

# **Rethinking the role of teachers' beliefs about their function: A survey of Greek teachers' inner thoughts**

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## **Abstract**

We report the findings of a survey of 388 primary and secondary EFL teachers in Greek state schools concerning their self-perceptions as practitioners and active users of and experts in different domains of the target language. The issues considered fall into three broad categories: general qualifications of EFL teachers, actual teaching practice, knowledge and use of the English language. The survey incorporates a wide range of quantitative and qualitative items that aim to investigate teachers' beliefs about how capable and successful they consider themselves to be in their own practice and the extent to which they are convinced that their professional contribution is acknowledged as significant by others. The conclusions shed light on the extent to which in-service teachers' prior experience as language learners, student-teachers and active practitioners is important in shaping their current beliefs about their function as educators.

**Keywords:** teacher self-perceptions, teacher beliefs, Greek educational context

## **1. Introduction**

Teachers' own perceptions about their role both in and out of the classroom have been well documented in the broader educational psychology literature (e.g., see Beijaard, Verloop and Vermunt 2000). Over the years, research has highlighted many interesting links between how teachers view themselves as educators and how they teach (Lieberman and Miller 1984), the academic success of their students (Abu-Rabia 2004) or even their direct or indirect involvement in and contribution to the development of novel educational practices (papers in Kompf *et al.* 1996). In the foreign language teaching domain, recent research has shed light on the ways in which teachers' self-perceptions can be linked with, among other areas, the implementation of intercultural educational practices (Sercu 2005), innovation and curriculum planning (Stoller, 2004) and learner motivation (Sougari and Sifakis 2007a).

The present study investigates the beliefs of 388 EFL teachers working in primary and secondary Greek state schools with regard to their role as educators. In doing so, it focuses on the ways in which Greek EFL teachers perceive themselves both as

practitioners and as active users of and experts in different domains of the target language. In particular, the issues considered fall into three broad categories: (a) general qualifications of EFL teachers, (b) actual teaching practice, and (c) knowledge and use of the English language.

On the basis of the data gathered, we attempt to examine the extent to which in-service teachers' prior experience as language learners, student-teachers and active practitioners is important in shaping their current beliefs about their role as educators in both their own teaching context and the wider community. We go on to discuss possible implications of the relationship between teaching domain, professional self-image, and classroom teaching in the Greek context and concentrate on delineating the role of the state-school EFL teacher with regard to his/her classroom situation, the wider socio-cultural community and the challenges that arise from the international spread of English.

## **2. Teachers' perceptions of their professional roles**

Teachers' own perceptions about their educational practices and their impact on different areas of the teaching and learning processes have been widely documented. From Schwab's distinction of the basic elements of teaching (the teacher, the pupil, the material to be studied and the society—Schwab 1973) to Shor's orientation of the critical pedagogy model, in which teachers participate in the continuing transformation of the teaching and learning experience (Shor 1992), teachers and teacher educators have sought to investigate teachers' beliefs as a means of understanding the elements of successful teaching.

Many studies have adopted the use of indirect techniques, such as the use of metaphoric pictures, as a meaningful vehicle for raising teachers' awareness of their roles and functions in their teaching context. For example, a study carried out by Ben-Peretz, Mendelsona and Kron (2003) highlighted the caring metaphor as a prevalent notion in many diverse teaching domains and concluded that the teaching context has a significant impact on teachers' images of their professional selves. Other studies focused on teachers' interpretations of the 'ideal' teacher. Here, qualities such as leadership and the positive influence of pupils in areas such as knowledge acquisition, education for morality and principles and success in creating interpersonal relations with students (Arnon and Reichel 2007) were found to be of importance. Other studies raised considerations concerning the need for a greater understanding of pedagogy,

child development and methods of evaluation (Korthagen 2004), while others highlighted the key role of students' evaluation of their teachers on issues such as pupil anxiety (Abu-Rabia 2004), ability in guiding pupils in solving problems (Musgrove and Taylor 1972) and creation of good relations with the students (Lowman 1995).

In the ESOL domain, it has been shown that it is virtually impossible to understand the work of EFL teachers without drawing attention to what has been termed 'teacher cognition', namely, the capturing of the complexities of who they are, what they know and believe, how they learn to teach and how they carry out their work in diverse contexts throughout their careers (cf. Borg 2003, Freeman 2002, Woods 1996; for a review, see Johnson 2006). Theories of situated cognition argue that knowledge involves experiencing practices, not just accumulating information. In this sense, learning processes are the result of continuous negotiations between teachers and pupils that involve practical applications (Chaiklin and Lave 1996, Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998). What is more, such applications are regulated by normative ways of reasoning and carrying out tasks and other resources in collective activities, or what Lave and Wenger (1991) have termed a 'community of practice'. In essence, the knowledge of individual teachers is constructed through the knowledge of the communities of practice in which that individual participates.

To that end, certain studies have investigated the ways in which language specialists construct and negotiate their roles and professional relationships through classroom discourse (cf. Creese 2000) to meet individual envisaged profiles (Sougari and Sifakis 2007b). With regard to the influences that help shape EFL teachers' perceptions, it has been shown that their own professional definition is the result of dynamic interactions with others, most notably learners, parents and principals (Lieberman and Miller 1984) and is further informed by their practical previous experiences as foreign language learners and as foreign language users (Feinman-Nemser and Flodden 1986). Other studies have shifted attention to teachers' cultivation of public duty, which is construed as moral and pedagogical stewardship (Prillaman, Eaker and Kendrick 1994). As we will see, all of these characteristics are present, to some extent, in the beliefs of Greek state school EFL teachers.

### 3. The study

#### 3.1 Data collection and analysis

The setting chosen for this research was state schools in Greece, where English is the first foreign language being taught from the third grade of the primary sector up to the third year of the upper secondary sector. A total of 388 state school teachers of English were asked to disclose their inner beliefs about their teaching practices. The instrument used for data collection purposes was a questionnaire, especially designed for the purposes of the current study. To ensure a greater response level, the questionnaire was sent out to school directories prompting the authorities to disseminate the questionnaire to the teachers who had enquired about teacher training courses during the previous year.

All the respondents hold a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Language and Literature; 17% declare to be holders of a postgraduate title in applied linguistics or a related field, whereas only one respondent holds a PhD title. The descriptive characteristics of the respondents are given below:

Affiliation		Gender		Age		Years of teaching experience	
Primary	46%	Female	91%	22-30	31%	0-1	2%
Secondary	54%	Male	9%	31-40	30%	1-5	22%
				41-50	32%	5-10	28%
				51+	7%	11+	48%

The descriptive and inferential statistics were computed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Thus the thirteen items considered for the current study are analysed in terms of frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. The respondents' age, affiliation (i.e., primary and secondary level), years of teaching experience and gender are considered as the variables that may have contributed to variability. The two non-parametric tests, the Mann-Whitney U test and the Kruskal-Wallis test, were run to detect significant results. To be more specific, the Mann-Whitney U test compared the sampled data in relation to gender and affiliation. As regards age and years of teaching experience, the Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to compare three or more independent groups of sampled data and their means. The significance level for all questionnaire data was set at  $p < .05$ .

### 3.2 Questionnaire

To gain an understanding of the teachers' perspectives regarding their views about their teaching practices, we administered a questionnaire exploring teachers' perceptions about general qualifications of EFL teachers, their perceptions about their professional obligations and their knowledge and use of the English language.

The questionnaire, which had been piloted and amended, was divided into three sections and contained open and closed items. Section 1 contained statements to which respondents could select one of five responses: *strongly disagree (1)*, *disagree (2)*, *neither agree nor disagree (3)*, *agree (4)*, *totally agree (5)*. Section 2 welcomed respondents' personal reactions to few statements provided, yielding evidence for qualitative analysis, which, however, is beyond the scope of the present paper. Section 3 asked participants for their profile. The findings presented in this paper derive from only a few items that form the greater questionnaire; the items selected are those that are closely related to the subject of this paper such as the teachers' priorities regarding learner involvement, knowledge of grammar and meaning of words, coursebook- and teaching-related issues, etc.

### 3.3 Findings and discussion

The results are grouped in two different tables to refer to those findings associated with gender and affiliation (in Table 1) and age and years of teaching experience (in Table 2).

#### 3.3.1 General qualifications of EFL teachers

As seen in the respondents' profile, all teachers are holders of a degree in the field of English language teaching in order to comply with the requirements for the appointment to a state school and to qualify as an English language teacher. Few teachers hold a postgraduate title that eventually gives them further insight into the intricacies of teaching and broadens their perspectives. The Mann-Whitney U test offers no statistical significance in the case of holding a C2 certificate for the independent variables: affiliation and gender (see Table 1). However, when the teachers' age and years of teachers' experience are considered, the Kruskal-Wallis test offers statistical differences among the various groups (see Table 2). To be more specific, the following age groups contribute to significance: 22-30, 31-40 and 41-50. The age group 22-30 is statistically different from the other two groups and the age group 31-40 gives a statistical

difference from the age group 41-50. Thus the three age groups give different priorities as regards the attainment of the C2-level certificate. Younger teachers seem to be more in line with the trends of the current Greek society that necessitates the pursuit of certificate titles that would offer additional qualifications for their prospective career. Thus the older the teacher, the less the priority allotted (when they were younger) to the attainment of such qualifications. The University degree ensures their teaching qualification, whereas the proficiency certificate certifies their language proficiency, which a prospective employer could seek for. When the variable of teaching experience is taken into consideration, it becomes apparent that experience does matter and that difference exists among those teachers who have experience for 2-5, 6-10 and 11+ years (see Table 2).

**Table 1. Summary results of the Mann-Whitney test with gender and affiliation as the independent variables**

Items		Frequency of agreement				Significant differences <sup>c</sup> shown by M-W U
		Gender <sup>a</sup>		Affiliation <sup>b</sup>		
		M	F	P	S	
The teacher		<i>Mean</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Mean</i>	
1	Holds a C2-level certificate	2.6	3.0	3.0	3.0	n.s., n.s.
2	Teaches Standard English	4.0	3.9	3.9	4.0	n.s., n.s.
3	Engages weak students	4.0	4.4	4.3	4.4	Gender*, n.s.
4	Can decide upon the structure of each teaching hour	4.1	3.9	3.9	3.9	n.s., n.s.
5	Teaching is based exclusively on coursebook	1.9	1.9	2.0	1.9	n.s., n.s.
6	Is obliged to implement a coursebook	3.8	3.7	3.7	3.7	n.s., n.s.
7	Incorporates the culture of other NSs of English	3.6	3.9	3.8	3.9	n.s., n.s.
8	Speaks English well	4.7	4.7	4.7	4.7	n.s., n.s.
9	Speaks more effortlessly with native speakers than with nonnative speakers	4.1	3.7	3.8	3.7	n.s., n.s.
10	Has got a 'good' accent (i.e. British or American)	3.9	3.7	3.9	3.9	n.s., n.s.
11	Can translate phrases or texts from English to Greek and vice versa	4.3	4.1	4.1	4.2	n.s., n.s.
12	Knows the Grammar	4.7	4.6	4.6	4.7	n.s., n.s.
13	Knows the meaning of words	4.5	4.1	4.2	4.2	Gender*, n.s.

<sup>a</sup>M= Male F= Female <sup>b</sup>P= Primary S= Secondary <sup>c</sup>Significance: \* $p < .05$

### 3.3.2 Actual teaching practice

Statements 2-7 in Tables 1 and 2 are connected with the beliefs of the respondents regarding their actual teaching practice undertaken in the classroom context. Affiliation

(teachers' appointment in the state sector) is not a variable worth considering for any of the statements as no statistical difference arises. As for gender, there is evidence that female teachers give more importance to the involvement of weak learners in everyday activities. None of the other variables reach significance showing that irrespectively of the other variables most teachers show preference for catering for the needs of weak learners. The teachers' response to this questionnaire item reveals their tendency to be preoccupied with this particular group of learners, so that they will not be left behind. Teachers attempt to embrace weak learners by actively engaging them in activities.

However, both groups of teachers offer a high mean (Male teachers,  $M = 4.0$ ; Female teachers,  $M = 4.4$ ), reflecting thus their vigilance for the engagement of all learners in their teaching practice. The same tendency is apparent when years of teaching experience and teachers' age are considered, even though there is no evidence that the two groups differ with respect to the two aforementioned variables.

Overall, it is accepted that the target of teaching is Standard English. All age-groups contribute to significance. In Table 2, the findings point to the direction of older teachers having stronger views about teaching Standard English, while this view loses its importance to a remarkable degree in the case of younger teachers. The fact that EFL teaching has always had a Standard English orientation reflects teachers' perceptions, which are deeply rooted in their schooling. The variable of teaching experience offers similar results as there is a distinct difference between those teachers with 6-10 years of teaching experience and those with 11+. The less experience teachers have and the younger they are, the less importance they give to the explicit teaching of Standard English.

**Table 2. Summary results of the Kruskal-Wallis test with age and years of teaching experience as the independent variables**

	The teacher	Age				Years of teaching experience				Significant differences <sup>a</sup> shown by K-W
		22-30 Mean	31-40 Mean	41-50 Mean	51+ Mean	0-1 Mean	2-5 Mean	6-10 Mean	11+ Mean	
1	Holds a C2-level certificate	3.6	2.8	2.4	3.0	3.4	3.5	3.2	3.0	Age ***, years ***
2	Teaches Standard English	3.8	3.8	4.1	4.5	3.7	3.8	3.8	4.1	Age ***, years *
3	Engages weak students	4.4	4.3	4.3	4.4	4.1	4.4	4.3	4.3	n.s., n.s.
4	Can decide upon the structure of each teaching hour	3.8	3.8	4.0	4.3	3.9	3.8	3.7	4.1	Age*, n.s.
5	Teaching is based exclusively on coursebook	1.9	1.9	2.1	2.1	2.0	2.0	1.8	2.0	n.s., n.s.
6	Is obliged to implement a coursebook	3.7	3.7	3.7	3.8	3.4	3.8	3.7	3.7	n.s., n.s.
7	Incorporates the culture of other NSs of English	4.0	3.8	3.9	3.5	3.9	3.9	4.0	3.8	Age *, n.s.
8	Speaks English well	4.6	4.7	4.8	4.6	4.5	4.6	4.7	4.7	n.s., n.s.
9	Speaks more effortlessly with native speakers than with nonnative speakers	3.4	3.8	4.0	3.9	3.8	3.4	3.7	3.9	Age ***, years **
10	Has got a 'good' accent (i.e. British or American)	3.9	3.7	4.2	4.0	4.1	3.8	3.8	4.0	Age**, n.s.
11	Can translate phrases or texts from English to Greek and vice versa	4.1	4.0	4.3	4.4	4.1	4.1	4.0	4.3	Age**, years*
12	Knows the grammar	4.6	4.6	4.7	4.7	4.6	4.6	4.6	4.7	n.s., n.s.
13	Knows the meaning of words	4.1	4.1	4.3	4.3	3.9	4.1	4.1	4.3	Age*, n.s.

<sup>a</sup> Significance: \*p<.05 \*\*P<.005 \*\*\*p<.001



To a great extent teachers feel that they make decisions related to how and what will be taught. Their teaching is based on a set coursebook, which they are supposed to follow, but not blindfoldedly. Their teaching practice can be supplemented in ways that can suit the needs of their learners and the teachers' own aspirations. The fact that no statistical differences arises as regards the teachers' clinging on the particular coursebook reflects the similar teaching practices followed; however, their responses suggest that they are willing to supplement the courseware material as well as their teaching with other material or tasks that they consider appropriate. As regards the structure of the lesson, older teachers (51+) feel that they have more control over their class than their younger counterparts (31-40). Younger teachers state that they are the decision makers in their class but not to the extent that their older counterparts feel. The root of this discrepancy could be traced in that older teachers know more about how the school system operates and feel that they can show more initiative.

Older teachers' preoccupation with Standard English and the target group (most often associate with British or American) has been established. It has also been said that older teachers supplement their teaching with more material than younger teachers. However, younger teachers (belonging to the 22-30 group) are significantly more willing to incorporate aspects of the lifestyle and culture of other NSs (not just British or American) than older ones (51+). This practice can be attributable to the young teachers' perception that English is not supposed to be tied with the conventional aspects (i.e. associating the teaching of English with the culture of Great Britain and the United States of America), but rather that societal changes call for broadening students' minds.

### *3.3.3 Knowledge and use of the English language*

As can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, the respondents hold strong views regarding statements 8-13, which are associated with the teachers' perceptions about their knowledge and use of the English language. The Kruskal-Wallis test does not reveal any major differences either between male and female teachers or between primary and secondary teachers – which is probably due to the fact that the initial academic training of all EFL teachers in Greece is largely the same. With particular reference to gender, the only statistical significance is traced in the teachers' concern about knowing the meaning of words; male teachers admit placing high priority in knowing the meaning of words. The findings indicate that older teachers (41-50) are more confident in knowing

the meaning of words as opposed to their younger counterparts (31-40). However, no significant difference arises in relation to years of teaching experience.

Speaking more effortlessly and subsequently fluently with NSs of English than with NNSs reaches only marginal significance in the case of male/female teachers ( $p=0.65$ ). Teaching experience and age gives a statistical significance; in particular, the Kruskal-Wallis test shows that:

- (a) teaching experience does matter as regards teachers' confidence in conversing with NSs of English by paying attention to meaning (statistical difference between the group with 2-5 years of experience and the group with 11+ years), with more experienced teachers being more confident, and
- (b) younger teachers belonging to the 22-30 group have significantly different views from the 41-50 group; older teachers feel more at ease in communicative events with NSs than with NNSs.

All teachers admit being in a position to speak English well; the overall mean being 4.7 ( $SD=.5$ ) reveals the teachers' strong belief that they have faith in their command of the English language. Therefore, there is no evidence that teachers differ with respect to any of the variables (i.e. gender, affiliation, age and years of teaching experience). This finding also points to the direction that the profession of the teacher is closely linked with certain 'competencies' that the teacher of English is supposed to have. Speaking English well is just one facet; as will be seen, having a good accent (i.e. British or American) –  $M=3.9$ ,  $SD=.8$ , having mastery in the language (i.e. knowing the meaning of words –  $M=4.2$ ,  $SD=.7$ , knowing the English grammar –  $M=4.6$ ,  $SD=.5$ , translating with ease –  $M=4.2$ ,  $SD=.8$ ) are among teachers' priorities. As can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, there are no differences among the groups in the case of some of these statements and that is the reason behind the lack of any statistical differences.

However, there are some age-related differences regarding statements 10 ('having a good accent') and 11 ('translating') and some experience-related differences in connection with statement 11. Thus teachers acknowledge their ability to translate from English to Greek and vice versa and their possession of a good accent. In the case of these beliefs, age-related differences arise between the age groups of 31-40 and 41-50. Older teachers place significantly higher importance on these practices. Their beliefs could be linked with their prior experience as language learners and/or the education received. Furthermore, experienced teachers (11+) believe that they are in a position to translate phrases or texts from English to Greek and vice versa; their counterparts with

less experience (6-10) believe that they have the ability but to a lesser degree. The root of this belief could be due to their familiarity with the teaching materials to a greater extent which is accumulated with teaching practice.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In sum, our research shows that Greek state-school EFL teachers tend to associate successful teaching with their own awareness of formal aspects of the language. This does not necessarily imply that they consider it important to be active users of the language, but they generally seem to consider that knowledge of its formal features is fundamental in providing adequate help to learners with lower proficiency. This confirms earlier findings of ours (e.g., Sifakis and Sougari 2005) and can be interpreted with reference to the broader educational tradition and culture in this country, which clearly favours a predominantly form-focused approach to the teaching of L1 even from the early stages of primary school. In the EFL context, these formal features refer to, for example, having a good Standard English accent, knowing the meanings of words, knowing the English grammar, etc. It is interesting that these beliefs seem to become more salient as teachers grow in age and teaching experience.

Our research has also shown that younger teachers show a marked interest in acquiring certificate titles that would, in their view, offer additional qualifications for their prospective career. The older and the more experienced the teacher, the less the emphasis on the attainment of such qualifications. This is illuminative of (a) the security that older teachers feel, that arises from the fact that they have professional tenure in the state sector, and (b) the lack of security of younger teachers who are faced with the future challenges of the profession. It should also be noted that, as teachers' beliefs are not significantly influenced by the teaching context in which they teach, our research shows that their perception of their professional role springs from a deeper concern for the teaching and use of the foreign language.

We have also found that female teachers are more inquisitive than their male colleagues and claim to make efforts to supplement their teaching with cultural input from speakers and countries of the inner- and outer- circle<sup>1</sup>. The same is also the case with younger teachers, who portray a conviction that the use and knowledge of the

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<sup>1</sup> According to Kachru (1985), inner-circle countries are predominantly populated by native speakers of English, who are therefore L1 users of English (e.g., Great Britain, USA, Australia, Canada), whereas outer-circle countries are populated by speakers whose mother tongue is not English but who are fluent users of English (e.g., India, Pakistan, Nigeria).

English language should be informed by current trends and demands that incorporate the global character of the language and should not be exclusively related to the conventional native-speaker approach of the language. That said, however, we also found that, as teachers become older and more experienced, they claim to be more confident in communicating with NSs rather than NNSs. What is more, the older and the more experienced the teacher, the more the inclination to teach Standard English (most notably, the British and American varieties), which also explains teachers' preference for native-speaker competence as the ultimate goal in language learning and communication. What is more, in situations where the professional status of state school EFL teachers remains rather low in Greece, preserving a norm-bound attitude towards the teaching and use of English is an understandable source of satisfaction, pride and sense of professional fulfillment for them.

Coursebooks are considered by all teachers to play an important and necessary role in English language learning. At the same time, coursebooks are not, or should not be restrictive in the planning of a successful instruction. While all teachers show some level of autonomy in what they claim about the way they teach, older teachers claim that they take more initiatives with regard to supplementing the set coursebook.

In the light of the above, it is important that ongoing professional training of state-school EFL teachers take consideration of the above findings and focus on:

- raising in-service teachers' awareness of the importance of communicating with NNSs, especially in the broader European context; this should also incorporate an awareness of the very broad uses of the English language worldwide and the changing orientation of the notion of the "native speaker" (Holliday 2006);
- empowering teachers to value and use the teaching of English as a means of raising their learners' intercultural communicative skills, both inside and outside the EFL classroom; this would imply that teachers see it as their professional duty to recognise the increasingly intercultural character of their state-school classes and put forward action research programmes to promote all learners' cultural identities on the basis of a shared, non-threatening language, essentially helping to alleviate negative stereotypical attitudes about immigrants (Alptekin 2002, de Bot 2007);
- emphasising the strengths of the communicatively efficient use of English, as opposed to perceiving the language merely as subject-matter that needs to be 'mastered' (Bax 2003, Kenning 2006, Savignon 2003).

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