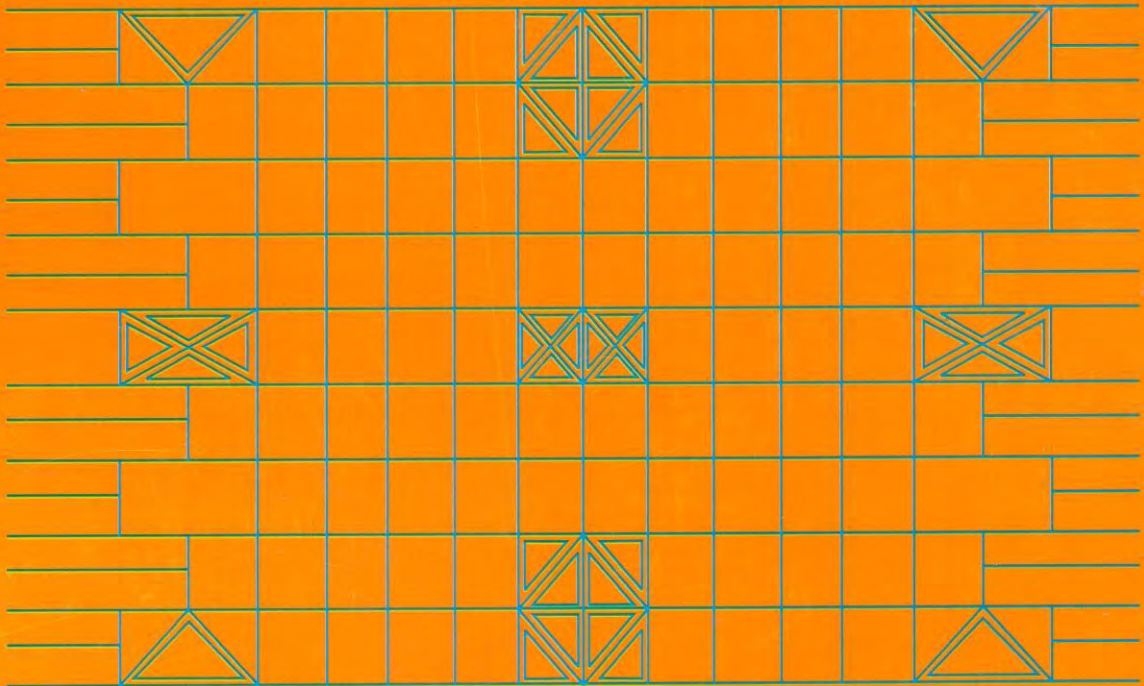

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**FAKULTAS BAHASA DAN SENI
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Framework for Articulating Beliefs:

Reflections on Teaching and Learning Experiences

Abstract

Our beliefs have a great influence on our daily activities and how we do them, for example how people go about driving has a lot to do with their beliefs about safety, beliefs about health influence the way people drink and eat, etc. As an English practitioner, my teaching practice is also driven by my beliefs. Thus, the way I select materials, start the class, assign an activity, and assess my students are informed by what I believe to be relevant to be applied to my language classroom.

In the following paragraphs, I will discuss four categories of the Stern's framework for articulating teaching beliefs and provide experience-based examples to illustrate how each could inform classroom pedagogy. As an extension of Stern's view, I will also discuss the importance of assessment for learners and professional development for teachers. At this stage, my views will be based on the experiences that I have acquired as a language learner and a language teaching professional.

Keywords: *Beliefs, Teaching and Learning Experiences, Classroom Practice*

Introduction

Everything we do is dependent on what we believe in and designing a language lesson is no exception. However, articulating beliefs which are relevant to language teaching is not easy as we hold many beliefs about many things. In this regard, we need a framework to refer to. A proposed model for articulating teaching beliefs is clearly summarized in Stern's book, *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching*. In this book, Stern (1983, 1992) maintains that the formulation of relevant

teaching beliefs should address the four key concepts which include language, social context, learning and teaching (as cited in Graves, 2000, pp. 26-27).

The importance of beliefs in developing a teaching content makes it imperative for us to understand the source of our beliefs. Based on Stern's conceptualization, Graves (2000, p. 26) arguably states that our teaching beliefs derive from our education and work experiences in the past. A language teacher's preference in implementing a certain activity in the classroom might have been influenced by his/her experiences both as a language learner and a teaching practitioner. While knowing where our beliefs stem from helps us understand how they come into existence, articulating those beliefs would enable us to make decisions in designing a language syllabus.

Beliefs about language

As pedagogy researchers continue to explore different aspects of language, they are divided on how language should be taught. A major controversy is whether language teaching should focus on form (Bailey, 1998) or on function (Larsen-Freeman, 1990; as cited in Graves, 2000, p. 26). With regard to the issue of form versus function, I take a middle-of-the-road position.

As my teaching practice revolved around the four skills of English, one of the postulates that I hold was that English is a learn-by-doing-skill. Therefore, my focus of teaching was not always telling the students about language but also getting them to use it. My English course was aimed at developing a language-centred classroom, a place where students were engaged constantly in using language receptively and productively.

The following listening class for young students about "past tense" might illustrate the learn-by-doing principle. During a 90-minute session, while offering an

interesting variety of materials, I also provided my students with warm-up and follow-up activities which encouraged them to pay attention to the English language and its use.

In the beginning of the class, I asked my students to watch a muted movie extract about dinosaurs called 'Jurassic Park'. During this activity, students jotted down verbs they had heard from the movie. After watching the film, we discussed and wrote about some dinosaur facts in past tense forms such as what dinosaurs looked like, where they lived, and what they ate. Then we listened to a cassette containing a five-minute story about dinosaurs. As the topic revolved around the lives of dinosaurs happening a long time ago, it allowed students to understand that past actions or events should be told in past tense forms.

As a follow-up activity, it is important to test the students' understanding of the story. In this case, I always encouraged all the students to come forward and retell the story in their own words. By doing so, students were not only exposed to comprehensible input, they were also able to produce comprehensible output (Nunan, 1999, pp.44-46). In the simplest terms, they used the language receptively and productively.

Beliefs about society

Stern's view of the social context of language could be categorised into three main areas: sociolinguistic, sociocultural and sociopolitical (Graves, 2000, p. 29). Sociolinguistic areas have to do with adapting language to fit the situation in which it is used, sociocultural areas deal with about how language and culture are related; and sociopolitical areas cover the discussion of the critical awareness of language use. In support of Stern's view, I am also in agreement with Ramirez (1995) on the idea that success in language learning is associated with some factors which include the social

context of the learning and cultural beliefs about language learning (as cited in Erlenawati, 2004, p. 323).

Given that most of my former students learned English for their communicative needs, the goal of our training centre was then to provide the trainees with a language-rich environment that would enable them to function effectively both in the classroom and in the workplace. Hence, to meet the needs of my students, I often made necessary changes from the original text book and found another topic related to their jobs. If I just simply referred to the book topics, my students would not obtain much benefit from attending the class. Language learning topics should be adapted to fit the needs of the students in the classroom.

Morning talk was one example of how I reflected my beliefs about social context in, for example, my company workers class. Every meeting, I assigned a student to choose a work-related topic / headline from a local Indonesian daily newspaper to be retold orally. In this 15-minute English presentation, the student shared his/her views of the story to the class and other students might respond to the issue by asking questions or giving comments. Whenever necessary, I provided my students with appropriate ways of asking and giving opinions. While this activity was not intended to reach a consensus on a certain matter, this classroom routine was an ideal chance for students to use language effectively and critically to address current and relevant issues around their work and society.

However, particular attention should be paid to the language-culture connection. While it is important to introduce the culture of the target language to students, language teachers should consider the values and beliefs that the students have (Brown, 2000, p. 202). As far as my classroom practice is concerned, this means that I should carefully select my teaching materials and activities. If an activity seems

to deter my students from taking part because it is culturally offensive, I should think of doing another acceptable activity. Research shows that students who come from different cultural backgrounds will feel valued and comfortable to learn when their native culture and language are appreciated by the teacher (Bos & Vaughn, 2005, p. 94).

Beliefs about learning

Of particular significance for the study of language pedagogy are the beliefs about how people learn in terms of process, roles and focus (Graves, 2000, p. 30). The process of learning could be seen from many perspectives, for example as a(n) inductive, deductive or cognitive process. While learning roles may occur in a situation where the learner works individually or in a group, learning focus is often associated with the acquisition of knowledge or the development of certain skills.

As far as learners are concerned, I believe in the notion that language learning should begin, proceed and end with assessment. The diversity of students' language backgrounds requires teachers to consider the fact that they learn and communicate at different levels. Thus, to fully understand how students learn language, ongoing assessment should be considered as part of the teaching and learning processes (Assessment Reform Group, 2002). Knowledge of learners' ability and progress plays an important role in determining the process, roles and focus of language learning. In this regard, I have greatly benefited from using an observation checklist or rubric to assess my students during their language activities. This observation form provides a periodical record of the students' progress and their achievement of targeted skills. Continually observing and assessing learner's ability and progress would give teachers valuable information about what to focus and how to teach in the future.

Along this line, Cambourne (1988, pp. 32-38) suggests that there are a number of conditions that make language learning successful. Conditions like immersion, demonstration and engagement are some of the important factors which contribute to children's language success. Language success is determined by student's interaction with other language users and by the opportunities offered to them to hear and practice language in a language-rich environment. In addition, demonstrations of how those forms are structured and used are also needed. Potential learners need demonstrations of how language is used before they could begin using it. Language interaction and modeling provides a scaffold for students to create language for their communicative purposes. In my experience as an EFL learner, I have found that students learn best and engage with language learning when they see clear connections between what they learn and what they use in their daily lives.

Beliefs about teaching

As suggested by Stern (2000, p. 30), beliefs about teaching are often associated with the roles of teacher toward the learners. In line with the beliefs about learning, the teacher may be perceived as a decision maker, knowledge transmitter, and learning structures provider. My basic premise about teaching is related to my view of learning outcome.

Underlying all of my teaching ideas is the belief that teachers play a vital role in making a positive change towards student learning. As students come to school with a variety of language backgrounds, a teacher should be able to notice these differences to be able to transform their language. In this regard, a teacher's role and approach plays an important part in developing learners' language skills. As put forward by Larsen-Freeman (2000, p. 83), I agree that improvement in teaching and problem-

solving in the classroom lie in the hands of a teacher who is willing to learn new concepts, explore current approaches and experiment with different strategies.

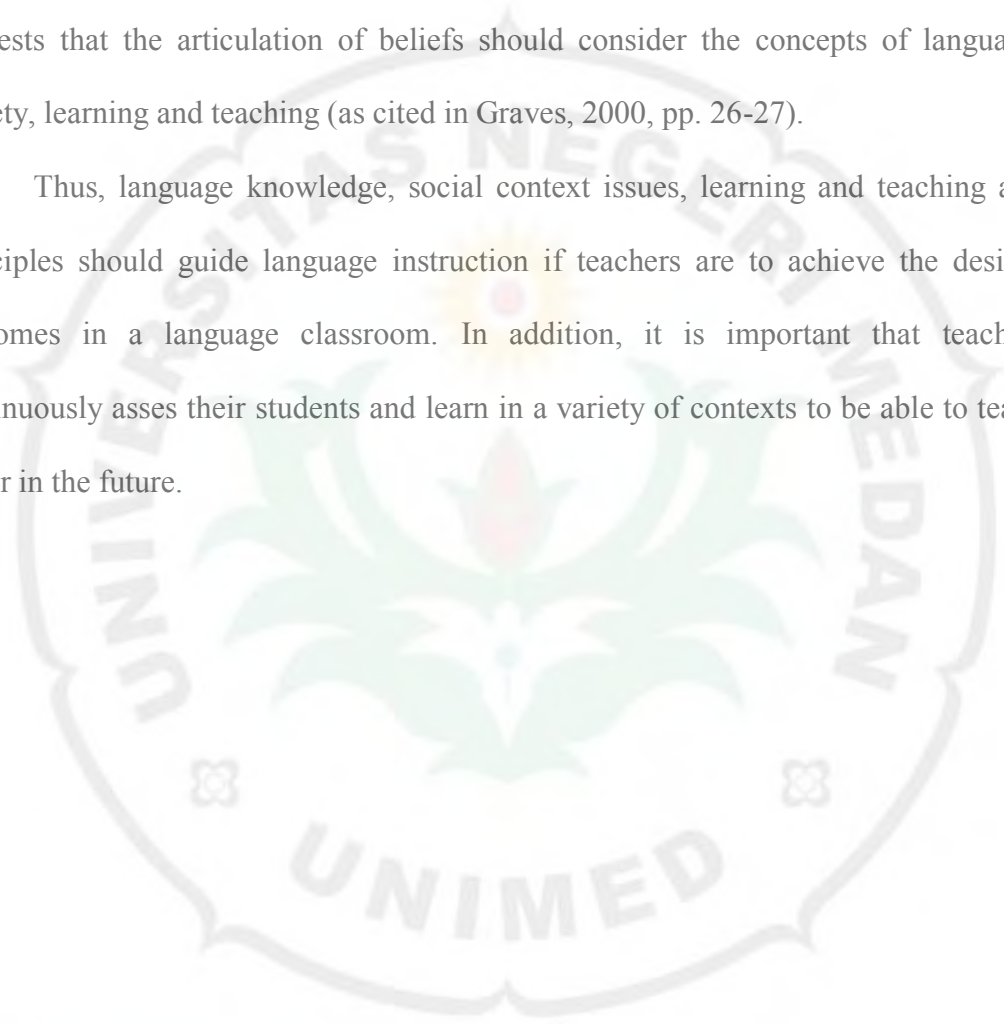
To illustrate this point, I would like to refer back to my example in the listening class. Actually, the hidden lesson behind the ‘dinosaurs’ story was to teach students about past tense. Yet, I realised that the topic of dinosaurs would be a boring lesson if totally taught in a grammar-translation approach. Horwitz’s research (1987) shows that learners feel discontented if the teaching methods in which they are engaged differ from what they believed those teaching methods should be (as cited in Erlenawati, 2004, p. 325). In this line, the process of teaching should be viewed as an eclectic approach in which teachers should create pleasurable ways of teaching which accord with their classroom conditions and learners’ needs.

In addition, one important aspect that Stern should have extended in the area of teaching is the concept of teacher as learner which is commonly referred to as “professional development”. Given that the performance of teacher has a great impact on student achievement, it follows that there is a need for the continuous learning of teachers. Teachers’ job is not only concerned with the transfer of knowledge and skills to students, it should also involve the pursuit of new knowledge and skills (Slepkov, 2008, p. 85). In order to meet the standards of language learning, teachers should strive to improve the quality of their performance. In this regard, I have found that teachers need to undergo professional development through ongoing readings, presentations, seminars, papers or courses. Professional development would enable teachers to reflect on their tenets and practices and be better prepared to base their classes on a better view of language pedagogy.

Conclusion

As with all other activities, a teacher's teaching practice is also influenced by his/her beliefs. In order to be relevant to language teaching, Stern (1983, 1992) suggests that the articulation of beliefs should consider the concepts of language, society, learning and teaching (as cited in Graves, 2000, pp. 26-27).

Thus, language knowledge, social context issues, learning and teaching and principles should guide language instruction if teachers are to achieve the desired outcomes in a language classroom. In addition, it is important that teachers continuously assess their students and learn in a variety of contexts to be able to teach better in the future.



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