Teachers' beliefs concerning teaching multilingual learners:

a cross-cultural comparison between the US and Germany

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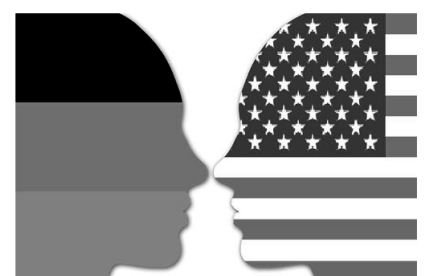Leuphana University of Leuphana, Lüneburg, Germany

ABSTRACT

We analysed the beliefs about multilingualism in school of in-service teachers from the US (n = 60) and Germany (n = 65), utilising a survey originally developed in German that was translated and adapted into English. Results show that teachers from both samples, on average, strongly agree that a person's identity is connected to their language and culture. However, we found significant differences in scale mean values between US teachers and German teachers concerning their beliefs about (1) the interconnected nature of language with culture and identity, (2) language demand in content classrooms, (3) responsibility for language teaching, and (4) valuing multilingualism. Our results provide insight into cross-cultural differences between German and US teachers' beliefs, as well as a strong instrument in two languages to measure teachers' beliefs about multilingualism in schools.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher attitudes and beliefs have an important relationship to their knowledge of teaching and knowledge of context and thus need to be accounted for and examined. In the research literature, teacher attitudes and beliefs have been extensively examined and the notion of beliefs itself has been defined. Borg (2001) argued that '[Beliefs] are involved in helping individuals make sense of the world, influencing how new information is perceived and whether it is accepted or rejected' (p. 186). Borg further clarifies that:

belief is a mental state which has as its content a proposition that is accepted as true by the individual holding it, although the individual may recognize that alternative beliefs may be held by others. This is one of the key differences between belief and knowledge, in that knowledge must actually be true in some external sense. (p. 186)

Based on this understanding, the notion of 'ideological clarity' (Bartolomé 2004) is clearly important for teachers of multilingual learners, meaning that teachers need to have a sense of how their beliefs and attitudes may be impacting their perceptions of students, families and communities as well as how those beliefs and attitudes may be impacting their practice.

Research internationally has illustrated various issues related to teacher attitudes and beliefs regarding working with multilingual learners. In the US, researchers found that teachers had negative attitudes about teaching multilingual learners, feeling it was not their job to teach multilingual students (Walker et al. 2004). Further, pre-service teachers adopted deficit perspectives of students and found multilingual learners to be an extra burden on their time (Pappamihiel 2007). Another study from the US illustrated how difficult it is to define the dispositions necessary for teachers of multilingual learners to succeed as

well as to measure them (Midobuche et al. 2010). In France, a recent study illustrated how teachers' attitudes and beliefs around their multilingual students perpetuated negative language ideologies and policies (Young 2014). In Germany, a study was conducted with content teachers illustrating that many did not see themselves as teachers of language as well (Hammer et al. 2016).

Building on existing research, this cross-cultural study serves to analyse the beliefs of in-service teachers concerning the teaching of multilingual learners in content classrooms. In doing so, we are especially interested in identifying differences between in-service teachers from two different cultural regions: the western United States and northern Germany. There is currently a shared opportunity to research a problem worth exploring collaboratively across the US and Germany: the under-prepaedness of content teachers to work with students who enter the schooling system without proficiency in the language of instruction (Lucas 2011; Freeman & Freeman 2014). The US and Germany, though they comprise different sociopolitical contexts, share the same research challenge and the opportunity to further develop a research base, as called for by Faltis and Valdés (2016), for understanding the development of content teachers to work with multilingual learners, as well as the dispositions, skills and practice content teachers of multilingual students should learn, embody and employ. This study is an effort to contribute to the growing body of literature on content teacher preparation to work with multilingual students from a cross-cultural perspective with particular attention to a critical aspect of that development: teacher beliefs.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The research literature on teacher attitudes and beliefs regarding working with multilingual learners (e.g. Sowa 2009; Coady et al. 2011; Huerta 2011;

Pettit 2011; Mackinney & Rios-Aguilar 2012) asserts that teachers should believe that all students can learn and that teachers should have a positive attitude towards diversity, multilingualism and multiculturalism. Teachers should also have positive attitudes towards the family cultures, religions, and communities students come from. Additionally, teachers need to have the inclination to advocate for multilingual learners as well as believing that there is inequity in society that teachers can do something about. Therefore, teachers must understand the implications of various ideologies for educational standards, curriculum and practices, such as standard language ideologies (Lippi-Green 2006), monolingual ideologies (Gogolin 1994; Wiley 2007) and raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa 2015).

Based on the need to account for culture, the questionnaire comprises a scale (1) Embracing the interconnected nature of language with culture and identity. Besides that and based on the research background described above, an instrument was developed in German (Hammer et al. 2016; Fischer et al. 2018) that focused initially on the following dimensions: (2) Understanding language demand in content classrooms, (3) Feeling responsible for the language development of multilingual students in content classrooms, and (4) Valuing multilingualism. These four dimensions provide a conceptual framework for our study.

1. EMBRACING THE INTER-CONNECTED NATURE OF LANGUAGE WITH CULTURE AND IDENTITY

This dimension matches the call Lucas & Villegas (2011) made for teachers to develop a sociopolitical consciousness. It also attends to teachers' beliefs and ideologies about inequity in society as well as how ideologies can impact the perceptions of students, learning and the relationships between teachers, students and families.

2 Understanding language demand in content classrooms

Part of teachers' believing that multilingual students can learn in the content classroom is understanding the language demand of content learning as well as how language proficiency develops for bilingual and multilingual students. Teachers' believing that all students can learn is grounded in understanding the opportunities and demands of that learning.

3 Feeling responsible for language teaching

An important part of a teacher's belief system regarding working with multilingual students is the responsibility a teacher feels towards those students' learning. When teachers believe it is not their responsibility, they are unlikely to provide a productive learning environment for multilingual students.

4 Valuing multilingualism

As is clear from the research mentioned above and considering the other three dimensions in total, teachers working with multilingual students need to value multilingualism. This includes valuing the cultural background of students, their families, their communities, as well as a willingness and inclination to advocate for students and their multilingual development.

METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

Pupil consultation and engagement where Our research questions are:

1. **What are teachers' beliefs about teaching multilingual learners?**
2. **Are there differences in teachers' beliefs about teaching multilingual learners between teachers from the US and Germany?**

The survey instrument we utilised to collect data to answer these questions was first developed in German and then adapted and translated into English. There are 50 items on the survey, and great care was taken in the translation and adaptation process between English and German to ensure the same dimension and concept within a dimension was being measured. Therefore, the items were first translated into English and then were retranslated in German by an English and German native speaker. The items are statements that have to be rated in a four-step response scale: (1) strongly disagree, (2) somewhat disagree, (3) somewhat agree and (4) strongly agree. The survey is available, and was used for this study, in both a paper–pencil form and an online version.

The US sample consists of in-service teachers from the western US (n = 60) who participated in online professional learning content and took the survey as a pre-survey before engaging with the content. The sample from Germany consists of in-service teachers (n = 65) who work mostly in primary schools in the northern part of Germany.

Exploratory and confirmative factor analyses revealed that based on these responses four subscales were identified that match the four dimensions described above. The four subscales consist of 5 / 8 / 12 / 6 items. The reliability of subscales is acceptable (Cronbach's alpha = 0.84 / 0.76 / 0.74 / 0.91).

RESULTS

RResults illustrate that teachers from both the US and German samples on average strongly agree that a person's identity is connected to their language and culture. The group differences between the two teacher samples are not statistically significant. More than 83% of the German teachers and more than 77% of the US teachers agree with the statement that 'Identity is created by language.'

However, we find significant differences in scale mean values between US teachers and German teachers concerning the other dimensions of the survey (Table 1): for instance, understanding language demand in content classrooms (d = 0.53, p < .05), feeling responsible for language teaching (d = 0.60, p < .05), and valuing multilingualism (d = 0.97, p < .05).

	Germany		US			
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*p*	*d*
(1) Scale `Embracing the Interconnected Nature of Language with Culture and Identity´	3.15	0.47	3.21	0.57	ns	-0.11
(2) Scale `Understanding Language Demand in Content Classrooms´	2.06	0.56	1.75	0.57	< .05	0.53
(3) Scale `Feeling Responsible for Language Teaching´	2.10	0.49	1.80	0.44	< .05	0.60
(4) Scale `Valuing Multilingualism´	2.53	0.70	1.83	0.55	< .05	0.97

Table 1: Group differences between teacher samples from Germany and the US in four questionnaire scales about beliefs concerning teaching multilingual learners.

The sample of US teachers seems to be more sensitive concerning the language demand of content classrooms. For example, for the item 'Lower levels of proficiency in academic language matter less in content classes than in English classes', about 90% of the US teachers versus 53% of the German teachers strongly disagree.

Similarly, it appears that the US teachers in our sample expressed a stronger sense of responsibility for providing language support in the content classroom than the teachers in the German sample. 18% of the US teachers somewhat or strongly agreed with the statement, 'In content classes, linguistic errors can be corrected, but working on these errors systematically is not possible,' compared to 74% in the German sample.
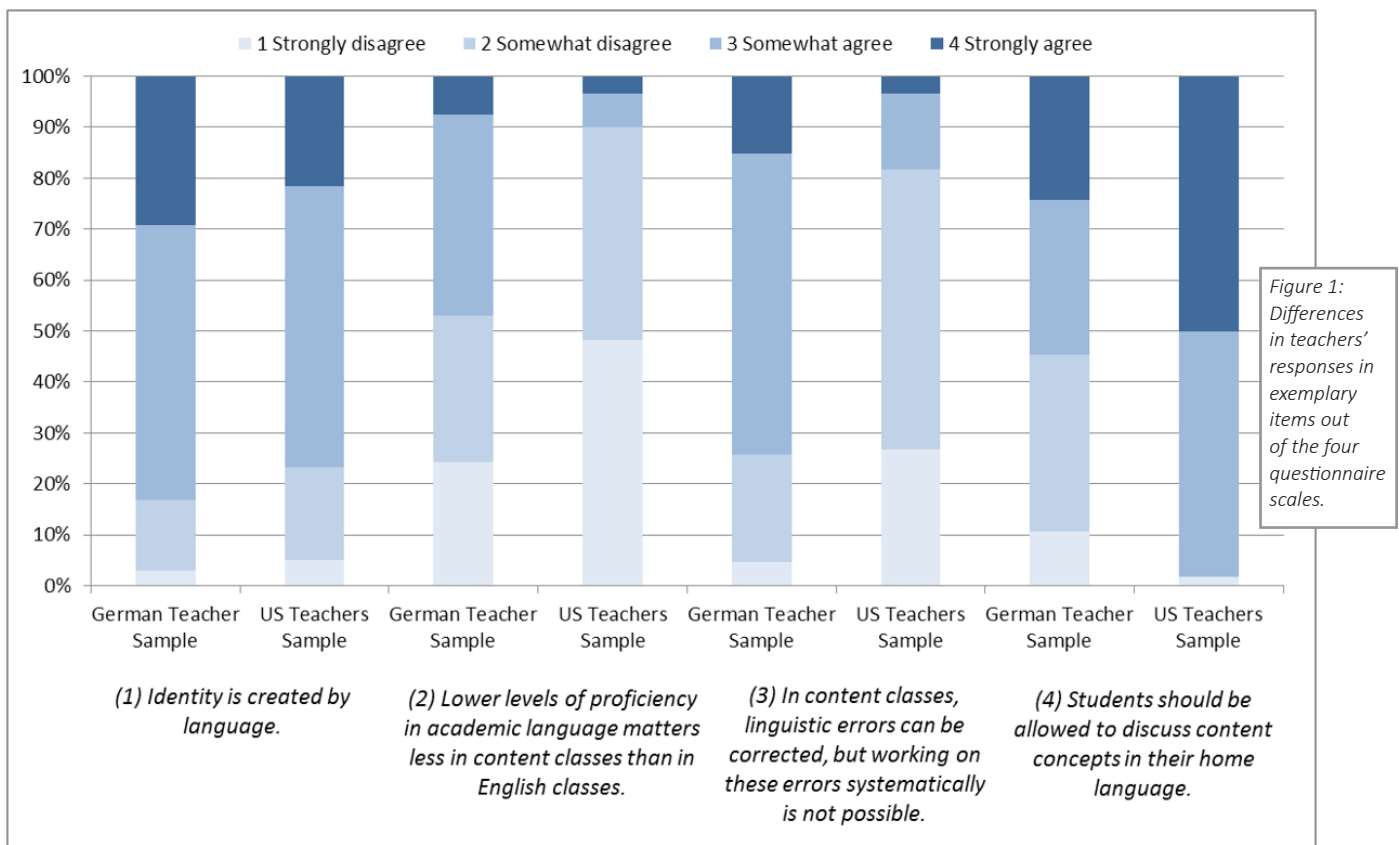
Finally, US teachers express a stronger value for multilingualism. 46% of the German teachers (strongly) disagreed with the statement, 'Students should be allowed to discuss content concepts in their home language,' whereas 98% of the US teachers (strongly) agreed with this statement.

DISCUSSION

Our results provide evidence of a quality instrument to measure important aspects of teachers' beliefs about multilingualism in school with consistency across both English and German. Further, this instrument provides interesting opportunities for US and German teachers and researchers to learn together, as well as from one another. This study is just the beginning of an opportunity to examine the work in our two contexts that are different, but share a similar challenge: the under-preparedness of content teachers to work with multilingual students. A limitation of this study is the small sample size, so representativity cannot be presumed. Therefore, causality for the found differences needs to be explored through a larger representative sample in the future. Nevertheless, the differences seem plausible when taking into account that teacher preparation to teach multilingual students is a fairly new endeavour in Germany, whereas the US has a longer history in teaching this topic in universities. Additionally, federal requirements in the US often put pressure on schools to continue to support teacher

learning after their formal training period at the university (or other route into teaching) has ended. These differences in in-service teacher learning supports across the two countries also suggest the value of replicating this study with pre-service teachers in each context and potentially following them over time.

Further research should investigate the nature of teacher learning in each context and how that may impact the findings in studies like these. Longitudinal research examining the shifting beliefs of teachers in each context from pre-service to in-service will also provide useful insights into teacher learning trajectories as well as the ways we can best support them. Also, the results from this study provide valuable tools for the field, both in terms of a cross-cultural research instrument that can be used in either national context/language or both, as well as in terms of an opportunity to consider the differences that surface across the two samples and the potential meaning that might provide for teachers as they continue to learn and grow in their ability to work with multilingual students. ∎

Figure 1: Differences in teachers' responses in exemplary items out of the four questionnaire scales.

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