

## Teachers' Beliefs: Believing in Teaching Incarcerated Persons

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**Abstract:** *This article gives insight into German as a foreign language course in a prison in the German speaking part of Switzerland. From the perspective of the teacher, the author reflects on beliefs and assumptions regarding professional issues which are carried into this specific learning setting and challenges these by contrasting them with anecdotal accounts. She advocates the view that rather than try and do away with their beliefs teachers should believe in incarcerated person's capability to learn and achieve.*

**Key words:** *Teaching German as a Foreign Language; beliefs; aspects of teaching*

'Now, how does it feel to be inside?' He asked – and I gazed out of the window of his spacious office; a meadow with flowers and butterflies, an idyll, were it not for the blue bars that spoiled the view and made me felt uneasy as if locked up in a narrow room with an extremely low ceiling...

### Introduction

The Collins Cobuild Dictionary of English defines 'belief' as '*a feeling of certainty that something exists, is true, or is good.*' In education, we teachers hold beliefs about learners, methods, classroom organisation, subject matter and testing and assessment; in fact about every variable involved in teaching into the classroom (Pajares 1992). Our beliefs and assumptions as practitioners are drawn from own experience as learners and teachers. We operate according to our beliefs, professional practice and increasing experience in a mostly subconscious way.

Recently, the results of Hattie's study (2009) exploring the factors most effective for learning have received great attention and the name of the study have become a buzzword. This research on a metalevel (more than 800 studies were looked at) showed that it is not the size of the learning group nor the quality of the equipment of the classroom, to give just two examples, that are evidentially the most effective factors to enhance learning, it is us, the teachers. While this news might have left us with a sigh of relief – as we thought with all the innovations we might become obsolete at some stage - it does remind us to be aware that our role

entails an enormous responsibility.

The study's outcomes underline what research in the field already showed on a smaller scale; teachers have a strong influence on learners' performance (Puchta. 1999:257) and the individual learning processes. It is therefore absolutely imperative that we examine our underlying professional beliefs more closely (Yero. 2001/2. 2).

I teach German as a Foreign Language to male prisoners in a penal institution in Switzerland. There, I am free to make my own choices regarding course material and I can set my own aims and goals as there is no specified curriculum. I can prepare the learners for an exam but apart from this my teaching is not put under any scrutiny whatsoever. Hence, as a teacher in prison – as ironic as this may sound for an institution as restricted and regulated as this - I have more autonomy than most other teachers and am consequently placed in an exclusively powerful position. Therefore, the onus is on me to examine the explicit and implicit beliefs I hold about these particular learners in this particular setting.

Teaching in a penal institution – no matter how big the rucksack of teaching experience may be – is a challenge for which you cannot really be prepared. When I first started teaching there, I was not exactly a fledging young teacher; I was a lecturer of German as a Second Language to students of a mainly academic background, I had taught English to IT-staff at a bank and had worked at a public school in an urban area with about 80 per cent of non-native speakers of German. Thus I had wide ranging experience of teaching different types and levels of learners before starting in the



prison but I soon came to realise that prison learners are somewhat unique.

My prison learners live in an isolated context detached from the world outside, a fact that affects them in various and sometimes unforeseeable ways. One might argue that learning in prison is denied a great number of innovations, be it that the respective institution lacks money, be it that certain multi-media tools are restricted for security reasons, and so on. Moreover the currently rather restrictive political climate would not approve of such “rewards” for those who are in prison to be punished. Either way, according to Hattie’s research, these technical tools and innovations are negligible and largely irrelevant to the learning process. So perhaps a reliance on state of the art learning tools is one the first ‘professional assumption’ that has proved largely irrelevant in the prison context. Over the coming pages I explore five aspects of teaching that I have come to reconsider in the prison context:

1. prisoners as language learners
2. classroom organisation
3. the use of mother tongue
4. approaches
5. topics

Before delving in it would be a good idea to set the context.

## 1. Setting the context

### 1.1 The foreign language to be taught: German as a Foreign Language

In Switzerland, High German is firstly the written language, functioning according to a strict and highly standardized grammar and orthography, and secondly, the spoken language at school, in electronic media, such as TV and radio, as well as in official situations. Where the idiom is used orally, it is normally more or less tinged by the respective dialect. Local and regional dialects are standard in oral communication and are generally on the rise as youngsters tend to use it for short text messages with their peers. Foreigners in penal institutions in the Swiss German part of Switzerland are exposed to both German and different Swiss dialects. In some prisons they can pursue an optional course of German as a foreign language to facilitate their everyday life in the institution. And prison staff in turn can facilitate prisoners’ life by being consistent in their use of High German – this also helps to make institution-based official communication more efficient.

### 1.2 The penal institution

[Poeschwies Prison](#) in Regensdorf near Zurich is one

of the biggest penal institutions in Switzerland. By Swiss law, prisoners are obliged to work. At the same time, in this particular prison, they have the possibility to get vocational training and to complete an apprenticeship in one of the 19 commercial enterprises. Furthermore, they can select from a number of spare time activities, which are optional<sup>1</sup>. These activities include languages such as English and German. Unfortunately, individuals normally have to wait for a place in a particular group. While research has shown that education can help reduce recidivism (The Center on Crime, Communities & Culture: 2001), learning the German language is valued as a tool for the prisoner to integrate and rehabilitation. It facilitates everyday communication between the prisoners and the institutional staff. Moreover, a prisoner’s competence in German is a prerequisite for a psychological therapy or an apprenticeship.

### 1.3 The course

Teaching takes place in a classroom provided with equipment such as whiteboard, overhead projector, TV, video. Thus it is comparable to any other classroom used for adult education. There are six groups of between three and ten learners who attend one contact hour of 50 minutes per week. Despite the fact, that the average stay of a prisoner is three years, normally groups are not permanent as prisoners are moved to other institutions, deported from the country or have completed their sentence.

<sup>1</sup> The problem of foreign language is not new in Swiss correctional institutions and therefore German learning opportunities for non-native speakers historically have a long tradition and date back to the end of the 19th century. The pastor took charge of the school management and teaching, supported by assistant teachers and prisoners. In the German concordats (Switzerland has two German and one latin concordates) institutions offer German as a foreign language courses depending on their size and the financial resources. In 2007, the revised penal code came into force which equates formation and work as outlined in Article 75, Paragraph 1, Criminal Code: The penal system is to promote the social behavior of the prisoners, especially the ability to live unpunished. The penitentiary system shall comply with the general conditions of life as far as possible, to ensure the care of the prisoners, to counteract harmful effects of deprivation of liberty and take into due account the protection of society, the prison staff and other inmates. Thus, German as a foreign language thus has its legal anchorage as an educational measure.

Once the number of students reaches a minimal number; new learners from the waiting list are assigned to the existing groups. In order to find the most efficient group for each learner to meet his needs, I do a placement test with new entries. To make decisions about appropriate groups is sometimes hard for the teacher, while the level of language competence of an individual learner might match with others in the group, the character and resulting group dynamics might not. Furthermore, reorganising the groups can be disruptive in that sense that the ‘fresher’ has to find his place amongst the ‘old-established’. Referring back to the learner description stated earlier, it could be assumed that groups tend to be heterogeneous. There are normally one or two beginner/false beginner groups and different groups ranging roughly from A2 to C1 in the European Reference Frame.

### 1.3.1 Testing and assessment

The main purpose of the course being both rehabilitation and integration, and bearing in mind all the descriptive elements given so far, the teacher is not for obvious reasons teaching to the test. However, learners have the chance to pass one or several of the Goethe Exams of the [Goethe Institute](#). No official testing period exists which takes the pressure off the learners and the teacher. It is arranged that as soon as there are a few candidates, a testing date is selected and organized. It needs to be stressed, that the prognosis for a learner to pass a diploma of his individual level of language should be good otherwise the teacher will suggest postponing until the next time as a negative outcome in an exam would almost certainly dent his confidence and hinder his learning journey. This sometimes requires difficult decisions. One learner even shed a few tears when I told him that his success in the next testing period was very questionable and that therefore he would have to wait until a later time.

However, tests in general help the teacher gain a perspective of what has been learned and are a prerequisite for determining at what stage new material can be presented. This view is consonant with Rudman (1989) who suggests learning and teaching as collaborating activities. Unfortunately, time constraints mean that reediting material to reinforce learning, normally a routine part of the teaching approach, cannot be fully utilized and the teacher has to demonstrate ‘Mut zur Lücke’ (the courage to leave gaps). However, tests can be harnessed to demonstrate achievement and to promote the motivation for further improvement.

### 1.4 The learners

The learners are on average aged approximately between twenty and fifty years – with a tendency of older persons, and they stem from all over the world. It would be literally impossible to write about these individuals in a summarized way as they vary so much in educational and professional background, interests and classroom experience. Having set the context I now return to exploring teachers beliefs and assumptions.

## 2. Beliefs:

### 2.1 On prisoners as language learners

The taxonomy model of ‘*the good language learner*’ (Skehan 1989), offers a framework of categories which are directly related to the learning process. This framework can be harnessed to identify differences in the learners: age, intelligence, aptitude, motivation attitude, personality and cognitive style. In addition there is variation in culture and social backgrounds. While some learners have studied or completed an apprenticeship, others hardly have any education at all. A mixture of these differences in the classroom consequently leads to highly heterogeneous classes. Drawing on this fact, the assumption could be that in such a group neither effective teaching nor learning is possible. A direct consequence of the described heterogeneity could be aggression amongst learners and problems with discipline for the teacher.

Despite the fact that prisoners are individuals with unique experiences and life stories, they all share a strongly organized and structured life with a clear schedule while in prison. This can lead to a certain level of homogeneity among the group, which is not a necessarily learner-friendly one. Being incarcerated is “often [ perceived as ] a burden per se” (Christoffel and Schönfeld. 2008). A burden which very often results in the prisoners experiencing low energy levels, a depressed mood and reduced presence. Consequently, common traits amongst learners might be a lack of flexibility, interest, motivation and spontaneity. By the same token, the German lesson can be used as a pretext for being off work for one hour per week.

In contrast to the observations above, I found that the learners are motivated in learning German and take trouble in making progress. Yet, learning does not proceed in a linear fashion and indeed, for many of them I feel that they undergo a U-shaped course of language development and learning. At first the motivation is high and they are reassured that the foreign language is something they can master easily. Later, they find German as one learner stated ‘madly difficult’, and they



detect their gaps in knowledge; 'I will never come to grips with that gender assignment thing!' In an attempt to fill the gaps they suggest more contact hours, which of course is out of question; 'I shall write to the director, he wouldn't be able to learn a language being taught one hour per week.' The impracticability of their wish often leads to frustration and abandonment.

On the other hand, there are learners who experience language anxiety that does not always naturally decrease over time, as Oxford (1999) underlines. Both these situations mark critical points in the learning process and have to be overcome. At this point the teacher's reaction is important. The following may illustrate what I mean. One learner was very enthusiastic about passing the B1-level diploma (Zertifikat Deutsch). Despite the fact that he had certain weaknesses, I agreed that this level was feasible for him. Because of the very short contact hours he would, however, have to practice the skill of writing in his spare time. At his level, the writing ability is tested by replying to a semi-formal letter where the content is already given by notes.

He began his letter:

*'Dear Mrs Lutz, I am not skilled at writing a letter at all.*

*Dear Ms Schumacher, my apologies for being such an ignorant fool. I don't have the least idea of how to reply to this letter. I left school when I was thirteen. I am very willing to improve my situation, and I am sure that with your help it will work. I can tackle that. Thank you for your understanding. Yours sincerely ...'*

Unsurprisingly, the learner left the institution having passed B1. His letter received amongst those being assessed the highest mark.

Often I find when the learner acquired competence in the foreign language this brings about positive effects in a broader field; as success as a language learner boosts the learners' self-esteem. For example, one learner always had his B1-certificate with him during the lessons. Every once in a while he would stare at it dreamily. By the same token, another learner told me how thanks to literacy and German he was now able to fully understand and fill in a form without any constraints. As Quinn (2007) states, such 'rewards for the teacher are priceless.'

The extent to which participants can identify themselves with the learner's part in a process can be seen in the following situation:

I was teaching subordinate clauses to a group and the individual learners were required to find examples of their own. One learner said: *Because I have an attack of migraine, I prefer to go back to my cell. Since I have an attack of migraine, I prefer to go back to my*

*cell.*' He would offer at least five versions, which were all correct, and I praised him for his work. However, when I eventually looked in his direction, I noticed that he was rolling his eyes and the skin of his face was something between yellow and white. Although he was in great pain he managed to use the learned structure correctly.

Having discussed individual examples so far, the last point of emphasis in this section concerns group dynamics amongst learners. Some learners are not willing to do any extra work outside the classroom and I told them this is fine with me. Yet, others expect to receive homework assignments to be completed for the next class as they enjoy comparing their work. What follows is a voice from the classroom to illustrate my point. *'Miss, my learning partner complained because I only brought a few exercises along. Can we please have more for next time?'*

## 2.2 On classroom organisation and methods

'Is your teaching there not dangerous?' is a question often raised by teaching colleagues. It is clear what kinds of attitudes have led to this question: a teacher in a prison might find herself in a perilous situation in which the teacher's control of both the situation as well as of the learners seems to be of prime importance. Drawing from this point, one might assume that a rather teacher-centred, hierarchical teaching might be a good choice. Transferring this to my own practice, I do indeed use a teacher-centred classroom layout with tables organized in a circle. At the same time, it needs to be stressed that this layout does not come from reflections on security. In the longer run, I found that the learners preferred to follow my instructions, answer to my questions taking turns, without the feeling of being deprived from my attention and interest or worse being isolated. This can be illustrated by the fact that learners would always choose plenary work when asked, arguing that individual work is for their cell.

## 2.3 On the use of mother tongue in the classroom

The prison being run in a so-called decentralised way, inmates live in cells, which are divided into 'living groups'. To prevent the over representation of one ethnic group and potential disciplinary issues their members are allotted to different "pavilions". This however has no repercussions on grouping German language learners. Hence, the classroom might be dominated by one ethnical group. Bearing in mind that the majority of learners are on level A1 and A2 of the European Language Frame, I advocate the view that a moderate, controlled use of the mother tongue amongst learners

can be beneficial in the learning process. This view is consonant with current research on second language acquisition (SLA), Kellermann (1986) that shows that the first language (L1) influence is a subtle and evolving aspect of second language (L2) development. Even more, this might lead to a genuine interest in comparing aspects of their own language to the foreign language and to consequently find analogies. In addition, the learners explaining phenomena of their language by using the German language take on the teacher's role and that of an interpreter for a limited time. As the target language is German the learner has the chance to see whether he can make himself understood. Hence the link between mother tongue and German can have a positive effect on the linguistic performance of the learner as research found. (Heyde. 1979) A great side effect for the teacher is that she can enhance her cultural knowledge and knowledge of foreign languages.

For instance, a learner did not know what the German word 'Aprikose' (apricot) meant. His colleague translated into Arabic. The word he uttered sounded like "Mischmasch" (hotchpotch). A small example of how a trivial word, homophone, can spark an interest and of how language teaching becomes a cultural event.

## 2.4 On approaches

The learners' needs in learning German can be divided into two groups. One group could be called their urgent and direct needs, such as for instance being able to communicate and understand prison officers or to make themselves understood during a visit at the doctor. The other could be defined as needs for their rehabilitation outside the institution where communicative skills might foster integration. This reflection would suggest that the four skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening are at the centre of any teaching. To incorporate what has been said about the learners themselves earlier, it seems obvious that choosing a grammatical approach might not be ideal.

Therefore, it is essential to determine the kind of second language skills prisoners need? If you reflect on their everyday life including work, communication with prison staff and their lawyer, therapist and social worker, you would mention communicative skills in both spoken and written form. Grammar is assigned a lesser importance and a more relaxed approach is preferred. Thus, participants feel more comfortable and allow themselves to forget their often difficult situations for a while. Yet, it needs to be stressed that certain language games did not appeal to the class: *You know, this game where you have two players and the rest of the group acting as referees, this game reminds me of the*

*situation in court where the judge thrones high above you. I rather not have it.'*

This and similar comments from the learners gave me food for thought. I found their remarks instructive. After a while I searched for new ways to precipitate learners' progress. Meanwhile, some students would ask about parallels and differences in their own language and in German. This prompted the decision to begin explicit tuition of grammar. However the new approach was not an unalloyed success. As one learner stated:

*"Once I spoke like a construction worker, grammatically completely wrong. But people understood me more or less. Then you came with your grammar-teaching, and now this language works in me and it just won't stop making me think".*

The above quote was uttered in an angry tone, and certainly the speaker would reject my point of view. However, in terms of language learning, I realized that the learner was referring to the concept of 'consciousness rising about grammar' shaped by Rutherford and Sherwood Smith (1988). The latter have suggested that instruction does not directly precede production and that learners need to be aware of grammatical phenomena. For this to be achieved the teacher needs to deliberately "draw the learner's attention specifically to the formal properties of the target language." (Rutherford and Sherwood Smith. 1988. 107). My learners find it instructive when they realize that the German language, which they regard as incredibly difficult, has five grammatical causes whereas theirs has seven. Even more, they feel more self-assured in German as grammar gives them an insight in the mechanics of the language.

## 2.6 On topics

Initially, I found it extremely difficult to decide on topics for the lessons. I promote the view that the classroom should not be a place where the prisoners are confronted with their difficult situation. Therefore, the topic on crime and punishment in the textbook of B2/C1-learners remained untouched. Following on from this point, considering every page of content in the available textbooks, I came to the result that topics of general interest, *nomen est omen*, are generally prone to turn a 'solid floor' into a 'trapdoor' exposing the learners in a way I have not intended. However, it was in fact the prisoners themselves who proved my misgivings unfounded.

One day in one of my first weeks there a learner showed me a cartoon. The main character was a little bird riding on his motorbike. While riding his bike he

had a collision with a man driving a car. The bird became unconscious. When he woke up he found himself in a cage. He mistook it for a prison when he saw the water-dispenser and slices of bread on the floor. His supposed situation made him reflect: *'Oh no, I must have killed the car driver.'* The prisoner with the cartoon in his hands was looking at me giggling. Honestly, I was rather shocked. Analogously, in the textbook for level A1 there is a dialogue between a little girl and an assistant at a pizza service. The girl calls the service to order nine pizzas. The man on the phone wants to speak to her parents because she is a minor. Eventually, he learns that the girl is home alone with her dog. Thus her order is rejected with the words: 'No mama, no papa: no pizza.' The comments of my students were: *'That poor young girl is in exactly the same situation as we are.'*

Similarly, I found on many occasions that it was the learners who chose to put their situation or the context of a prison as the centre of interest, as the following demonstrates. The topic of compound nouns has usually been an area where learners when asked to come up with their own words, often use words such as, 'Fluchtgefahr' (risk of escape) or 'Haftstrafe' (imprisonment). Following on from this point, one student once asked: *'Is it o.k. to say that I like it to be here in prison?'* After I had replied that yes, from a grammatical point of view it was, the room was full of laughter.

In contrast to the above, sometimes the issue of crime arises more indirectly. One learner was working hard in his spare time in order to prepare for the B1-exam. As he is slightly hard-hearing in one ear, he asked me whether he could get extra listening test examples to do in his cell. I provided him with the material by saying that I expected it back the following week unharmed. His answer was, 'don't worry nobody can steal it, I'm always careful locking my cell when I have, for instance, a shower.' When I fixed him with a stare for a moment, he would suddenly say: 'Oh, I see, no, I won't sell it or anything.' In line with the above, one learner told me he had not noticed that I was left-handed: *'I didn't know you're left-handed. Do you do all with your left hand? Do you write with it? Do you do manual work with it? I beg your pardon; with which hand do you actually shoot? I shot with a pistol. What, you do not possess an arm? I thought that all Swiss do.'*

### 3. Conclusion

Hopefully, this paper is a source of inspiration for the readers to reflect on their own assumptions and beliefs about teaching in general or about teaching prisoners in particular. Drawing from my experience, I can say

that teaching in the described context has tested – and still does test – my own assumptions and has left me grateful for the experience.

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