

## Foreign Language Teachers' Beliefs about School in Algeria within a Context of Curriculum Reforms

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper reports on a qualitative study which explored the beliefs of a sample of foreign language teachers about school in Algeria within a context of curriculum reforms. It was found that the participants believed that the Algerian school was generally a site of power and domination; that there was a drastic lack of resources; that students were unmotivated; that parents were disengaged; and that school administration was bureaucratic. The paper concludes that curriculum reforms in Algeria were not paralleled with social, economic and political reforms of educational institutions. It is suggested that there is an urgent need to equip schools with resources to make them adequately prepared for the effective implementation of the new curriculum. However, in the long term, it is suggested that policy-makers should promote a culture of active participation of all those involved in education, mainly the teachers and parents, towards improving the current situation of schools in Algeria, and ultimately, of the educational system.

**KEYWORDS:** Teachers' beliefs; curriculum reforms; foreign language teaching; school in Algeria; policy and power in education

### 1 INTRODUCTION: THE CONTEXT OF CURRICULUM REFORMS IN ALGERIA

Following a period of political unrest in the 90s, a process of peace and reconciliation was initiated in early 2000 in the hope of bringing back stability to the country. A series of political and economic reforms were consequently launched to meet the objectives underlying the process of reconciliation. These reforms involved the sector of education, as the Algerian government saw it as an important element towards any political and economic prosperity (Toualbi-Thaalibi, 2006, Tawil, 2006). The need for reform also emerged from the political efforts of Algerian leaders to adapt to globalisation because it was assumed that globalisation had an inevitable impact on new conceptions of education in the world (Tawil, 2006; Toualbi-Thaalibi, 2006). The Ministry of Education (2006a) notes for instance that:

Recent social changes that were triggered by the new political and economic visions of our country, the need of the Algerian society for development and progress, the opening on the world through modern technology, lead us to define new strategies...this cannot be achieved without a full reform of the educational system. (p. 17-18) [translated from French]

This initiative was paralleled by a series of meetings between Algerian and UNESCO officials, leading to a contract signed on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2003, in which the UNESCO accepted to fund these educational reforms (Tawil, 2006; Ministry of Education, 2006b). The project, called the Programme of Support for the Reform of the Algerian Educational System (PARE), was followed by a series of meetings and conferences between Algerian and UNESCO officials in the period of 2003 and 2006 to assess the progress of these reforms and to put forward future directions (Tawil, 2006). Other international agencies also contributed to the funding of the project, amongst which were the French Agency for Development (AFD), the European Union, and the United States Aid (USAID).

In this respect, the Algerian government appointed a National Commission for the Reform of Education (CNRE) in 2000, the task of which was to evaluate the then situation of the educational system and to provide some recommendations on the necessary reforms in line with the country's new philosophy of democracy, reconciliation and economic development. The CNRE gave their report back in 2001. The report confirmed the need to reform the educational system to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Tawil, 2006). The main issue highlighted by the CNRE was a deterioration of the educational system reflected primarily in: a) a decline in the number of students who pass their national examinations, b) an increase in

the proportion of students who re-take their levels, and c) a considerable proportion of students who drop-out from school before the age of 16 (Tawil, 2006). Furthermore, the commission raised concerns over the quality of teachers, who were criticised for not having the necessary teaching qualifications to undertake their jobs in an efficient way (Tawil, 2006). The proposed curriculum reforms centred round three platforms:

- Platform 1: Reforming the school structure which involved: a) introducing a pre-school level for 5 year old pupils, b) restructuring the duration of primary school from 6 to 5 years, and middle school from 3 to 4 years, and c) restructuring the post-compulsory education in secondary school (lycée) into three streams: general, technical, and vocational.
- Platform 2: Reforming teacher training which involved: a) improving the knowledge and skills of teachers and inspectors, and b) coordinating and evaluating teacher training and development.
- Platform 3: Reforming teaching syllabuses and textbooks which involved: a) elaborating and introducing new teaching programmes for all school levels, b) providing and evaluating new teaching resources and materials, c) introducing new teaching methodologies to meet the programmes' objectives, and d) setting up systems for information and communication technology in schools.

The government felt optimistic towards these reforms; although some studies conducted by the ministry of education as an initial evaluation of the process found that the reforms had not been met with great enthusiasm by teachers, parents and students (Toualbi-Thaalibi, 2006). However, these studies did not make explicit the factors behind this lack of enthusiasm. The study reported in the present paper formed part of a larger research which explored the beliefs of foreign language teachers about these curriculum reforms in order to find some possible answers to this lack of enthusiasm from the point of view of teachers. With particular relevance to the scope of the paper, the study aimed to explore the teachers' beliefs about school in Algeria. It sought to provide answers to the following questions:

1. What are the beliefs of a sample of foreign language teachers about school in Algeria?
2. What issues of policy and power underpin these beliefs?
3. What conclusions can we draw for teachers' beliefs in Algeria?

## 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is premised in the area of research which suggests that a better understanding of teachers' practices can be achieved by an understanding of the beliefs underlying those practices (Pajares, 1992; Ballone and Czerniak, 2001; Schmidt and Kennedy, 1990). The underlying assumption is that teachers' classroom decisions do not happen at random, but are guided by systems of beliefs which "greatly impact on their instructional decisions in the classroom" (Farrell and Lim, 2005: 1). Hence, recent years have witnessed a growing body of research in the field of teachers' beliefs (Fives and Buehl, 2005), although at the same time, it is argued that still little is known about teachers' beliefs and that no consensus was reached as to the exact nature of this construct (Rueda and Garcia, 1994). The reason for this, as it is argued, is the fact that beliefs are complex and abstract in nature, which makes them difficult to research (Pajares, 1992).

Nevertheless, there is a general consensus that teachers' beliefs derive partly from the teachers' personal and professional experience (Anderson, 1998; Farrell and Lim, 2005; Richards and Lockhart, 1994) and from their school experience as learners (Farrell and Lim, 2005; Schmidt and Kennedy, 1990). The literature indicates that teachers' beliefs generally fall under three main categories: (a) personal beliefs, which are teachers' beliefs about themselves and how they should be, and which derive from personal experience as a learner (Raths, 2001, Richards and Lockhart, 1994); (b) beliefs about teaching, learning and curriculum, which stem from different sources, mainly the teachers' personal experience as learners and their professional experience as teachers (Richards and Lockhart, 1994; Calderhead, 1996); and (c) epistemological beliefs, which are beliefs about the nature of knowledge and how knowledge is acquired and are closely interrelated with beliefs about learning and teaching (Fives and Buehl, 2005). It is argued that such a categorisation of teachers' beliefs can give researchers some insights about teachers' practices, but also about teachers' lives and work (Filisetti and Fives, 2003).

Furthermore, the literature on teachers' beliefs generally argues that educational innovations would not succeed if the objectives of these innovations are incompatible with the beliefs of its users and implementers (Rueda and Garcia, 1994; Fives, 2003; Anderson et al., 1991). Matese et al. (2002: 3) posit that teachers see "innovation through the lens of their existing knowledge and beliefs". Ballone and Czerniak (2001: 7) point out that "the teacher is the critical change agent in paving the way to educational reform and that teacher beliefs are precursors to change". Schmidt and Kennedy (1990: 2) posit that introducing any curricular innovations "is not likely to significantly alter teaching practices if teachers either do not understand or do not agree with the goals and strategies implicit in these new devices". Hence, Richards et al. (2001) warn

that curriculum innovations usually fail when there is a mismatch between the ideologies underlying the innovation and the teachers' beliefs.

### 3 METHOD

The study was positioned in the qualitative framework, defined as the one that “produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification...[and] can refer to research about persons' lives, lived experiences, behaviours, emotions, and feelings as well as about organizational functioning, social movements, cultural phenomena, and interactions between nations” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 10-11). It aimed at investigating teachers from an ‘emic’ perspective (Schwandt, 1998; Ellis, 2006), which involves “understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it” (Schwandt, 1998: 221); in contrast to an ‘etic’ perspective, which views reality in a more objectivist stance and researches individuals from an outsider’s point of view (Schwandt, 1998). More specifically, the study embraced a ‘constructivist paradigm’ (Guba and Lincoln, 1998; Schwandt, 1998), which can be briefly defined as the paradigm where the “world of lived reality and situation-specific meanings that constitute the general object of investigation is thought to be constructed by social actors” (Schwandt, 1998: 221).

The sample of participants comprised twenty teachers who taught either French or English as foreign languages at different school levels in Algeria. The sampling of participants depended on their professional circumstances and the context of the study, and as such adopted a ‘purposive convenience’ sampling strategy (Flick, 1998; Punch, 1998; Kumar, 1996) “where advantage is taken of cases, events, situations or informants, which are close at hand” (Punch, 1998: 193). Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight teachers, and group interviews were held with four groups of teachers. All interviews were audio-taped and all the participants were allocated a pseudonym. Table 1 below provides an overview of participants' profiles and the methods of data collection.

*Table 1 Summary of participants and data collection methods*

Method of data collection	Participant name (pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Curriculum Subject	School level	Years of teaching	Data Ref in text
Individual interviews	Jamila	41	Female	French	Primary	20	jamila/int
	Mohamed	46	Male	French	Primary	26	mohamed/int
	Salima	47	Female	French	Middle	22	salima/int
	Karim	37	Male	French	Middle	15	karim/int
	Zohra	35	Female	English	Middle	12	zohra/int
	Nabila	33	Female	English	Middle	13	nabila/int
	Omar	49	Male	English	Secondary	26	omar/int
	Hakim	47	Male	Inspector of English	Middle	22	hakim/int
Group interviews	Bassim	38	Male	English	Middle	16	pem/eng/gr/int
	Salim	42	Male			20	
	Dalila	46	Female	French	Middle	20	pem/fr/gr/int
	Wassila	48	Female			30	
	Latifa	53	Female			34	
	Ahlam	36	Female	French	Secondary	14	pes/fr/gr/int
	Tariq	44	Male			16	
	Amin	48	Male			22	
	Malika	37	Female	English	Secondary	17	pes/eng/gr/int
	Samia	33	Female			14	
Nabil	45	Male	21				
Rafik	39	Male	16				

The study used ‘grounded theory’ as a procedure for data analysis and followed the procedure as discussed in Strauss and Corbin (1998), Boulton and Hammersley (1996), Punch (1998), and Flick (1998). The procedure generally entailed three stages: (1) open coding, where data were translated into categories, (2) theoretical (or axial) coding, which entailed the process of taking the data from open coding to a higher level of abstraction, and (3) selective coding, which involved “finding

a higher-order concept, a central conceptual category at the second level of abstraction” (Punch, 1998: 218) towards developing ‘theory’ (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Finally, issues of ethics and trustworthiness were addressed throughout the study in order to establish confidence and consistency of the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Flick, 1998). In particular, the study referred extensively to Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (British Educational Research Association, 1992) and Recommendations on Good Practice in Applied Linguistics (British Association for Applied Linguistics, 1994), but also used the strategies discussed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), Flick (1998), Miles and Huberman (1994) and Boulton and Hammersley (1996).

## 4 FINDINGS

### 4.1 BELIEFS ABOUT THE ROLE OF SCHOOL

The participants tended to perceive the role of school in terms of the objectives it was believed to achieve. In this respect, they believed that school should “form the citizen of tomorrow...to be committed and disciplined...to be organised...in all aspects...the perfect citizen...” [omar/int]. Furthermore, they also perceived school from a parental perspective. That is, they looked at school as the students’ second home, as the following teacher explained:

The role of school is a second home...the student has a first home and school is the second... [jamila/int]

However, the participants described the reality of Algerian school as being deficient. One teacher, Mohamed, for instance, believed that:

School in Algeria has become like in the street...the same thing...there’s no more respect for the teacher...there is a total anarchy...there are a few parents who are interested in their children’s progress, but most of them do not care...the most important for them is that their children go to school...and at the same time the teacher has been marginalised a lot...by the government and society...those at the top do not care about school anymore...look at this classroom, look at the board, look at the walls... [Mohamed/int]

Another participant, Nabila, believed that the actual role of school in Algeria had become to “make children sleep...as if [they were]...giving sleeping tablets...” [nabila/int] whereas she felt that the actual role of school in particular and education in general should ideally be to open up students’ eyes towards the world.

Another participant, Omar, believed that the Algerian school in reality had become deficient because it had been influenced by a corrupt political system, and that it had become a means of indoctrination, rather than emancipation. This indoctrination, according to Omar “...is present in the textbooks that [teachers] use in the classroom, and in the curriculum and in the educational system” [omar/int]. He explained that teachers were implementing orders, and that they did not have any power to change.

Hakim, for instance, believed that school in Algeria did “...not even exist because there [was] actually no culture of education in this country” [hakim /int]. He believed that those involved in education must start first by defining what learning is because in Algeria they did not know what learning is.

### 4.2 BELIEFS ABOUT RESOURCES

In terms of resources, the teachers believed that resources were important for efficient learning to take place. One teacher, Nabila, for instance believed that the ideal school was where “there [were]...less students in the classroom and also where there [was]...a specially-designed language classroom” [nabila/int] to teach foreign languages appropriately.

However, the participants believed that in reality there was a drastic lack of resources, which according to them had contributed to the deterioration of foreign language education in Algeria. Two issues the teachers highlighted were overcrowded classes and lack of textbooks. In this respect, they believed that overcrowded classes represented a barrier to any curriculum development and innovation, as the following groups of teachers explained:

The new curriculum is good, but it does not suit the current situation...you can’t work with a classroom of 40 students...there should be a class of 25 students maximum...because in the current situation, you are only able to work with a small group of students at the expense of the others...so only a few will be able to learn and progress... [pem/eng/gr/int]

The participants also pointed out that to raise standards, decision-makers would need “to provide textbooks and pedagogical documents” [Mohamed/int].

#### 4.3 BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENTS

The participants noted that students' standards had fallen in their language classes because of a heavily-loaded curriculum, which did not usually reflect students' social environment and needs. This, according to them, led to the "...students' loss of motivation" [karim/int] in the sense that they had become "...passive and over-reliant on the teacher" [karim/int].

Another point expressed by all the participants, was their concerns over students' behaviour. They believed that students in the past were better than in the present. This was reflected, according to the participants, in their students' behaviour inside and outside school. The following French teachers expressed her disappointment of the situation:

I have been really disappointed to see children's education...in decline...my students are all right, but I see other students who disrespect their teachers...this is disappointing... [pem/fr/gr/int]

#### 4.4 BELIEFS ABOUT PARENTS

The participants believed that parents should be involved in their children's education. They believed that education was not only limited to the classroom but extended to the students' homes as well. They believed that parents' follow up was very important for the progress of their children. However, they believed that in reality "...a few parents...[were] interested in their children's progress, but most of them [did] not care...the most important for them [was] that their children go to school" [Mohamed/int]. The participants believed that parents had become passive, which in turn impacted on students learning, and hence, the deterioration of students' standards and lack of discipline. In general, they believed that there was a break up between family and school in Algeria. Jamila explained the issue of parents' detachment from school in the following quote:

The children's environment plays an important role in education... parents don't show any interest to their children's education anymore, and it is rare to see parents coming to the school to enquire about their children's progress... [jamila/int]

#### 4.5 BELIEFS ABOUT THE ADMINISTRATION

The participants reported that there was a continuous conflict between an autocratic and bureaucratic administration and the teacher. They believed that they worked in a culture of oppression and that this had led to "...injustice...and to a breach of equal opportunities policy" [hakim/int]. They noted that teachers lived "...in constant fear from the administration" [jamila/int]. They believed that this state of affairs was one of the main causes behind the deterioration of education in Algeria.

The participants also explained that the Ministry had never consulted them before innovations were implemented, as Zohra noted:

...we have a problem in Algeria...they never ask our opinion when there is an innovation...unfortunately everything is imposed from the top, even the BEF examination, a national examination full of mistakes...because those who decide and plan are not aware of their responsibility...and they usually have nothing to do with the teaching profession... [zohra/int]

### 5 DISCUSSION

#### 5.1 POLITICALLY-DOMINATED SCHOOL

The first key finding the data reveal was that the participants believed the Algerian school as a place for political indoctrination rather than emancipation. This view comes within a current educational debate on the effectiveness of school and the latter's position between, on the one hand, narrow political objectives, where politicians define the role of school according to their political aims for power and control; and on the other hand, social aspirations, where the civil society decides on the role of school as a place for teaching social justice, equality and democracy for the benefit of society as a whole. In this respect, Morgan (1998) for instance notes that there are many perspectives through which organisations can be viewed, amongst which are on the one hand the view of organisations as 'socio-cultural systems', and on the other as 'systems of political power and instruments of domination'. A socio-cultural systems perspective views organisations as the embodiment of society with its shared "values, rituals, ideologies, and beliefs" (Morgan, 1998: 111). These organisations are regulated by a system of shared objectives and meanings, or 'realities', which stem from the enactment of its actors. More specifically, schools according to this view can be seen as a reflection of the students' home and society. This view allows for

a continuation and reciprocity of education between informal and formal institutions, in the sense that school complements home and society, and reciprocally home and society complement school. A 'political power and instruments for domination' perspective, however, views organisations as arenas of competition for power and domination towards the fulfilment of personal or group interests, where conflict is created to shape people's beliefs according to hidden political agendas (Morgan, 1998). Authority and control are some key characteristics of these types of organisations. The school in this perspective can be seen as a place for political indoctrination towards serving a system governed by political power and economic interest. School, according to this view inculcates a political ideology of submission to a system created by politicians towards maintaining their power and privileges.

The participants viewed school within a 'political power and instruments of domination' perspective. They believed that the Algerian school was a place for political indoctrination and control deliberately intended by the Ministry. These beliefs seem to concur with the political reality of Algeria. In fact, the Algerian political system is generally characterised by a top-down and bureaucratic culture inherited from the French colonial period (Bouhouche, 1998; Zoubir, 1998; Bouakba, 2006). This system has impacted negatively on the educational system and its institutions (Brahimi, 1991), and although different governments have made several attempts to 'democratise' the educational system and its schools, the structure and culture remained to a large extent bureaucratic and top-down (Bouakba, 2006). Brint (1998) explains that schools in most developing countries have generally inherited a traditional system from their former colonial powers, which consequently led to their decline and their inefficiency in meeting their societies' needs and demands. Brint also notes that other problems that contribute to the decline of schools in the developing countries are lack of political stability, insecurity, and poverty, which Algeria is known to have been suffering from (Garon, 2003; Bouhouche, 1998; Zoubir, 1998; Ciment, 1997; Malley, 1996), and although a process of peace and reconciliation has been initiated lately, schools in Algeria seem to still live the repercussion of this instability, which may possibly explain the participants' beliefs.

## 5.2 SOCIALLY-DISTANT SCHOOL

Another issue that seems to add to the decline of the Algerian school and that the data reveal is the absence of communication between schools and parents. The participants explained that there was a detachment of parents from school in the sense that parents do not take an active role by liaising with schools for the follow up of their children's education. These beliefs are congruent with the literature on parents' relationship with school, which suggests that parents' involvement in the education of their children is crucial. Parents' involvement, as it is argued, increases students' performance and achievement (Tableman, 2004), and benefits children at all stages of their educational pathway (Kreider, 2002). In foreign language learning, Sung and Padilla (1998: 2) for instance note that it "is commonly noted that for young learners, parents' involvement in and attitudes towards language learning are two important factors in second language development". Furthermore, from a policy perspective, the data indicate that there was an absence of 'a culture' of parents' involvement in schools, and reversibly of school accountability towards parents. The literature generally argues that parents' involvement in schools can also give "parents the opportunity to take part in decision-making" (Cotton and Wiklund, 2001: 1), which could potentially create a balance of power and reduce governments' control on schools (Cotton and Wiklund, 2001). The participants, who were also parents, seemed to suggest that one way of reducing government control and central authority over school was by involving the parents. Like this they could ensure a less dominant and more democratic educational system.

## 5.3 UNDER-RESOURCED SCHOOL

Other key beliefs related to describing the current state of schools in Algeria and that the data reveal were about lack of resources. The teachers explained that schools in Algeria were unable to provide adequate resources in order to facilitate students' learning. This situation has created what seems to be an endless conflict between the Ministry, and its administration, on the one hand, and the teachers on the other. Brint (1998) points out that some major characteristics of schools and education in developing countries, which Algeria is part of, are the presence of a centralised authority and lack of resources. The picture of the Algerian school that the data provide is somewhat similar to what Brint describes.

The participants believed that resources were important to meet the challenges of the new curriculum. With respect to foreign language teaching, in particular, these beliefs are compatible with the literature which stresses that the provision of resources is vital because learning a foreign language with appropriate resources would create a more authentic experience within a communicative language teaching curriculum (Murphy; 2000; Yalden, 1987; Richards and Rogers, 1986). This could potentially enhance students' motivation, and therefore may increase their learning and achievement (Ballone and Czerniak, 2001; Murphy, 2000). Another important benefit of an adequate provision of resources is the fact that it can help teachers to diversify their teaching styles in order to meet the needs of all their learners (Ballone and Czerniak, 2001). This is particularly

necessary where teachers deal with large classes (Ballone and Czerniak, 2001; Sarwar, 2001), which the data also revealed. Reversibly, it is argued that a lack of resources may lead to a difficulty in meeting all the learners' needs and learning styles, and this generally results in students losing their motivation and interest in their learning (Ballone and Czerniak, 2001). This may partly explain why the Algerian students were reported to have lost motivation in learning foreign languages.

## **6 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The conclusions we can draw for the study is that curriculum reforms in Algeria were not paralleled with social, economic and political reforms of the educational system, in particular school institutions. The teachers' beliefs presented in this study seem to provide a warning call directed to the ministry of education, that school was inadequately prepared for the proper implementation of the new curriculum. They explained that in the absence of a democratic culture of education, of an adequate provision of resources, and of an active participation of parents and society, any curriculum reforms were ineffective. It was discussed above that any attempt to introduce curriculum reforms without full consideration of teachers' views and beliefs would lead to a failure of the innovation (Anderson et al., 1991; Richards et al., 2001; Schmidt and Kennedy, 1990; Ballone and Czerniak, 2001). In this particular case, the ministry seemed to have dumped the new curriculum on the teachers without taking their views and without ensuring schools are appropriately prepared for the innovation. As a consequence, the teachers seemed to have developed negative beliefs about the innovation and its context. It is important, however, to highlight that one cannot take the participants' beliefs at face value; rather this paper only attempted to provide possible interpretations to these beliefs as they are constructed in the participants' systems of truth; there may well be other interpretations.

The recommendations that can be put forward can be summarised into two objectives: a) a short-term micro objective, which involves the provision of adequate resources and the improvement of schools' situation in order to make them appropriately equipped for the demands of the new curriculum, and b) a long-term macro objective, which involves the priority for policy-makers to promote a culture of active involvement of all those involved in education, mainly of teachers and parents, in all educational matters. The purpose for that will be to create opportunities for dialogue and communication towards sharing experiences and knowledge for the benefit of education and society.

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