

The effect of collective accompaniment on the pedagogic beliefs of foreign language teachers

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Abstract

This article reports on a case study of the effects of collective accompaniment and collaborative reflection on the pedagogic beliefs of an English as a Foreign Language teacher. Following the Collective Accompaniment Model (CAM) (Guillemette, 2014), a group of eight English instructors took part in a bi-weekly series of group sessions aimed at helping them discover and understand their beliefs about teaching and learning through collective reflection. After this process concluded, Kelly's (1955) Repertory Grid Technique (RGT) was used for the collection of data. For the purposes of the current study, one participant's pre- and post-interviews were analyzed in order to better understand the effects of CAM sessions on her pedagogical beliefs.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta un estudio de caso sobre el efecto del acompañamiento colectivo y la reflexión colaborativa en las creencias pedagógicas de un maestro de inglés como lengua extranjera. El modelo utilizado para la reflexión colaborativa fue el Modelo de Acompañamiento Colectivo (CAM por sus siglas en inglés) propuesto por Guillemette (2014). Un grupo de ocho participantes compartieron un proceso bisemanal de reflexión colectiva a través de este modelo, para descubrir y entender sus creencias sobre la enseñanza y el aprendizaje. Junto a este modelo, se utilizó la Técnica Repertory Grid (RGT por sus siglas en inglés) del trabajo del psicólogo George Kelly (1955) para la recolección de datos. Para este proyecto, se seleccionó a uno de los ocho participantes de las sesiones CAM, para analizar sus entrevistas previas y posteriores y lograr comprender mejor los efectos del modelo en sus creencias pedagógicas.

Keywords: CAM; rep grid technique; reflective practice; teacher beliefs; teacher development.

Introduction

The present article reports on the effects of Guillemette's (2014) Collective Accompaniment Model (CAM) on the pedagogic beliefs of an English language teacher. The CAM is a procedure for running collaborative workshops in which teachers are given the opportunity to reflect on critical incidents in their teaching practice. The CAM uses what Houde and Guillemette (2020) refer to as "the art of questioning" to help teachers discover solutions to their professional problems (p. 286). This questioning, as the authors explain, is designed to promote reflection on, in, and for action.

The CAM sessions took place every two weeks for a period of three and a half months and were attended by the professor in charge of the sessions, the professor's research assistants, and eight research participants (all of whom graduated with a BA from the same TEFL program and were actively teaching at the time of the CAM sessions). In each session, one participant was chosen to discuss their particular teaching difficulty. The CAM sessions followed a prescribed organizational framework. First, the presenter would be given 10 or 15 minutes to describe an issue that was having a negative impact on their teaching. This description was followed by a technical questions segment in which the participant would explain their instructional context, e.g., the age and number of students they were working with, the curriculum they followed, aspects of their educational institution, etc. Next, the floor was opened to all of the CAM participants so that they could ask open questions about the presenter's situation. The terminal aim of each CAM session was the presenter's creation of an action plan based on what they had discovered about themselves and their practice.

Through a case-study of a single participant, the current research aims to gain an understanding of how the CAM may affect language teacher beliefs. In the first section of this article, a literature review is provided which describes the Collective Accompaniment Model in terms of pedagogic beliefs. In the second section, the study's

methodology is described. In the third section, data obtained from a CAM research participant is analyzed and discussed. Finally, the last section presents the conclusions drawn from this research.

Literature Review

Richardson (1996, as cited in Richter, 2014) defines beliefs as “psychologically held understandings, premises and propositions about the world” (pp. 103–104). Similarly, Mak (2011) defines them as a “subset of a group of constructs that name, define, and describe the structure and content of mental states that are thought to drive a person’s actions” (p. 54). Teacher beliefs are one such set of constructs. Beliefs not only influence teacher performance in the classroom, but also affect the way they perceive themselves as teachers (1999, as cited in Mak, 2011). Johnson (1999) writes that the beliefs carried by a teacher “filter the ways they conceptualize teaching and themselves as teachers and develop explanations for their own classroom practices” (cited in Mak, 2011, p. 54). Beliefs that teachers carry can be reinforced or challenged when they enter the teaching profession and through their experiences in educational settings. In the particular case of language instructors, teacher beliefs are related to teacher conceptions about how languages are learned, the best ways to increase the effectiveness of L2 instruction, and how problems are dealt with as they arise during the instructional process.

Because of the impact beliefs have on the teaching–learning process, it is important that teachers be aware of their beliefs and reflect on their origins and effects. The ability to reflect on practice, however, can be weakened by the oftentimes solitary and individualistic nature of the teaching profession. Forniciari (2019) writes of the “lack of a collective spirit among teachers,” noting that many teachers see their work as a “one-man mission” (p. 210). This lack of collective spirit means that teachers are frequently left to deal with professional issues and classroom problems on their own. Unfortunately, as Fanselow (1997) argues, trying to explore teaching without help “is like trying to use a pair of scissors with only one blade” (p. 166). The present research project, then, is premised on the idea that teachers who have the opportunity to share their thoughts and experiences with a community of peers may be better able to reflectively engage with their professional practice.

Methodology and Data Collection

Research question and participant

The research question posed for this study was: How did the pedagogical beliefs of a single language teacher change (or not) as a consequence of their participation in guided collective accompaniment sessions? To answer this question, the study followed a qualitative approach, i.e., an approach in which “the researcher wants to understand the nature or meaning of human experiences” (Fade, 2003, p. 139).

A single participant in the CAM sessions was selected on the basis of convenience sampling. She agreed to participate by signing a letter of informed consent. The participant is a Mexican language teacher in her early twenties. She is a graduate of an EFL teaching program in Central Mexico and had six years of experience teaching children at the time she presented her situation in the CAM sessions.

The Repertory Grid Technique

In order to aid the participant’s articulation of her beliefs, the Repertory Grid Technique (RGT) was selected for pre- and post-interviews. The RGT is an alternative interview technique first pioneered by Kelly (1955) in the field of clinical psychology. In the 1960’s, the technique began to be utilized in other fields, especially as a data elicitation instrument for research. Repertory grids are fundamentally a matrix made up of “elements” and personal “constructs.” Elements are described as “the identification or provision of a series of cases [or] examples” (Björklund, 2008. p. 51). These elements are systematically compared and contrasted with each other, which “enables the respondent to identify ‘constructs,’ i.e., the ways he or she has of making sense of, or construing, the elements” (Björklund, 2008. p. 51). Constructs, on the other hand, are defined as “expressions of intuitions, ‘gut feelings,’ and perceptions” (Björklund, 2008. p. 51). The repertory grid technique can play a useful role in eliciting and understanding teacher perspectives, as it can clarify the personal constructs that instructors use to understand their professional world and the people that are part of it (Chitsabesan et al., 2006; Erin, 2020).

A pre-interview was carried out around a month before the CAM sessions commenced. A second interview was carried out six months after the first one, to see how the participant’s perceptions might have changed as a result of participating in the CAM sessions. Additionally, a follow-up interview was conducted so that

the participant could clarify and expand on some of the constructs provided in the previous interviews. The three interviews were conducted in Spanish.

During pre- and post-interviews, the rep grid elements were selected and categorized in order to better understand the participant's beliefs concerning the practice of good, average, and bad teachers. That is, the participant was asked to think about: a great L2 teacher, a great teacher, an average L2 teacher, an average teacher, a bad L2 teacher and a bad teacher. Then, through dyadic elicitation, she was asked to compare these elements in order to create a list of constructs about the positive and negative characteristics that she associated with these teachers. This process allowed the participant to reflect on her prior "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975, as cited in Mattheoudakis, 2007), i.e., the beliefs generated by her previous learning experiences (Mattheoudakis, 2007). Finally, the participant was asked to rate the elements against the constructs she had generated, assigning each a number from 1 (most positive) to 7 (most negative). She was also asked to rate her own past, present and conjectured future professional practices in terms of the personal constructs. The participants initial rep grid can be seen in Figure 1.

RANK	1 Positive Characteristics, Behaviors, etc.	A Great L2 Teacher: Ada A Great Teacher: Tonia An Average L2 Teacher: Juan An Average Teacher: Juan A Bad L2 Teacher: Luis A Bad Teacher: Rubi You in the past. You as you are now. You as You Would Like to Be									7 Negative Characteristics, Behaviors, etc.
		1	1	3	2	4	1	4	4	2	
10	Impulsar (da herramientas/caring)	1	1	3	2	4	1	4	4	2	inequipado con herramientas para alumnos
13	Disponibilidad/trabajador	3	2	x	3	x	x	2	6	4	Ocupado
14	Dedicación a la clase	2	1	2	3	5	2	3	2	2	Careless (sin dedicación)
16	Organizado (con grupos)	1	1	1	1	1	2	4	2	1	Desorganizado (con grupos)
17	Seguimiento plan de trabajo	3	1	3	1	1	2	1	4	3	desobediente
2	Habilidad nata (con el idioma)	2	x	1	x	3	x	4	2	1	Principiante (en el idioma)
1	Experiencia (Experiencia)	2	1	2	1	2	2	6	4	2	novato
3	Dinamic (Dinámico)	1	1	5	4	7	4	5	3	1	monotonous (monótono)
5	Rebelde pero cumplido	5	4	5	3	5	7	6	4	5	Rígido
5	Performance (forma de dar clase)	1	1	4	4	6	6	6	3	1	not creative (No innovador)
11	Monitoreo	1	1	1	3	3	5	6	3	1	desatento
12	Impartir orden	2	1	3	2	1	4	6	4	1	Falta de técnica
4	Organizado (ideas y pizarrón)	2	2	2	1	2	4	5	3	1	Tosco/ sucio
6	Trasmitir conocimiento	2	1	2	1	3	3	5	3	1	incongruente
7	Transmitir Confianza	3	2	5	7	6	7	4	2	2	carácter fuerte
9	Motivador	3	3	3	1	5	5	3	2	1	desmotivador

Figure 1. Rep Grid done with the participant on the first interview with classification.

Procedure

While rep grids are a hybrid qualitative / quantitative methodology, for the purpose of this article, only the qualitative dimension was analyzed. Once the interviews had been conducted, content analysis was conducted on the participant's constructs, which were then grouped into three major categories: professionalism, professionalization, and inter/intrapersonal characteristics. These were subdivided in minor categories as well and, for the purposes of this report, color-coded. The description of each of the categories can be seen below in Figure 2.

CATEGORY	SUBCATEGORIES
<p>Professionalism</p> <p>"the conduct, aims, or qualities that characterize or mark a profession or a professional person" (Merriam Webster dictionary, ref).</p>	None
<p>Inter and Intrapersonal characteristics</p> <p>The constructs that the teacher has as part of their personality or that they decide to showcase in their practice because it resembles traits of who and how they are.</p>	<p>Communication skills: the ability the teacher has to transmit information that is embedded into their own personality.</p> <p>Emotional skills: the capability and ability of the teacher to transmit, control and or showcase their emotions to improve the classroom setting, and to manage situations accordingly.</p> <p>Personality: traits that can be found in the person regardless of their teaching persona.</p>
<p>Professionalization</p> <p>The traits that the teachers gain or develop during their teaching education: theory or philosophy of practice, skills gained because of the profession, and actions that the teaching requires but are applied and developed through the practice.</p>	<p>Language/subject/content knowledge: the linguistic and paralinguistic knowledge that the teacher has of the subject imparted.</p> <p>Praxis: the theoretical and practical knowledge the teacher has about how to perform in the classroom.</p>

Figure 2. Data classification and color-coding.

Findings and Discussion

The number of constructs a participant is able to produce is associated with measures of cognitive complexity, the capacity of an individual to perceive reality from various perspectives (Castejon, 2001). Because producing new constructs is cognitively demanding, RGT interviews often end after six or seven constructs have been identified. This is especially true if a participant has not considered the interview topic in great depth. On the other hand, if a participant is well-versed in a particular subject and has devoted time to considering it, he or she may well be able to supply 10 or more constructs. In some cases, a participant may be able to supply twenty or more constructs (Winter, 2013). In the current study, the participant identified a total of 17 constructs in the first interview and 19 in the second. These construct numbers are a preliminary indication that the participant holds complex and nuanced views about teaching. It is common in the literature for researchers to gauge growth in cognitive complexity by comparing the number of constructs generated by an individual at different times (Castejon, 2001; Fransella et al., 2004). In this study, the participant was able to generate two more constructs in the post-interview than in the pre-interview. While this is not a big change, it does indicate that as a result of the CAM sessions, she was able to add to the storehouse of her pedagogical beliefs.

The constructs provided during both interviews as well as some notes from the follow-up conversation can be seen below as Figure 3.

Positive characteristics of teachers				
	Rank	Pre-CAM	Rank	Post-CAM
1.	1	Responsabilidad	10	Impulsar (da herramientas/caring)
2.	2	Cumplimiento	13	Disponibilidad/ trabajador
3.	3	Conocimiento	14	Dedicación a la clase
4.	7	Cronología	16	Organizado (con grupos)
5.	8	Visual (organización en pizarrón)	17	Seguimiento plan de trabajo
6.	9	Claridad	2	Habilidad nata (con el idioma)
7.	10	Dinámica	1	Experiencia
8.	17	Experiencia	3	Dinámico
9.	4	Estricta	5	Rebelde pero cumplido
10.	12	Confiable	5	Performance (forma de dar clase)
11.	6	Organizado	11	Monitoreo
12.	14	Personalidad	12	Impartir orden
13.	15	Divertido	4	Organizado (ideas y pizarrón)
14.	5	Confianza en sí mismo	6	Trasmitir conocimiento
15.	11	Motivación	7	Transmitir Confianza
16.	13	Empatía	9	Motivador
17.	16	Disponibilidad	8	Apasionado
18.			13	Paciente
19.			15	Tutoría

Figure 3. Positive constructs from pre, post, and follow-up interviews.

There was a clear change in the constructs ranked as most important. In the first interview, the top three constructs were *responsabilidad*, *cumplimiento*, and *conocimiento*. This was related to her experience as a teacher trainee, and the words selected were broad and formal. In the second interview, the constructs *experiencia*, *habilidad nata*, and *dinámico* were ranked as the most important. These constructs are more specific. In the final, follow-up interview, the participant noted that these constructs are more focused on herself as an instructor rather than on the descriptions of the teachers she had chosen as grid elements. In the same vein, in the pre-interview the construct *experiencia* was ranked in last place; in the post-interview, the same construct was ranked in first place. In the follow-up interview, the participant explained that experience is important “because not everyone can be teachers.” Experience for her refers to being able to analyze groups and make a class work through the practical experience of using different teaching methodologies. She considered that having a native ability with the language helps her to make activities without the use of pre-prepared materials. Another significant change had to do with the construct ranking of *dinámico*, which was in tenth place in the pre-interview and changed to third place in the post-interview. This change had to do with the pandemic situation, in that her online work underlined the importance of motivating students to participate more.

The classification of constructs also changed between interviews. In terms of the professionalism category, the first interview included two constructs, *responsabilidad* and *cumplimiento*. As noted above, these were ranked as the two most important constructs. In the second interview, there were five constructs placed in the category, although only one of them ranked among the top ten constructs: *impulsar*, in tenth place. Thus, while the total number of constructs only increased by two between the pre- and post- interviews, the types of constructs elicited reflect clear changes in the participant’s beliefs and pedagogic priorities. In the category of professionalization, the number of constructs -- six -- remained the same in both interviews, but there was a clear shift in the participant’s perception of this concept. In the follow-up, she mentioned that she used to consider that being an English teaching professional primarily meant fulfilling the administrative requirements of her position. By the time of her second interview, it was clear to her that she needed to widen her understanding of how professionalism could be applied to other constructs, such as *impulsar/dar herramientas*, *dedicación a la clase*, *organizado*, and *seguimiento del plan de trabajo*. For inter/intrapersonal characteristics, the participant mentioned eight constructs in the pre-interview and six in the post-interview. She subsequently explained:

“yo recaigo mucho como en la personalidad, me gusta más esa onda... de que seas chido [...] porque te da la confianza” – Excerpt 1, follow-up interview

In this excerpt from the follow-up interview, the participant expressed that she believes that personality improves teaching practice because it increases confidence.

There were a number of changes in the selection of words to describe her beliefs about personality. The constructs tended to be more focused in the second interview; whereas in the pre-interview the constructs tended to be general descriptions of teacher traits, in the post-interview they were reformulated as specific action statements. For instance, *organizado* changed to *organización del pizarrón*; *motivación* changed to *motivador*; *confiable* changed to *transmitir confianza*; and *conocimiento* changed to *transmitir conocimiento*

The participant reported that the CAM sessions made her reflect on how adapting to online classes, and the limitations this new modality placed on her practice, affected her motivation and personality. She mentioned that when she began teaching online, she felt like a bad teacher. She felt overwhelmed by the workload of creating new material and writing lesson plans, all the while trying to take care of her personal life. Because of the awareness she gained through the discussions held in the CAM, she started to change her point of view. She mentioned that she noticed a change in her perspective: she learned to worry less about administrative requirements and instead focused her energies on her students and how to help them. For instance, the CAM sessions allowed her to see the negative aspects of the construct *responsable*. When the other CAM participants shared their experiences about being forced to follow a lesson plan and methodology imposed by their institutions, she realized that she was not the only language teacher who felt pressured. She gave the following example of how school administrators often imposed institutional rules:

“... tienen que ponerles esto [a los alumnos] porque yo les digo. No me importa que tú te estés muriendo o algo, pero lo vas a hacer porque es tu responsabilidad.” Excerpt 2, follow-up interview

This is a strong example of how the CAM influenced the participant's beliefs about teaching. It can be deduced that this kind of new thinking is the reason that the construct *responsabilidad* no longer appears in her second interview. Instead, this was replaced with the construct *rebelde pero cumplido*.

Conclusions

This case study analyzed whether the CAM had any effects on a teacher's beliefs. As has been demonstrated in the findings, there was a slight but positive change in the number of constructs elicited in the post-interview. Furthermore, the participant changed constructs, removing some, adding others, modifying still others. During the second interview, the participant took more time when deciding how to address each construct and was able to provide more detailed accounts of what each one meant to her. She also started to tease out subtle differences between them, and ranking the constructs seemed to be easier for her as well.

Overall, the CAM sessions seemed to have had a positive influence on the participant's capacity for self-reflection. Most significantly, her perception that she herself was the primary obstacle to good teaching changed dramatically. By the time of the second interview, she was able to reflect on her practice more objectively and recognized her ability to pro-actively drive positive learning outcomes.

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