

# When attitudes and beliefs meet: A qualitative study with some Brazilian teachers of English

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## Abstract:

This paper is about attitudes and beliefs. Considering attitude as an evaluative reaction and beliefs as a perception one might have on something or somebody, this paper has as objective, through the lens of both elements, to understand some teachers' perception and reaction on the teaching/learning process of English as well as to reflect on the relationship between both. Therefore, this paper is based on a qualitative research, conducted with a group of Brazilian teachers of English. To generate the data, we used the teachers' diaries. The data pointed, among other things, the existence of a strong relationship between attitude and belief, imbricated with the teachers' practices. Besides that, we ratified our assumptions that attitudes can hold/integrate a belief and beliefs emerge as a justification of an attitude. The relevance of this study lies in the possibility to shed light on the teaching/learning of English, in order to overcome barriers, materialized in attitudes and beliefs, which, many times, impede educational success.

**Keywords:** Attitude. Belief; English language; Teacher.

## Resumo:

### **Quando as atitudes e as crenças se encontram: Um estudo qualitativo com alguns professores de inglês brasileiros**

Este artigo é sobre atitudes e crenças. Considerando atitude com uma reação avaliativa e as crenças com uma percepção que se pode ter sobre alguma coisa ou alguém, este artigo tem como objetivo, através das lentes de ambos os elementos, compreender a percepção e as reações de alguns professores de

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inglês sobre o processo de ensino/aprendizagem bem como refletir sobre a relação entre atitude e crença. Para tanto, este artigo está baseado em uma pesquisa qualitativa, conduzida com um grupo de professores brasileiros de inglês. Para gerar os dados, nós usamos os diários de bordo dos professores. Os dados apontaram, dentre outras coisas, a existência de uma forte relação entre crença e atitude, imbrincada com as práticas dos professores. Além disso, ratificamos as nossas suposições de que as atitudes sustentam/integram uma crença e que as crenças emergem como uma justificativa de uma atitude. A relevância deste estudo reside na possibilidade de lançar luz no processo de ensino/aprendizagem da língua inglesa, para superar barreiras, materializadas nas atitudes e crenças, que, muitas vezes, impedem o sucesso educativo.

**Palavras-chaves:** Atitude; Crença; Língua inglesa; Professor.

## 1. Introduction

The educational setting is a multifaceted space, which involves several elements, which, many times, go unnoticed. Among these elements, teachers and learners' reaction and perception are of great relevance to figure out and plan the educational path. Many specialists, for instance, have come to conclusions about how beliefs and attitudes operate in the educational space and it is a consensus among them that beliefs play a central role in shaping teachers' practices (SCHEYERL; ANJOS, 2019, UTAMI, 2016, BARCELOS, 2015, GABILLON, 2012, KUMARAVADIVELU, 2012, MARSH; WALLACE, 2005, WALKER; SHAFFER; LIAMS, 2004, S. BORG, 2003).

This paper is about beliefs and attitudes a group of teachers developed. Our main objective is to share some data which pointed to the existence of a relationship between attitude and belief as well.

Initially, we assumed that learning a language is a social psychological phenomenon (GARDNER, 1985), in which attitudes and beliefs could be related with each other so intrinsically (ANJOS, 2020), in a kind of relationship, which needed to be explained. Our

idea, from this perspective, was to understand this relationship between attitude and belief as well as the threshold between them, what justifies the title of this paper. Actually, this paper emerged from a very basic question: when do beliefs and attitudes meet?

Therefore, we analysed the diaries, the teachers provided us with. We have to say it was not an easy task, since the threshold between belief and attitude is really subtle, which turns the identification, many times, confusing. However, we went ahead, coming across with very interesting findings, which ratified our assumption of the existence of a relationship between attitudes and beliefs.

The relevance of this study lies in the possibility to shed light on the teaching/learning of English, so that strategies might be planned to overcome barriers, which, many times, impede the educational success. In the next lines, first, we briefly reflect on some concepts about attitudes, beliefs and their interrelation. Second, we describe the methodology and the instrument of data collection we used. Third, we present the findings and our analysis. And at last, we share our final remarks.

## 1.2 Understanding attitudes, beliefs and their interrelationship

This section is dedicated to explain concepts of attitudes and beliefs and how they influence teachers' practices. These concepts, obviously, shed light on this study, since they provided us with a great deal of information, which gave us support to understand the issue we were interested in. Our purpose is, first, to reflect on attitudes and later on beliefs, closing this section with some (in)conclusions about the relationship both might have.

Thus, 'attitudes' have been researched by many specialists in the educational environment, as a way to understand better this space. They agree with the fact that 'attitudes' influence the teaching/learning process. In this respect, Gardner (1985) says that 'attitudes', students might have, influence how successful they will be in incorporating aspects of the language. According to him, 'attitudes' can emerge in several perspectives, influencing the learning of a language. He lists attitudes toward learning the language, attitudes toward speaking it, reactions to its sound or character, or structure etc, emphasizing that a key point, concerning 'attitudes', is that they can play a role in determining how successful an individual would be in acquiring it.

As we can see, attitudes might occur related with different aspects concerning the language one is learning. But what is the definition of attitude, which can support us to understand it, in relation to the educational setting, considering the complexity the term embraces? We have used, for some time, Gardner's conception on attitude, since it gives us a clear understanding how it operates. He claims that:

The concept of attitude is complex, and many definitions have been proposed to describe its essence. [...] From an operational point of view, an individual's attitude is an evaluative reaction to some referent or attitude object, inferred on the basis of the individuals's beliefs or opinions about the referent. (GARDNER, 1985, pp. 8, 9)

Other concepts have emerged to explain attitudes, such as 'attitude' is a tendency to answer positively or negatively toward a certain referent (HOUSSEINI, POURMANDNIA, 2013); it is a psychological tendency materialized, when one evaluates an entity with certain level of approval or disapproval (EAGLY, CHAIKEN, 1993); it is a mental and a neural state of readiness, organized through experiences, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individuals' response to all objects and situations with which it is related (ALLPORT, 1954). All of these concepts point to the relevance of the understanding of attitudes. This understanding of the extent and nature, mainly, of negative attitudes and beliefs makes it possible to confront and transform them, so that teachers can, properly, face the challenge of coping with different students. Concerning this, Walker, Shaffer and Liams, (2004, p. 133) put:

It is important to study and understand the formation of these negative teacher attitudes in order to implement pro-active strategies that will help teachers positively rather than negatively adjust to the new challenges of educating linguistically diverse students.

Thus, the understanding of 'attitudes' has given support to several researches. In this respect, Moita Lopes (1996) verified, through a research with 102 teachers of English, the occurrence of extremely positive attitudes, almost of veneration toward the language and the foreign culture, in detri-

ment of the local ones, what, possibly, were influencing their practices.

In this line of thought, Coskun (2011) examined 47 future English teachers' attitudes toward teaching pronunciation, within an EIL<sup>1</sup> perspective. This researcher used questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The data pointed that English native speaker is regarded as the correct model in English language teaching (ELT).

Through a likert-scale questionnaire, Walker, Shaffer and Liams (2004) intended to investigate teachers' attitudes concerning English language learners. The researchers, among other things, came to the conclusion that negative attitudes, mainly the ones related with negative events, are difficult to be modified. They also observed a relationship among attitudes, racism and prejudice. They verified as well that 87% of the teachers surveyed signaled never have taken part in a language teacher education course. Based on that, they claim that neutral attitudes can turn into positive ones, if teachers receive proper knowledge to work with learners.

Gürsoy (2013) investigated two hundred teacher trainees, in order to understand their attitudes toward the English language and their self-reported difficulties when using their foreign language skills in daily and academic language. By using a questionnaire, this researcher verified that trainees have mildly positive attitudes toward the English language, with females being more positive than males. The findings also suggest that trainees have stronger instrumental motivation than integrative motivation. Moreover, the results indicated that trainees do not differ significantly in terms of their difficulties in using daily language skill.

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1 English as an international language.

We shared some few researches on attitudes just to evidence how they work and have produced relevant information to understand the teaching/learning process. From now on, we want to present some concepts on belief and researches on it as well.

Beliefs', in the educational setting, have also been of interest on the part of some researchers. Just like 'attitudes', 'beliefs' are an essential key issue to understand the educational space. Many concepts have also emerged to refer to 'beliefs', as a way to make things clear for those who want to work with them.

Concerning this, Barcelos (2008) mentions terms such as folklinguistics theories of learning, learner representation, metacognitive knowledge, cultural beliefs, learning culture, culture of learning. Pajares (1992) also argues that defining 'belief' is at best a game of player's choice, since many terms have been used to refer to it, such as values, judgments, axioms, opinions, ideology, perceptions, conceptions, conceptual systems, preconceptions, dispositions, implicit theories, explicit theories, personal theories, internal mental processes, action strategies, rules of practice, practical principles, perspectives, repertoires of understanding, and social strategy, to name but a few that can be found in the current literature.

Regarding the concepts, Borg (2001) claims that teacher beliefs are evaluative propositions which teachers hold un/consciously as true when teaching. She uses the term 'pedagogic belief' to refer to areas related with the teaching/learning process, such as about teaching, learning, and learners; subject matter, self as a teacher, or the role of a teacher, emphasizing these propositions play an important role in many aspects of teaching. Perhaps, that is why Utami (2016) says as well what teachers do in the class-

room is ruled by what they believe, which serves as a filter, through which instructional judgments and decisions are made.

Barcelos (2006) understands 'beliefs' as ways of thinking, of seeing and realizing reality, which might have a powerful impact over teachers' actions. She also highlights 'beliefs' as a filter for human behavior, saying that they work as an important feature of reflective teaching. In this perspective, she claims that beliefs may help researchers to understand possible resistance to new methodologies, any potential cognitive dissonance between teachers' and students' beliefs, learners' language difficulties, their use of language learning strategies as well as their motivation. In practical terms, Barcelos (2006) motivates researchers to understand 'beliefs' in a social constructivist perspective, leaving questions such as: what beliefs are available in our community for our learners and teachers?

In this line of thought is that Moraes (2006) conducted a qualitative research with eighteen pre-service Brazilian teachers of English, by using diaries as well. The data pointed, among other things, that the contact with new methodologies changed the participants' beliefs. This researcher mentions, for instance, that the participants initially held the belief that language is a linguistic system, that learning a language is to learn a set of structures and that the teacher has a centralizing role, who holds the knowledge and should transmit it to the learners. However, according to Moraes (2006), these beliefs changed later, what signals that pre-service teacher education can be influenced by other teachers' practice.

In this perspective, Araújo (2006) also conducted a qualitative research with two Brazilian teachers of English, using an interview to investigate their beliefs. With this

study, among other things, this researcher could conclude that with a critical analysis of their practices, teachers could figure out better their teaching approach and make progress concerning knowledge based on their learning experience, education, and teaching. She came to the conclusion as well that this study, working as a self reflection, made it possible the confrontation and articulation of new and old beliefs concerning teaching and learning a new language.

For Pajares (1992), 'beliefs' seems to be a construct based on evaluation and judgment. Thus, this researcher argues 'beliefs' may also become values, with evaluative, comparative and judgmental functions. Based on that, we draw attention to the relationship between 'attitudes' and 'beliefs'.

Concerning this, Marsh and Wallace (2005) assure that 'attitudes' can influence beliefs by influencing the perception of an attitude object, by affecting the mere retrieval of beliefs on which the attitude was originally formed, or by constructing new beliefs. Pajares (1992) also mentions a view of 'belief' as a true or false proposition, as a judgment. In this line of thought, upon defining 'beliefs, Connors and Halligan (2015) use the term 'propositional attitude', opening space as well to understand the relationship between 'attitudes' and 'beliefs'.

Thus, we assume that there is a relationship between 'attitudes' and 'beliefs', that needs to be understood and explained. This relationship may also be understood through the categories elaborated by Anjos (2020): attitudes hold or/and integrate beliefs and beliefs emerge as a justification of an attitude. Initially, we had a very superficial idea on this, because it was just an assumption. However, later we ratified it.

We finish the literature review and next we briefly describe the method and intru-

ments we used to collect the data and, then, we present the data.

### **1.2.1 Method and instruments of data collection used**

This study was developed under the light of the qualitative paradigm. Thus, the purpose was to immerse in a social reality, to understand the meanings teachers ascribe to their practices. Therefore, we used the diaries the teachers provided us with. With diaries, we mean personal diaries elaborated by teachers themselves based on their teaching actions. Thus, we consider diaries one of the most useful tools to investigate beliefs and attitudes. Vieira-Abrahão (2006) denominates diaries as self report to describe personal experiences. According to Telles (2002), these self reports can provide the construction of language teacher practice representations. Diaries or self reports work as a kind of tool to capture teachers' and learners' histories, to explain with depth their actions and answers in classroom. (VIEIRA-ABRAHÃO, 2006).

For this research, we made a cut in the study we previously conducted, to share in this paper only the data generated from this instrument. Basically we asked the teachers to write their diaries during the class breaks or even at home, as a kind of memo, in which they resort to their memories to get events which occurred during their classes. We guided them in this perspective, saying it was worth taking note of everything which happened during their classes, such as their reactions, practices, perceptions as well as the ones of the students.

For this purpose, we both agree with the fact that it is emerging in Applied Linguistics the comprehension of the role of discourse in the subject constitution, as some-

one with a multiple and conflicting identity and of his reflexivity in the production of knowledge (PENNYCOOK, 2006). Thus, we invited those ones who live the educational practices to give their opinions to take this study forward.

We tried as much as we could to get from the diaries information related with beliefs and attitudes, identifying and classifying them according to the categories we previously established. However, not in all diaries was possible to identify the occurrence of 'attitudes' and 'beliefs'.

This research was conducted in accordance with the requirements to conduct research in Brazil. It was properly protocolled at Plataforma Brazil. It was registered at Federal University of Bahia (UFBA), which number of certification is (CAAE) 59915516.7.0000.5531. The proceedings adopted in this research obeyed the ethic criteria concerning research with human beings, according to the resolution CNS N° 466 de 2012.

### **1.2.2 Findings**

Before we share the analysis of the data, we want briefly to explain how we did it. As we mentioned, we took as basis the two categories of analysis elaborated by Anjos (2020): 1. Attitudes hold or/and integrate beliefs and 2. Beliefs emerge as a justification of an attitude as well as we were guided by some research questions: 1) How teachers evaluate their practices?; 2) How do teachers believe they teach and 3) How do they think students learn better?

Thus, in the beginning of this study, we requested the teachers to elaborate a diary, describing their practices in the classroom. That day, many questions emerged concerning the structure of this text, the language

to be used, the number of pages etc. All the questions were previously solved. After six months, they gave us their diaries for our analysis. The diaries were of great relevance to understand their 'beliefs' and 'attitudes'. Among other things, we identified their 'beliefs' and 'attitudes' toward their practices and their students. To a better understanding, we first share the report and after our analysis. Let us get started.

### **REPORT 1**

#### **Class 1, 7th year, February 26th, 2019.**

**P1:** I worked with a group of the 7th year about 'health problems' [...] We discussed on the main current health problems and possible preventions. In the end of the class a song was used. I got to the conclusion that the class was very productive, because the students got involved in it a lot.

In this report, we verified that P1 revealed to work with CLIL<sup>2</sup> approach, since she chose the topic 'health problems', for instance, and developed activities with vocabulary of this content. Her attitudes concerning her practice is that it worked well, since she got to observe students' engagement in the learning process. This allows us to say that the proper teaching methodological choice makes it possible learners' engagement in the learning process, since it generates motivation (ANJOS, 2018). We may assure as well that P1's attitudes on the fact of her class be 'productive' is justified by her belief that her students took part in it, what, somehow, ratifies the notion of the relationship between 'attitude' and 'belief' (therefore, category 2).

### **REPORT 2**

#### **Class 2, 9th year, April 4th, 2019.**

**P1:** Thinking of a different methodology to read the book, translations and application of exercises, I took students to the multi-

mídia classroom. In the very beginning, I realized the students' excitement, because we were not in the common classroom and that was a good start to me. [...] I realized how they were attentive and surprised by analyzing that the content was so present in their everyday lives.

The second report of P1 allows us to state that the change of methodology and of the environment, made it possible to develop a positive attitude towards her students, when she evaluated that they were 'excited', exactly because they were in another learning space as well as she evaluated that her students were 'attentive' and 'surprised' to know the relationship between the content approached with social life. Thus, her belief (to be in another learning space) justifies her positive attitudes (students' excitement) toward her students, as well as her belief, that students realized that the content approached was related with their lives, emerged to justify her attitudes ('attentive', 'surprised') toward her students too. (Thus, category 2)

In P1's report, something that also drew our attention was the fact of having used twice the word "realized" to stress her belief, ratifying the notion that 'beliefs' are ways of perceiving the world around us. Another analysis of this report allows us to state that P1's attitude is aligned with category 1 as well, since when she said that "they were attentive and surprised" (evaluative reaction), this attitude holds and integrates her belief, ratified by the use of the verb 'realized'.

### **REPORT 3**

#### **Class 3, 6th year, April 15 th, 2020.**

**P1:** It was a very productive class and students got engaged very much in their productions. And I could also realize the importance of binding theory with practice of that they like to do.

2 CLIL – Content and Language Integrated Learning.

P1 also revealed, through her belief, to have a critical awareness of her practice, when she signaled her perception of the relevance of a theory more aligned with a practice that might please the students, what establishes a dialog with Freirian's assumptions, that the critical teaching practice implies a movement of doing and thinking about the practice, so that, one can improve the next practice (FREIRE, 1996). She also made it clear her positive attitudes toward her practice, when she evaluated her class as 'productive'. But this also allows to state that when she states 'students got engaged very much in their productions', it sets up her beliefs, which emerged to justify her attitude (Therefore, category 2).

#### **REPORT 4**

**Class 2, 6th year, April 29th, 2020.**

**P2:** Students took part in the class, motivated by a song and many of them realized, singing, that there were colors in English, even though it was a first contact with the English language in classroom. I realized, then, that some of them brought prior knowledge.

For P2, the educational work with songs generates learners' motivation, what makes it possible as well the actioning of their prior knowledge in order to make sense in the English language. This belief is related with the notion that playful activities are triggering factors of learners' motivation. P1 also revealed to hold a positive attitude towards her teaching practice, justified by her belief that her students got engaged to carry out the tasks she proposed, what allows us to say this data is related with category 2.

#### **REPORT 5**

**Class 3, 8th year, April 10th, 2020.**

**P2:** I explained the differentiated use of prepositions and comparing prepositions in the Portuguese language. I applied the CLIL method and I thought that the theme should

be approached with the previous use of the text with the interpretation of it and only later to use a report of the prepositions, without stressing grammar so much. Expositive lectures, with focus on grammar, is (sic) very monotonous, I assume this, I should change my practice.

P2 also reports to have used CLIL approach to explain a grammatical item, without, however, stressing grammar overly. She highlights to know that classes, based on grammatical items, are tedious explanatories. She takes the opportunity to take note her understanding on the need to change her teaching approach. It seems that P2, somehow, develops a more critical view of her practice, because, for instance, she used, the adjective 'monotonous' to refer to her own classes based on grammar. This way, upon having this attitude, she desires to change the status quo of her practice. In a last analysis, we verified that when P2 said that classes with focus on grammar are very "monotonous", this is her attitude which holds and integrates her belief as well. (Thus, category 1).

#### **REPORT 6**

**Class 4, 9th year, April 29th, 2020.**

**P2:** I provoked a debate among students to talk about the terms related with Facebook and whatsapp and I realized their prior knowledge, developing the class with a specific vocabulary to construct the knowledge of the English language and to broaden vocabulary. I realized the class was quite participative because, although being English terms, they are of everyday use.

For P2, classes with focus on specific terms can support students in activating their prior knowledge and, consequently, in constructing and broadening their vocabulary in the English language. Based on this, P2 holds the belief that the class was participative. Again we noted the use of the verb "realized", related with a belief. About this,

we may say as well that the fact of evaluating her class as ‘participative’, it is an attitude that holds and integrates her belief (she believes her class was a success). (Thefeore, category 1).

#### REPORT 7

##### Class 4, 9th year, April 12th, 2020.

**P6:** In spite of the full classroom, I got to draw all students’ attention, thanks to some students, who show interest and knowledge of the English language. All the students were attentive and answering the questions. The class was a success, now there is just the presentation of the letter made by them.

P6 notes that in spite of the discomfort of an improper logistic factor (crowded classroom), he gets to develop his practice. This is not a mere complaint on the part of the teachers, but a discourse, which emerged in the educational setting and requires change. In spite of this, P6 highlights positive attitude towards his students when he says that his students were ‘attentive’. Besides that, his belief that his ‘class was a success’ is a belief supported by an attitude (‘sucess’= evaluative reaction). (Thus, category 1).

We finish here the data analysis and next we present our final remarks.

### Final remarks

This study made it possible to validate our assumption on the relationship between attitudes and beliefs, because we come to the conclusion that, in discussive terms, an attitude can be diagnosed when a qualifier (adjective) is used, such as in “my classes are **productive**”, “my students are **intelligent**”. However, these evaluative reactions hold and integrate a belief as well, since they are part of perceptions of something or somebody.

This assumption was validated through the categories we elaborated. First, atti-

tudes hold or/and integrate beliefs, verified, for example, when P1 wrote “they were attentive and surprised”- ‘attentive’ and ‘surprised’ are attitudes, but the sentence as a whole is a belief; and when P6 wrote that his students were ‘attentive’ (attitude), the belief that his class was a success is supported by this attitude. Second, beliefs emerge as a justification of an attitude, what we verified when P1 wrote “students got involved in the class” (belief), with which she justifies the fact of her class be productive (attitude). To a better understanding, and taking the mentioned context into account, one can use the question: how can we know a class was ‘productive’ (attitude)? And the answer might be: ‘because students got involved in the class’ (belief as a justification).

Concerning the first research question, how teachers evaluate their practices? In short, the diaries provided us with data that are aligned with it, such as the notes “the class was very productive” (P1), “I should change my practice” (P2) and “the class was a success” (P6). The second and the third research questions, how do teachers believe they teach? and how do they think students learn better? were contemplated in the data as well, when, for example, P1 wrote “I could also realize the importance of binding theory with practice”, P2 wrote “I applied the CLIL method” and when P1 wrote “I realized the students’ excitement” and P2 “students took part in the class, motivated by a song”.

Besides ratifying our assumption, through this study we came to some other conclusions such as: 1. proper methodological choice results in learners’ engagement in the learning process; 2. change of methodology and of environment converges to the development of positive attitudes on the part of students; 3. teachers’ self-reflection, through self report, makes it possible

the development of a critical view on their own practices; 4. self report, elaborated by teachers, makes them aware on their view of themselves and of their students; 5. take notes of their practices makes teachers aware on the need to change the status quo of their teaching practices and 6. teachers' personal diaries make it possible the emergence and analysis of beliefs and attitudes.

Also, we cannot help saying that this study has its own limitation, because not all diaries provided us with data related with what we intended to investigate. In spite of that, this cut we made, made it possible to figure out our assumption: beliefs and attitudes meet. We still have to say that the investigation of attitudes and beliefs, through diaries, is possible and this investigation really shed a light on the teaching and learning process, since we could figure out this setting and many of its features, making it possible to think of alternatives in order to deconstruct negative attitudes and beliefs based on the data, since the confrontation with the practice might lead to reflection and the adoption of strategies of change (DUTRA; OLIVEIRA, 2006). Finally, we also want this paper to open room for others in this perspective.

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Recebido em: 19/08/2020  
Aprovado em: 05/10/2020



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