TEACHERS’ AND STUDENTS’ BELIEFS WITHIN A DEWEYAN FRAMEWORK: CONFLICT AND INFLUENCE

1. INTRODUCTION

It has been suggested that because of teachers’ positions of authority in the classroom, they are seen as experts by students, and thus, may exert a strong influence on the development of students’ beliefs (Horwitz, 1988; Rubin, 1987; Wenden, 1987). It is believed that effective teaching and learning develop from the similarity between teachers’ and students’ beliefs (Kumaravadivelu, 1991). Nevertheless, students bring their own interpretations to the process and these may not coincide with the teachers’, thus resulting in a conflict or mismatch. If we want to understand classroom culture, we have to understand not only the harmony, but also the conflicts (Block, 1996).

The relationship between teachers’ and students’ beliefs is still relatively unexplored. The few studies that have investigated this relationship suffer from two basic problems. First, most of them have used questionnaires or inventories, which makes it difficult to understand the process from an emic perspective and reinforces an abstract view of beliefs by disconnecting them from teachers’ and students’ actions in real contexts and experiences. Second, the studies with a more interpretive framework have looked only at the influence of teachers’ beliefs on students’ beliefs and not vice versa, which is also a way of ignoring the dynamic nature of beliefs and the culture of the classroom where students’ and teachers’ subjectivities are negotiated (Breen, 1985). If we look only at teachers’ influence on students’ beliefs, it is easy to ignore that students as much as teachers have their own agendas that they try to pursue (Manke, 1997). In short, research on the relationship between teachers’ and students’ beliefs about Second Language Acquisition (SLA), in general, has failed to consider the interrelationship between beliefs and actions and the influence of students’ beliefs on teachers’ practices and beliefs.

This chapter reports on an ethnographic study that moves beyond the description of teachers’ and students’ beliefs about SLA by looking at teachers’ and students’ actions and interpretations in the language classroom and by investigating not only how teachers’ beliefs about SLA may influence students’ beliefs, but also how

students’ beliefs may influence those of teachers’. I first briefly review select studies that have investigated the interaction between teachers’ and students’ beliefs about SLA. After this, I explain the theoretical framework that guided the study, give details about the context of the study, participants, data collection, and analysis. I then present and discuss the findings. I conclude with implications for practice and suggestions for future research on teachers’ and students’ beliefs about SLA.

2. RESEARCHING TEACHERS’ AND STUDENTS’ BELIEFS ABOUT SLA

The mismatch between teachers’ and students’ perceptions is based upon the premise that students do have their own views about the learning process. This assumption became more widely accepted within the communicative approach, whose principles encourage teachers to avoid teacher-centred classes and to create a secure, non-threatening classroom atmosphere. As pointed out by Block (1992), this shift away from “predominantly teacher-directed approaches to greater learning autonomy has brought with it a redefinition of teacher/student roles” (p. 43). As students have their own opinions and beliefs about language learning and classroom roles (Kumaravadivelu, 1991), a conflict can be created if their views are different from those being advocated in the communicative approach. Conflicts resulting from the implementation of the communicative approach may trigger passive resistance or non-learning by students, breakdown of language production, and frustration (Ellis, 1996). Moreover, according to Cortazzi (1990), if teachers enthusiastically embrace the communicative approach, they may have their status and their perceived competence diminished in students’ eyes.

Mismatches between teachers’ and students’ beliefs can cause other sorts of problems not necessarily related to the communicative approach, such as (a) misunderstanding and miscommunication (Luppescu & Day, 1990), (b) students’ questioning of their teachers’ credibility (Schulz, 1996), (c) learners’ engagement in strategies of which the teacher disapproves (Rees-Miller, 1993), and (d) students’ withdrawal and feelings of unhappiness (McCargar, 1993). In short, the conflict can affect learners’ motivations and efforts and the types of activities they choose to do (Schulz, 1996).

Many studies have indicated that teachers and students have different beliefs concerning (a) classroom activities such as formal explanation in class, games, and pair work (Nunan, 1986, as cited in Nunan, 1993); (b) the role of grammar and error correction (Schulz, 1996; McCargar, 1993); and (c) the role of teacher and students in different cultures (Lutz, 1990). These studies are important because they show the types of mismatches that can happen. However, most of them have not matched students and teachers and have basically relied on questionnaires. A study by Barkhuizen (1998) with five English teachers and 60 ESL students from grades 8–11 in Africa is an exception. She employed classroom observation, questionnaires, and individual and group interviews. Her study showed that students gave mechanical skills a much higher ranking than teachers expected. Block (1990, 1992) used interviews to investigate the metaphors about language teaching and learning employed by teachers and students. Although Block did not use the word beliefs, in