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Teacher cognition and language education: Research and practice (review)

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Common themes throughout the book include the rapidity of technological change, the tedious nature of a great deal of the work at hand, and, most importantly, the interaction among the related fields. The long list of abbreviations provided at the beginning of the volume is greatly appreciated. The authors tend to focus on their own research, which is in the area of German L2 learning; however, given the importance of this research in the field, this focus is justified. Figures provided in the book are often blurry, and at times their inclusion is not well justified. It is not until the final chapter that the authors address speaking as a skill (up to this point they focus on written language).

This work, not designed to be a classroom textbook, will be an important resource for researchers who wish to develop, analyze, or implement ICALL software.

References

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Borg, Simon (2006). *Teacher cognition and language education: Research and practice*. London: Continuum. Pp. 314, £85.00 (cloth).

The field [of teacher cognition] is characterized by an overwhelming array of concepts. . . . The need for such diversity may be justified by the inherently complex nature of the phenomenon under study; however, the confusion is also due to the fact that identical terms have been defined in different ways and different terms have been used to describe similar concepts. (p. 35)

This point is made by Simon Borg at various points in his new book, *Teacher Cognition in Language Education*, and is arguably the state of the art in the new but growing area of teacher cognition. Borg states

that his goals in this book are to provide a thorough summary of emerging research and to contribute to a more unified framework for this fragmented field. He does an excellent job with respect to this first goal; his approach to the second, although benefiting from his thorough review of the research literature and his list of issues needing attention, nonetheless leaves the reader searching for more solid ground.

Borg breaks the book into two parts; 'the first deals with what we know about language teacher cognition while the second examines the research methods through which it has been studied' (p. 2). In Part One (chapters 1–5), Borg provides a wide-ranging discussion of research results in the field. He begins with the origins of teacher cognition research in general educational (chapter 1), noting the emerging view of the active role of teachers in shaping classroom events and the personal, practical, dynamic, and tacit nature of teacher knowledge. He then discusses the field of language teaching, describing research on pre-service teachers (chapter 2) and in-service teachers (chapter 3) and in two areas that have received extensive study: grammar teaching (chapter 4) and literacy instruction (chapter 5). Each chapter ends with a summary of main points and areas for future research.

Part Two (chapters 6–9) is a critical discussion of relevant research methodologies, divided into four categories: self-reports (chapter 6), verbal commentaries (chapter 7), observation (chapter 8), and reflective writing (chapter 9). 'Self-reports' is the term used for structured instruments used to elicit short written answers from teachers: questionnaires, rating of teaching scenarios, and tests. Verbal commentaries are drawn from interviews: structured/unstructured, repertory grid-based, stimulated recall, think-aloud protocols. The category 'reflective writing' includes journals, autobiographies, retrospective accounts, and concept maps. The chapter on observation is organized around the factors that affect observational research, for example, intrusiveness of observers, structuredness of research instruments, and explicitness of the researcher's purposes. The final chapter (chapter 10) collects the key research issues, proposes a framework for analyzing language teacher cognition research, and makes suggestions for future research.

Borg states that

one particular challenge [for researchers in the field] is posed by the array of concepts and terminology this research draws on. . . . While terminological proliferation was perhaps a necessary feature of early research, the continued introduction of new terms should, I feel, be strongly opposed. (p. 272)

I would argue that terminological proliferation is not the problem; in fact, it may be that different terms help thoughtful readers to think 'beyond the word.' Our goal as researchers in this field is to explicate what goes on in teachers' minds, and certainly to do that we do need to share our ideas; but using the same term does not necessarily mean referring to the same concept. Research on teacher cognition has demonstrated that teachers develop their own somewhat individual complex networks of knowledge, assumptions, and beliefs that inform their practices; it is evident from Borg's book that researchers do the same thing. The concept signified by a term such as 'teacher belief' can only refer, for each of us, whether teacher or researcher, to its place in our own personal cognitive structure. Replacing 'perceptions' with 'beliefs' does not mean that we will interpret the concept identically. A positivist fallacy of much research (whether quantitative or qualitative) is the assumption that if we all use the same label, we are all talking about the same thing.

The issue, I would contend, is not the proliferation of terms but explicating the relationships among the concepts – the relationships of beliefs to knowledge, of experience to verbal learning, and of both of these to action and practice. Research in the field has yet to find a means of portraying the interwoven and dynamic complexity of teacher cognition – with its 'logical typing' (Bateson, 1979), its 'strong and weak ties' (Barabasi, 2003), its 'strange loops' (Hofstadter, 2007), its 'butterfly effects' (Glieck, 1987), and its 'complex systems' (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, in press). Borg's synthesis is an excellent start.

References

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