

Knowledge, Belief and Practice in Language Teacher Education: Integration and Implementation of Threshold Concepts over a teaching career

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This paper presents a study with pre-service and practicing language teachers in the Republic of Ireland, within the framework of Threshold Concepts (Meyer, Land et al. 2010), to explore the core but troublesome knowledge and practices of language teaching and the conditions that facilitate the integration and implementation of these concepts over a teaching career. The project draws on previous work on threshold concepts in teacher education (Devitt et al, 2014) and will look at the interplay of knowledge, belief and practice at initial teacher education and beyond for language teachers. The Threshold Concept framework holds the promise of providing a new lens through which to explore the notion of teacher cognition, defined by Borg as “what teachers think, know and believe” (2006, p.1). The potential of Threshold Concepts as catalysts in the restructuring of not only learners’ knowledge systems but also their beliefs and even identity resonates with a model of teacher knowledge which encompasses dimensions of thought from experiential to theoretical knowledge and personal belief to objective “truths” (Woods and Çakir, 2011).

The study was conducted as a qualitative case study in two phases:

1. an initial exploratory phase with 8 practicing language teachers in Ireland to identify threshold concepts (TCs) underlying good language teaching and factors impacting on the integration but also implementation of these TCs in teachers’ knowledge and practice;
2. a follow-on study with pre-service language teachers to explore their experience of identified TCs as part of their initial teacher education programme.

Qualitative analysis of participant interviews in phase 1 suggests that, from the perspective of professionals in the field, facilitating meaningful language use in the classroom and fostering learner autonomy are the key elements underlying good language teaching. This essential knowledge is often expressed as a belief system, one which is in place since initial teacher education or participants’ language learning history. However, the degree to which teachers can teach in accordance with these beliefs is expressed as contingent upon local and broader policy contextual factors. The second phase of the study explores the development of these concepts during a programme of initial teacher education and is currently underway (final interviews to be conducted in April 2014). Four pre-service language teachers have completed language learner autobiographies and are participating in a collaborative blog focusing on the threshold concepts identified. Preliminary analysis of the blogs suggest that while these student teachers are primarily focused on more technical aspects of teaching, such as planning and classroom management, these aspects are oriented towards core principles of language teaching, such as bringing real language use into the classroom by using the target language. Participants also express a tension between knowledge and beliefs about teaching and their ability to teach in accordance with these beliefs, through a lack of skills in this case rather than contextual factors. This tension appears to contribute to a sense of impostorship (Brookfield, 2006) where they state they don’t feel like a teacher as their practice is behind their state of knowledge and their beliefs.

References

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