

Teacher Cognition in Language Teaching: Beliefs, Decision-making and Classroom Practice.

Devon Woods: Cambridge Applied Linguistics series, Cambridge University Press, 1996.
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In the recent literature on teacher education there has been a move away from seeing teaching as a collection of measurable and observable skills and strategies, towards viewing classroom practice in terms of the motivation, interactive decision-making and post-event reflection which accompany it. Undoubtedly the most interesting aspects of the practice of teaching are the thinking processes which underlie it, although of course these processes are much less amenable to research and study than clearly identifiable classroom behaviours. Devon Woods in *Teacher Cognition in Language Teaching: Beliefs, Decision-making and Classroom Practice* sets out to investigate and report on the processes by which teachers conceptualise their courses, lessons and the teaching process itself. As Woods notes:

There is a sense in which the outside observer looking at classroom events only sees the tip of the iceberg; the purpose of this book - even though the view will inevitably have distortions - is to have a look under the water (Woods, 1996, p.23).

This book is a report on a complex research project in which Woods studied a group of eight university-based ESL teachers. Woods was interested in the ways in which the teachers viewed their teaching. Did they take an overview of the whole course, see it lesson-by-lesson or indeed activity-by-activity or as a combination of these? What procedures did they use to plan and organise the course and the lessons within it? How did they interpret the subsequent classroom events and how did these interpretations influence their subsequent teaching and thinking? (Woods 1996, 12-15)

The research therefore focuses on clarifying planning processes, teaching events and teacher interpretation of these events as closely in time as possible to when they first took place. Woods describes his methodology as participant-centered research with an ethno-cognitive orientation. The term ethno-cognitive serves to describe the combination of observation and elicitation of underlying thinking and planning. The actual procedures used were a combination of ethnographic interviews with the teachers, logbooks which the teachers used to record their thoughts, lesson observation and playbacks of some lessons on video with elicited 'think-aloud' teacher commentaries on aspects of the lessons. These procedures aimed to capture the role of prior learning and experience in the thinking and planning processes of the teachers concerned as well as their interpretations of specific classroom events.

From a recognition of the difficulty in teasing out the particular roles played by the teacher's existing beliefs, assumptions and knowledge, Woods develops the concept of BAK which represents the three aspects intertwined. In the course of his research Woods

became convinced that these three aspects of teachers' thought processes are not clearly distinguishable in the minds of teachers and that it is the interaction of all three which impacts on planning, teaching and decision-making processes. The combining of beliefs and assumptions with the knowledge that may be gained from reading and listening to 'experts' has the power to validate teachers' strongly held feelings and intuitions and to focus attention on how these can interact to create new personal insights as to which teaching practices are most effective. As Bruner notes:

If one fails to develop any sense of reflective intervention in the knowledge one encounters, one operates continually from the outside in - knowledge controls and guides you. If you develop a sense of self premised on your ability to penetrate knowledge for your own uses, and you share and negotiate the results, then you become a member of the culture-creating community (1986:132).

It is clear that much of the ability to penetrate knowledge for your own uses comes about as a result of articulation of ideas in one form or another. Woods study would appear to reinforce the benefits to the individual of reflective logs, dialogue journals and pre and post-event collaborative discussion and feedback.

When reading reports on research, it is tempting to jump from the research questions straight to the discussion and conclusions, bypassing the methodology and the findings. In the case of this book to do that would be a mistake as the account of the researcher's insights as he worked through the large amount of data collected and the accompanying verbatim comments from the teachers under investigation provide fascinating reading. The actual conclusions provided by Woods contain few surprises, and in common with both quantitative and qualitative studies, few incontrovertible assertions. However, from the viewpoint of the classroom teacher many aspects of the research findings are very reassuring. It validates the variety of ways in which teachers working in similar contexts may go about planning their courses, and reinforces the fact that coherence in planning and interpretive processes depends largely on what is coherent for the individual at the particular stage of their development. It was hard not to wonder at the level of intrusion into their classrooms and minds which the participant teachers had to tolerate - but it is clear at the same time that involvement provided an excellent professional development opportunity. The participants seem to acknowledge that the research process led them towards individual insights about their teaching and planning which they otherwise might not have gained. Woods' research will no doubt provide

The book will be very useful primarily to other researchers on teacher behaviour, and to pre- and in-service teacher educators. It contains helpful pointers to those involved in curriculum development and the implementation of change - stressing as it does the power of the teachers' BAK in shaping courses and innovations in ways which are coherent with their own current views and experiences. From the viewpoint of research methodology the book will be helpful background reading to others interested in studying cognitive processes whether of teachers or learners. However readers contemplating qualitative studies may be alarmed at the way in which the scope of the study, and therefore the time

taken, broadened from inception to eventual publication. The richness of the data generated by the study of a small group of teachers is both daunting and impressive.

REFERENCES

Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.