

Assumptions and attitudes regarding teaching Language Arts (language and writing in particular)—preservice and in-service teachers

Abstract

The paper presents the preliminary results of a qualitative, comparative study that examines the beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions of Language Arts pre-service and in-service teachers in the areas of teaching writing and language study/grammar. Data has been collected using surveys administered to practicing teachers and preservice teachers in Oregon (United States), Germany and Greece. The results reveal a change in the identity of Language Arts teachers (in-service and pre-service): all teachers consider themselves as teachers of literature, language, and writing (instead of teachers of literature). Further, our surveys uncover the effects that national curricula have on teachers' curricular and pedagogical decisions.

Introduction and background information

The newly adopted Common Core State Standards across the United States have placed increased emphasis on writing and language study (in addition to the study of literature), thus reaffirming the fact that English Language Arts classrooms are similar to a tripod, comprising three distinct yet interrelated subjects: literature, writing and language study. Because of that, then, it is necessary for ELA practitioners to have expertise in all three areas involved and identify themselves as ELA teachers instead of writing, or language, or literature teachers.

In addition, preservice teachers bring with them significant experiences from their own K-12 years in school which “are important determinants of how they think and what they do” (Street, 2003, p. 35), a building block of their emerging identities as ELA teachers (Street, 2003, p. 42). Prior knowledge (developed in K-12) and experiences are foundations for building new knowledge. In fact, “in every profession, there are certain sets of attitudes essential to the effective conduct of that profession. These attitudes, in turn, “shape [the way teachers] present the subject to [their] students” (Street, 2003, p. 38) and can have a negative influence on classroom instruction (p. 39). In other words, there is a direct, strong relationship between teacher attitudes, teacher identity and pedagogical practice (Street, 2003, p. 33, p. 34; Daisey, p.158).

Further, it has been reported that the negative attitudes and beliefs preservice teachers bring as a result of their K-12 schooling are not altered throughout their college education and field experiences (Street, 2003, p.45). These negative attitudes are significant, however, since they can shape the way that preservice teachers will present the subject to their students (p.38).

Our research focus was to uncover and understand the beliefs and attitudes of preservice and inservice teachers in the areas of writing and language

instruction for two reasons: first, to improve the way we train ELA teachers (p. 47) so that they can develop their confidence and identity as ELA teachers which, in turn, will contribute to positive learning experiences for their students. Second, to note any significant differences between the preservice and in-service teachers in terms of attitudes and values regarding ELA instruction; we hypothesized that some of the differences could possibly be attributed to the actual realities of the in-service teachers.

In addition, we wanted to look across national boundaries in order to construct a more ‘general’ picture of the Language Arts classroom, to understand the core/basic principles that inform the identity and attitudes, and guide the pedagogy of any Language Arts teacher.

Methodology

Participants in our study –Both preservice and inservice teachers were chosen from three different countries: USA, Germany and Greece, the last two chosen because they have national curricula with which we are very familiar as we have spent significant time there. Thirty-two in-service teachers from the three countries participated in our study, teaching in grades 5-12: 13 teachers practice in Germany, 10 in Greece and 9 in Oregon. The participants ranged from novices to experienced, with a range of educational experiences (bachelor’s to doctorate). In addition to the in-service teachers, we distributed the survey to 69 preservice teachers (students) from Germany and Oregon (29 and 40, respectively).

Data Sources Data, which provide a snapshot rather than a detailed, in-depth picture of preservice and inservice teachers’ attitudes, were drawn from three different sources: first a Likert-scale survey (Appendix 1) regarding their attitudes and assumptions towards language and writing (1 = strongly agree, 5 =strongly disagree). Second, from demographic information provided by participants; finally, in the section labeled ‘open-ended questions,’ participants were asked to provide information regarding their training in writing pedagogy and knowledge about language.

In the Lickert-style survey, statements were divided into those focusing on teacher agency/ability (i.e. statement #20--“Teachers must be able to create their own materials for a Language Arts lesson”) and those focusing on subject matter (i.e. statement #29—“It is necessary to write a formal outline before writing.”) In order to ensure consistency in the responses, each issue was addressed by two slightly different statements (#6 –Teachers use assigned reading as mentor texts; #15—Teachers must be able to describe the interrelationships between reading and writing).

Although ELA classrooms involve the tripod , as mentioned in the introduction, we decided to focus the surveys on attitudes towards writing and language instead of focusing on literature for two reasons: first, because typically Language Arts teachers are more secure as readers than as writers (Cremin and Baker, 2010, p.

10). Second, because preservice and inservice teacher attitudes, at least in Oregon, towards grammar and knowledge about language have been shaped by the state standards that focus primarily on error hunting and language “remediation.”

To construct the questions, we consulted past surveys (Schessler et al., 1981; Tighe, 1991; NCTE 2000) and their results but also considered best practices in the field, current paradigm, and teacher training requirements (NCTE 2006), as well as conditions such as national curricula or state-adopted textbooks that might affect the instructional context.

A second element we considered while constructing our surveys were fundamental beliefs expressed by professional organizations about Language and about the Teaching of Writing (NCTE 1991 and 2004, respectively): Students’ language is valued and used as a means of learning, change and growth within the classroom; the power of language and the rules that it follows are discovered, not invoked; grammar is important because it is the language that makes it possible for us to talk about language; people associate grammar with errors and correctness, but knowing about grammar also helps us understand what makes sentences and paragraphs clear and interesting and precise; teaching grammar will not make writing errors go away, but knowing basic grammatical terminology does provide students with a tool for thinking about and discussing sentences; finally, lots of discussion of language, along with lots of reading and lots of writing are the three ingredients for helping students write in accordance with the conventions of Standard English.

NCTE’s beliefs about the Teaching of Writing include the following tenets: Everyone has the capacity to write; writing can be taught; teachers can help students become better writers; people learn to write by writing; writing is a process; writing is a tool for thinking; writing grows out of many purposes; conventions of finished and edited texts are important to readers and therefore to writers; writing and reading are related; writing has a complex relationship to talk; literate practices are embedded in complicated social relationships; composing occurs in different modalities and technologies. In fact, teaching writing as a process has been the dominant paradigm since the mid 1960s, after the Dartmouth conference. The paradigm emphasizes process over product, establishes three distinct phases/stages of writing (non-linear)--prewriting (invention), drafting (organizing) and revising (reseeing)--,and expects teacher intervention and peer feedback/collaboration during the construction of a text.

The survey statements –which were presented scrambled to participants— comprised four separate categories:

-Curriculum: statements 1, 4, 17, 18, 23, 26

-Pedagogy: statements 3, 5, 6, 15, 20, 24

-Teaching Writing/Writing Process: statements 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 21, 25, 28, 29, 30, 31,

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-Grammar/Knowledge about Language: statements 2, 7, 9, 12, 16, 19, 22, 27, 33

The focus of curriculum statements was the content of a Language Arts classroom (the “tripod”) without specific detail on each element comprising the tripod (i.e. literature, writing or language). Since teacher practice is guided by particular training/subject matter expertise, the pedagogy statements in the survey aimed at exploring the teachers’ perception on the influence of those elements in their practice.

As mentioned earlier, a number of Language Arts teachers consider themselves primarily literature teachers, an approach that preservice teachers also exhibit. Our project aimed at uncovering teacher attitudes and assumptions regarding the two “neglected” elements of the tripod-- writing instruction and grammar/knowledge about language; as a result, the remaining statements focused exclusively in these areas.

Discussion of results

(Appendix 2 presents all the results, separated by category)

Curriculum

All participants—preservice and inservice teachers in all countries—reaffirmed the importance of the tripod in the Language Arts classroom (statement#23--rating average 1.88) instead of the primacy of literature only (statement #26—avg. rating 3.67). In other words, they position themselves as Language Arts teachers (i.e. teachers of literature, teachers of writing, teachers of grammar) instead of simply teachers of literature/reading. Further, inservice teachers are keenly aware of the impact national curricula have on their practice; in particular, inservice teachers in Germany and Greece—both countries with a long tradition in national curricula—agreed that the standards provide a sufficient blueprint for Language Arts instruction (statement #17--rating average 2.76), whereas German preservice teachers—who lack the clinical experience—disagree with statement #17 (rating average 3.55). On the other hand, Oregon teachers, both preservice and inservice, who have had to loosely follow state standards and have had no experience with national standards, disagree with that statement (rating average 3.44). Further evidence of the influence that state-adopted texts have on curricular and pedagogical decisions is provided from statement #18, with both Greek and German in-service teachers agreeing (rating average 2.1) that the texts read in class should also guide writing topic selection.

Statement #4 –All that a teacher needs to teach in the Language Arts classroom is included in the district-approved textbooks—was a puzzle, at first, because of the apparent disagreement between German and Greek teachers (rating average 2.80 vs. 4.1 rating average); this difference can be attributed to the fact that in Greece, the state-approved textbooks include the content that necessary for the high stakes end-of-year exams for seniors which determine whether or not they will attend university. As a result, we hypothesize that for most teachers in Greece,

day-to-day curricular decisions are driven by the need to fully cover the content of the textbooks, leaving little room for outside resources to be brought in.

Pedagogy

The pedagogical ‘flexibility’ required of teachers is confirmed with participants’ responses to statement #3—all participants agreed that teachers should be trained to evaluate the effectiveness of lessons and to adjust them according to student weaknesses. Beyond this general agreement, however, some differences emerged regarding pedagogy; specifically, inservice teachers in Greece, whose practice is constrained by a strong national curriculum and high stakes exams, agreed on the need to focus their teaching on developing students’ ability to discover the meanings of texts (statement #5) and to use a ‘reading-to-write’ approach through mentor texts (statement #6). In contrast, preservice and inservice teachers in Oregon and Germany are not as ‘convinced’ that teachers should guide students towards discovering the meaning of texts for themselves (statement #5 rating averages 2.5 and 2.3, respectively, vs. rating average 1.8 for Greek teachers). Similarly, differences—albeit slight—were noted regarding the reading-to-write approach (use of mentor texts): preservice and inservice teachers in Oregon and Germany, are in slightly less agreement than Greek teachers on the practice of using mentor texts (rating averages 2.0 and 2.26 for Oregon and German teachers, respectively, vs. rating average 1.9 for Greek teachers).

Surprisingly, we found very few differences between preservice and inservice teachers, which leads us to agree with Street that “the attitudes of new teachers are forged during their experiences as students, long before they arrive at the university for formal teacher education (Street, 2003, p.35).

Teaching Writing/Writing Process

Teachers’ knowledge and sense of competence with teaching writing are critical for a Language Arts teacher (Street, 2003, p.34); our survey sought to examine teachers’ knowledge and understanding of the writing process, both of which are critical in creating self- confidence and positive attitudes towards teaching writing (Cremin and Baker, 2010, p.10).

It is clear that some 45 years after the Dartmouth conference which established the writing process movement, teaching writing as a process has become the dominant paradigm in writing instruction. Specifically, our participants agreed on some of the fundamental principles that guide teaching writing as a process: the importance of understanding the various stages of writing, including multiple prewriting strategies (statements 10 and 11, respectively), the importance of peer feedback at all stages of the writing process (statement 30) as well as the possible variation in the organization of texts (statement 13).

Differences emerged, however, along national boundaries. Some of these differences can be attributed to the longer immersion of Oregon preservice and inservice teachers vs. German and Greek teachers in writing-as-a-process

pedagogy and, possibly, to a stronger teacher/writer identity : specifically, all Oregon teachers agreed that revision is different from editing and correcting mistakes (statement 32) as well as on the importance of reading a piece out loud (statement 31). By contrast, German teachers do not see themselves as writers (statement 28) and as such, they do not acknowledge the value of reading their texts out loud (statement 31).

Other differences can be attributed to the impact exams and national curricula have on writing pedagogy; specifically, because the end-of year high stakes exams that determine access to university education are timed, teachers must help students develop ‘efficient’ writing strategies, strategies that might not, however, conform to the basic tenets of the writing process approach. Thus, Greek teachers acknowledge the value of outlines before writing (statement 29), a statement which has two ‘correlates’: that writing is transcription of thought (21), and that it is not discovery (25). Similarly, they are not in strong agreement regarding the effects of genre and audience on writing (statement 14), possibly because the high stakes exams require essay writing instead of any other text type.

Grammar/Knowledge about Language

Despite the 1963 Braddock report on the negative effects of formal grammar instruction on students’ writing, all teachers in our survey agreed that it is very important for Language Arts teachers and student writers to understand the structure and diversity of language, (statements #2 #12 and #16, respectively), and to teach grammar (statement #22)—especially standard written language (statement #27)—thus affirming, once again, the tripartite nature of the Language Arts teacher: teachers of literature, teachers of writing, teachers of language. This was a surprising finding for us because in Oregon—similar to the situation in most of the US—few College of Education programs require a course in linguistics and/or a course in the Structure of English; typically, preservice teachers take a course in Language Arts methods which might include a unit on grammar pedagogy. Equally surprising was the strong agreement across all groups that despite advances in computer technology regarding grammar- and spell-checking programs, grammar instruction is still necessary (statement #33).

Beyond the areas of agreement noted above, there are areas of disagreement across national boundaries. Specifically, preservice teachers in Oregon, who have had little instruction about language structure in their K-12 years, believe that the purpose of grammar instruction is simply to teach punctuation conventions (statement #9), a belief not shared by any other group in our survey. Similarly, Oregon preservice and inservice teachers, whose writing training and experiences have emphasized not only solid content but also authentic voice, consider good writing as writing that is more than just grammatically correct (statement #19).

Despite the advances in genre theory and pedagogy, which advocate broadening the focus of language instruction to include paragraphs and whole texts rather than isolated sentences, it appears that teachers —except inservice German teachers— still adhere to the pedagogical sequence that begins with parts of speech

identification (#7). This could be due to the fact that most textbooks, when presenting information about language, take a hierarchical approach, starting with word class identification (parts of speech), moving to phrases and then to isolated sentences.

Since our aim was to uncover teacher attitudes about writing and language, we wanted to probe more about their training in those two areas; here, we found some interesting results that differentiate knowledge about teaching writing from knowledge about language and language instruction. With respect to writing pedagogy, most Oregon inservice teachers acquired their knowledge in various ways: university courses in content and pedagogy, student teaching experience, and professional development opportunities. A significant percentage, however, (89%) acquired knowledge simply by reading in the field on their own; this is close to the same percentage for Greek teachers who learn to teach writing by reading in the field since there are no university pedagogy classes that they take while training. For language instruction, on the other hand, college courses provide most Oregon teachers with knowledge about language/grammar as opposed to Greek and German teachers who acquire most of their knowledge about language and grammar in high school.

Conclusion

Our surveys revealed change in the past 20 years regarding preservice teacher beliefs about English Language Arts. Specifically, while in Tighe's 1991 survey student teachers strongly supported literature as forming the core of the English Language Arts classroom, we found our respondents supporting the tripod English classroom, where literature, writing and grammar are on an equal basis. Additionally, contrary to Tighe's findings regarding grammar, we found strong agreement among teachers about the importance—the necessity in fact—of grammar instruction.

Our surveys also confirmed Norman's and Spencer's 2005 finding that the experiences preservice teachers bring with them regarding Language Arts "have formed their beliefs and values about teaching and learning" (26). Thus, the teachers we surveyed assume that teaching Language Arts must emphasize writing, language and literature. This "Language Arts" identity is not significantly different from the one we identified in Oregon inservice teachers, especially in the area of writing instruction where the writing process pedagogy is now the most influential paradigm for teaching writing.

Finally, our surveys confirmed the significant effect of national exams and textbooks on curriculum decisions; specifically, in both Germany and Greece, they determine not only content but pedagogy, often against best practices in the field.

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2 **Appendix 1 -- Survey**

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Strongly Agree

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Somewhat Disagree

Strongly Disagree

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1. The primary focus in a Language Arts class is for students to read multiple texts.
2. Understanding the basic structure of language is important for Language Arts teachers.
3. Teachers should be trained to evaluate the effectiveness of lessons and strategies and know how to adjust their lessons for student weaknesses.
4. All that a teacher needs to teach in the Language Arts classroom is included in the district-approved textbooks.
5. Teachers spend their time guiding students in discovering the meaning of a text for themselves.
6. Teachers use assigned reading as mentor texts, i.e. a way to show students how various texts are constructed.
7. Grammar instruction should start with parts of speech instruction and move to sentences.
8. The purpose of writing instruction is to teach students the structure and organization of papers.
9. The purpose of grammar instruction is to teach students punctuation conventions.
10. Teachers must understand the various stages of the writing process.
11. Teachers must know multiple prewriting strategies to help students get started.
12. Conscious knowledge of grammar is important for any student writer.
13. There is a single appropriate organization format for academic university-level papers.
14. Writing depends on audience and genre considerations.
15. Teachers must be able to describe the interrelationships between reading and writing.
16. Teachers should be able to explain how language usage is affected by linguistic, social, cultural and economic diversity.
17. The national and/or state standards for reading, speaking, writing and grammar/usage provide a sufficient blueprint for Language Arts instruction.
18. The texts read in a class should be the focus of writing topics.
19. Good writing is always grammatically correct writing.
20. Teachers must be able to create their own materials for a Language Arts lesson.

21. Writing is transcription of thought: we first think of what we want to write and then write it down.
22. Grammar instruction has no place in a secondary-level Language Arts curriculum.
23. There should be a balance between reading, writing and language instruction.
24. Teachers must have training in the teaching of writing.
25. Writing is discovery: we discover our meaning (and revise it) as we write.
26. The primary focus in a Language Arts class is for teachers to explain the meaning of literary texts.
27. The purpose of grammar instruction is to teach students how to use the standard written form of their language.
28. As a teacher, I must use various prewriting strategies to do research, read closely and attentively, and figure out what I want to say about a subject.
29. It is necessary to write a formal outline before writing.
30. Feedback from peers is important at all stages of the writing process (from early exploratory writing to final drafts).
31. It is important to read a piece of writing out loud to hear every word and see if there is a real human voice behind the sentences.
32. During revision activities students edit out most typographical errors and mistakes in grammar, spelling, usage, and punctuation.
33. Grammar instruction is unnecessary since computers have grammar and spell checkers.

Demographics

- Age: 18-23 24-29 30-35 36-42 43-50
50+
- Gender: M F
- A. Pre-service teachers
- Year in school: Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior Post-bacc.
- B. In-service teachers
- Years teaching: <5 5-10 11-15 16+
- Do/Did you have a teacher in your family (parent or sibling)? Yes
No
- Grades you will teach / do teach [circle all that apply]: 7-8 9-10 11-12

Open-Ended Questions

- Where did you acquire knowledge about teaching writing? (Check all that apply)
- College content course in Liberal Arts?
- Methods course in College of Education?
- Student teaching experience?
- Professional Development or inservice training?
- Reading in the field on your own?
- Literacy coach or mentor?

Other (fill in)

Where did you acquire the bulk of your knowledge about language/grammar?

(Check all that apply)

High school English classes?

College course in grammar or linguistics?

Foreign language instruction?

Professional development or inservice training?

Methods course in College of Education?

Other (fill in)

Appendix 2—Rating averages

Question # and Category	GM In-Service	OR In-Service	GK In-Service	OR Preservice	GM Preservice
#1 (Curriculum)	3.54	3.33	2.20	3.36	3.52
#2 (Grammar/KAL)	1.23	1.33	1.10	1.36	1.21
#3 (Pedagogy)	1.38	1.33	1.10	1.39	1.55
#4 (Curriculum)	3.38	4.78	2.80	4.45	4.17
#5 (Pedagogy)	2.31	2.44	1.80	2.23	2.72
#6 (Pedagogy)	2.08	2.11	1.90	2.41	2.03
#7 (Grammar/KAL)	3.23	2.56	1.90	2.34	2.83
#8 (Writing)	1.69	2.89	2.50	2.59	1.83
#9 (Grammar/KAL)	3.15	3.44	4.60	2.86	3.21
#10 (Writing)	1.69	1.11	2.00	1.36	1.17
#11 (Writing)	1.54	1.33	1.60	1.41	1.24
#12 (Grammar/KAL)	2.31	2.11	1.40	1.80	2.34
#13 (Writing)	4.00	3.89	4.10	3.80	4.07
#14 (Writing)	1.46	1.22	2.50	1.64	1.59
#15 (Pedagogy)	2.23	1.33	2.10	1.55	2.17
#16 (Grammar/KAL)	1.77	1.78	2.10	1.53	2.28
#17 (Curriculum)	2.62	3.44	2.90	3.45	3.55
#18 (Curriculum)	2.15	3.11	2.20	3.18	2.76
#19 (Grammar/KAL)	2.62	4.33	1.80	3.70	3.69
#20 (Pedagogy)	2.08	1.56	1.70	2.20	1.79
#21 (Writing)	1.92	3.00	1.40	2.55	2.34
#22 (Grammar/KAL)	4.23	4.78	4.70	4.48	4.07
#23 (Curriculum)	2.00	1.11	2.40	1.63	1.97
#24 (Pedagogy)	2.23	1.22	1.90	1.58	1.76
#25 (Writing)	2.38	1.67	3.10	1.75	2.41
#26 (Curriculum)	3.38	3.89	3.60	3.48	4.00
#27	2.23	2.44	2.90	2.40	2.34

(Grammar/KAL)					
#28 (Writing)	3.00	1.67	2.10	1.93	2.21
#29 (Writing)	2.46	4.00	1.30	3.90	3.14
#30 (Writing)	2.38	2.33	2.00	2.38	2.72
#31 (Writing)	3.,31	1.67	2.70	2.35	3.55
#32 (Writing)	2.85	3.33	2.80	2.28	2.69
#33 (Grammar/KAL)	5.00	4.67	4.80	4.90	4.83

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