (Maria, diary entry)

241103. The lesson today was super boring; the topic was not that difficult but the book and the teacher made it boring. (Maria, diary entry)

The following diary entry adds on the same aspect of what is believed of a teacher. Xochitl expects the teacher to give and provide space for them to review, making sure they are ready to move a step further. This entry also stresses the idea of how having more explanations makes students understand issues that might have not been clear when first introduced. The teacher's strategy to reinforce and re-explain these works wonders on students learning, boosting their self-esteem. She highlights how the teacher being very good, explains things so clearly that everyone understands. That makes an interesting point regarding how she places herself to a secondary position; she gives no credit to her learning capacities, making the teacher entirely responsible for her understanding and learning. This has to do with the place teachers are given by students; somehow, set in students' psyche, is the idea that teachers are entirely responsible for students learning.

270404b. Good teacher and good lesson, I was able to re-affirm my knowledge and understood the things I hadn't quite understood and the teacher gave us a review to make sure that we knew everything before going into the next topic. (Maria, diary entry)

The following entry, from Maria's diary, let us perceive what she thinks about teaching and learning. To her, the role of the teacher is important. By comparing 'the girl' to the actual teacher, she believes that the substitute teacher 'makes it more interesting'. It is the same subject, the same programme and probably the same material as the ones used by 'the teacher', however, *the girl* 'makes it more interesting'. By explaining how 'the girl' achieves this, she highlights another aspect of what learning is about: involving them in the content, making them co-participants of the process, making the lesson more dialectical and not so much monological, 'she asks us to comment'. By asking for students' collaboration, 'the girl' is encouraging students reading and preparation for the class: 'we all arrive at the lesson having read ... we all have knowledge about the topic to be discussed ... we all participate'. Another important characteristic of 'the girl' in charge of the class is that she takes advantage of lesson time by explaining and clarifying any doubts students may have. By providing explanations

and clarification (by doing what a teacher is expected to do), this teacher is making students feel confident, in her as a teacher and in themselves as learners.

“[the lesson] was very interesting. I don’t know if it is because of the girl [substitute teacher] but she makes it interesting, more than the teacher and it is because she asks us to make a comment of the previously read topic, that makes that we all arrive with previous knowledge of the topic to be dealt with and if we have any doubts these are dealt with in the classroom and as we already know about the topic, we all participate.” (Maria, diary entry)

Maria contrasts the role of a substitute teacher with that of her teachers. Maria was greatly impressed by the work of this particular one. She starts by emphasising that *the girl* makes the course interesting. She then mentions specific ideas of how the girl fulfils her beliefs as a learner. To begin with, reading is done outside the classroom so that lesson time is used in more productive ways (discussing and clarifying doubts), promoting participation. *The girl* provides opportunities for each of them to have something to say by asking them to provide a comment on the assigned reading. This way, the girl is reaching two objectives: she makes sure students read (they have to comment) and they know what the lesson will be about (previous knowledge). Another advantage of this approach is that the objectives of the lesson are clear; students know what is to be accomplished in that day.

An interesting point emerges in the way Maria refers to the substitute teacher, ‘*the girl*’. It clearly connotes the idea that Maria does not consider her a teacher, in the full sense of the word. This might be because of the girl’s age (a recently graduated student) or because of the fact that she was introduced as an assistant to *the* teacher. However, this particular girl made every effort to gain students’ trust so that they recognised her as a teacher. Maria’s comments indicate that she is prepared not only to handle a group of university students but also to raise interest in what could be a ‘boring’ subject. I may speculate that the so-called girl proves that there are ways of reaching a group of young adults and of making them interested in their school subjects.

In this other entry, Xochitl captures another of the expected teacher’s roles. Again, she undermines her active role in learning to give prominence to the role of the teacher; she does not consider herself as a (co)constructor of her learning but as a mere beneficiary of the teacher skills to teach. She does not give

herself any credit for making learning happen, the teacher's activity provokes *her* learning by clarifying *her* doubts. Thus, the teacher makes learning happen.

250304. I liked the lesson very much, this teacher is really good ... today I understood everything; well, the teacher knew how to clarify my doubts. (Xochitl, diary entry)

Another example of how students tend to (over)emphasise the role of the teacher is given below. This entry reports Maria's amazement at how the teacher turns a tedious course into a worthwhile attending one. By whatever teaching strategies the teacher uses, everyone is engaged, even when the content might not be of students' particular appeal. This reinforces the idea of the teacher as the one and only initiator of learning, the one who makes a difference between a boring and an interesting course. Nevertheless, it is clear how they separate one thing from the other; that a course is tedious does not necessarily mean that the teacher is. Alternatively, a bad teacher can make, what could be an enjoyable course, dull. It is all in the teacher.

110504. The lesson was good. It's incredible, even though the course is tedious, I don't get bored with [teacher's name]; what's more, she keeps everyone paying attention.

In the following extract, Ramon identifies the teacher's attitude towards the course as highly influential, especially on how students respond to it. What he seems to be saying is that a teacher's inability to teach is easily identified, therefore breaking the trust deposited in the teacher. Once this trust has been violated, student reaction is to alienate from the teacher and the course; this causes students to disconnect and become bored, they disengage.

... because I have had teachers who arrive, stand in front of the group and start saying two or three things and then they do not know what else to say, and then they start asking 'What do you think?', and they don't know how to finish, so the lesson turns boring. They don't make the lesson interesting, if the course could be interesting, they turn it into a boring one and then we skip these lessons ... (Ramon, interview data)

The following entry illustrates how students (mis)interpret the teacher's attempt to involve learners in the learning process. From what Ramon mentions, it seems that the teacher is trying to employ 'discovery' techniques to make students infer knowledge; it would appear that the teacher is trying to exploit the learners' innate ability to figure out whatever he wants them to learn, applying principles of learner autonomy and self-discovery. It might also be the case that the teacher is a follower of the *laissez faire* approach.

Sometimes I feel that the teacher is not committed to teaching us; instead, he gives us material for us to learn, like on our own, but we waste time in trying to work out what it is he wants us to learn. (Ramon, interview data)

Punctuality is highly valued as a positive aspect of teachers as it may denote the interest/level of commitment teachers have in the course. Maria bitterly expresses her discomfort at the teacher's absenteeism,

The teacher didn't arrive, which made us happy. But this teacher misses lots of classes, he's not coming until Friday and on Wednesday a pal who is in the teaching area is going to teach us the lesson (Maria, diary entry)

Something important to draw from this entry is students' first reaction of happiness as this means they would have some 'spare' time to occupy as they better please; an attitude that may be subject to criticism because of the negative results it might bring. She then realises that they have lost many classes with that teacher and the near future looks the same.

To conclude, with the following conversation between Maria, Dizzy and Ramon may serve to illustrate what is expected of an effective teacher,

M: they should know about the subject they are teaching

D: have a complete command ...

M: ... but there are some teachers that, even though they know a lot, they do not know how to transmit that to students ...

R: that they know how to teach their subject

D: exactly, transmit knowledge

M: and you know when s/he knows because of the way s/he talks and for what she comments

D: the key is that you know, like M says, transmit that idea that you have, that clear idea, so that it is clear to the student.

The points made by these students should seem commonsensical enough for teachers and teacher trainers. As it can be perceived, students are not expressing unattainable characteristics that teachers may never reach; on the contrary, they should be basic attributes in a teaching professional. It appears that the main issue in the comments gathered above has to do with teachers' professionalism or love for what they do.

Implications

Passion towards teaching implies several things in the classroom context. It cannot only be manifested as the commitment teachers have to their students and students' learning but as teachers' dedication to and efficiency at their job, their *professionalism*. Students appear to place a great deal of emphasis on attitudes and ways teachers relate to students, appreciating their human side.

There were indications on the importance of 'passion' on how 'good' teachers are passionate about what they teach. This passion is usually transmitted to and welcomed by students, who in turn correspond with equal enthusiasm towards lessons and course content. When students sense that teachers truly enjoy their work, they believe that teachers make learning effective. Conversely, they are turned off by teachers who teach simply because it is a job and have no interest in their work or their students. In terms of dedication to the profession, passion can translate into teachers' ethical conduct and professionalism, into fulfilling their teaching responsibility with interest and care, into treating students as individuals who deserve all their attention. In short, love can be manifested in teacher-person acting *professionally* and making every effort to understand and care for student-person.

Research has suggested possible measures teachers might take to promote positive beliefs in the classroom and eliminate the negative ones. Horwitz

(1999) points out that while it is very difficult for teachers to tailor instruction to each student belief, the investigation of beliefs is useful in making teachers aware of different learner types that need to be accommodated. Additionally, Wenden (1986) proposes that if we are to discover what characterizes successful language learning, we need to discover what students believe or know about their learning and provide activities that would allow students to examine these beliefs and their possible impact on how they approach learning.

Other recommendations come from Bassano (1986), who recognized that students have different needs, preferences, beliefs, learning styles, and educational backgrounds, but argued that *the imposition of change upon these factors can lead to negative reactions*. Bassano offers teachers six steps towards dealing with student beliefs:

- become aware of students' past classroom experiences and their assumptions about language learning;
- build students' confidence;
- begin where the students are and move slowly;
- show them achievement;
- allow for free choice as much as possible; and
- become aware of the students' interests and concerns, their goals and objectives.

Furthermore, Dörnyei (2001) believes that in order to work with students' beliefs, they:

- (a) need to develop an informed understanding of the nature of language learning and reasonable criteria for progress;
- (b) should be made aware of the fact that the mastery of a second or foreign language can be achieved in a number of different ways, using diverse strategies; and
- (c) discover for themselves the methods and techniques by which they learn best, a key factor leading to success.

While the suggestions provide sound pedagogical advice and reflect a humanistic approach to language teaching, it is not clear to what extent, if any, they will have an effect on the learner's beliefs about language learning. There seems to be a lack of literature on intervention methods in educational research that report on the degree of success such methods might have in changing learner beliefs.

Conclusion

Student voice hereby presented seems to indicate that teachers' influence on students is so great that the way a student responds to their learning is very much influenced by the way teachers treat them, even at this level of studies. It seems clear that students' awareness of a teacher's sincerity resides in the congruence between words and deeds. It appears that students informing the study not only look for a teacher's guidance and expertise, but also that they recognise and value teachers' authority, expecting teachers to guide them in the learning process. Being authoritarian does not invoke respect nor ensure students' participation in the process of learning. If students were treated as responsible young people, they would certainly respond responsibly. If they were asked to make an extra effort, they would certainly do it. If, on the other hand, they were given a poor course, they would respond poorly.

It must be considered that students' prior learning experience –positive or negative– might inform what they perceive to be the 'right way' to teach. From the voices assembled above, it can be concluded that students tend to equal 'good' teaching with clear, detailed explanations of the subject matter. Students talk about teachers' commitment to their lessons as represented by the type of work done in class and the quantity of material brought to them. Another basic premise is that teachers should know about the subject and be able to transmit the information they wish to convey. Besides, students like classroom time to be spent in productive ways, keeping a good pace, being 'active'. In short, what students consider 'good' teaching is not at odds with what teaching manuals usually emphasise. It seems as if these students considered that the teacher is still central in the classroom to promote 'learning'; the teacher is still regarded as *the* 'specialist' person to guide them and to create a positive classroom environment. Students do expect teachers to be an authority and lead learning.

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