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# **Netting the Maroro:**

## **An exploration of Cook Islands teachers' beliefs about language learning and teaching**

A thesis presented in partial  
fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in Second Language Teaching  
at Massey University  
Palmerston North

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2003

## **Abstract**

Teachers' beliefs play an important role in teachers' decision making processes and affect their practice. Beliefs are situated within specific contexts. Little work has been done to investigate the beliefs of language teachers in the South Pacific. This study investigated the beliefs about language learning and language teaching of Cook Islands teachers working in Rarotonga, Cook Islands. The research used a qualitative approach based on questionnaires, interviews, and stimulated recall, including detailed case studies of three teachers.

The findings suggest that the Cook Islands teachers involved in this study held beliefs about the language learning process, the nature and use of language, Cook Islands learners, the challenge of risk-taking by students in schools and the teacher's role within the classroom. Beliefs about the language learning process included those relating to initial and ongoing language acquisition, the relationship between written and spoken language, and the teaching strategies best suited to effective language learning. The role of phonics, reading, and the place of modelling were identified as particularly important. Beliefs relating to the nature and use of language included strongly identified beliefs about the links between culture and language and about the relationship between the languages used in the Cook Islands. Bilingualism was seen as an ideal goal but getting there was seen as problematic. Teachers' beliefs about learners included beliefs about affective factors and the idea of learner readiness. Beliefs were held about the particular problems associated with risk-taking in Cook Islands classrooms. Teachers held beliefs about their roles, particularly in the relationships they have with students and school administrators including the ideas of tolerance and patience in providing a good learning environment for students.

In situations where decision-making was needed, but individual beliefs were in conflict with each other, the process of more centrally held beliefs overriding other less centrally held beliefs was observed.

Many of the beliefs held were influenced by teachers' own language learning experiences. Significant events in the teachers' lives were identified as important sources of beliefs and motivation. The influence of the historical colonial setting was particularly evident.

The research shows that Cook Islands teachers have specific beliefs that influence their practice. These beliefs were found to be strongly related to the historical, social and professional context of the believer. Because of the effects of beliefs on practice it is important for beliefs to be considered in any process of teacher change. The findings of this research should help towards an understanding of teacher beliefs necessary for future initiatives aimed at improving language teacher practice.

# Acknowledgments

*E teia nei  
Ko Iesu tei atu mou  
Akameitaki au iakoe  
Akateitei au iakoe  
Kia tapu to'ou ingoa  
E tuatau atu*

I would like to thank the following people for their assistance in the preparation of this thesis.

Mr Ken Matheson, Secretary for Education, who allowed me access to schools in Rarotonga and encouraged the research.

Staff of the Cook Islands Curriculum Unit, who gave generously of their time and through discussion provided insight into local school culture.

The teachers and students of the Cook Islands, particularly the three teachers who allowed me to enter their lives. Thank you for the way you opened your hearts to me.

Margaret Franken, my supervisor, who encouraged me to do this in the first place and who provided advice and direction. Her expert knowledge of the field and useful feedback proved extremely helpful.

Richard, Sarah, Katie and Stephanie, my family, who provided support in so many ways.

Meitaki ma'ata koutou.

Kia orana e kia manuia.

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## Chapter One Introduction

*All thinking begins in wonderment.*

Socrates

This thesis explores the beliefs some Cook Islands teachers have about language learning and language teaching. The main focus of this study is their beliefs about English language learning and teaching. English is a second or third language for most teachers in the Cook Islands and for most of the students. The researcher was prompted to investigate teacher beliefs whilst providing in-service training to teachers on a number of islands in the Cook Islands.

When planning for teacher training and teacher development it is important to consider the things the students or teachers involved bring to the training. Previous experience, knowledge and beliefs will have a bearing on how teachers and learners receive new material presented to them. Interpretations of material are coloured by what teachers and learners already believe, know and understand. It seems likely that teachers' beliefs about language would be influenced by a number of factors including their experience in their first language, usually a dialect of Cook Islands Maori.

The literature suggests that teachers' beliefs must be considered as they contribute to the decisions teachers make in their day to day classroom practice. Knowledge of these beliefs is therefore useful, providing insight into the reasons why teachers act and react in certain ways.

Schools in Rarotonga, Cook Islands provided the context for this study. Rarotonga is the largest island in the Cook Islands, a small country in the South Pacific. Rarotonga had a population of about 8000 people in 2001. It is the administrative centre for the

group of fifteen small islands spread over two million square kilometres of ocean. There are thirteen schools in Rarotonga. These range in size from Rutaki School with 34 pupils to Tereora College (the only full secondary school) with 450 pupils. The schools are located around the perimeter of the island in the main villages. Most Cook Islands teachers work in Rarotonga for at least part of their working lives.

The interest in teachers' beliefs was stimulated by observations of classroom teachers' practices in language teaching and involvement in in-depth discussions with teachers. The researcher realised that a greater understanding of teachers' beliefs might help in the development of more effective in-service training in the context of the Cook Islands. It was also thought that an understanding of the history of education in the Cook Islands, with a particular focus on language policy, would provide an important angle from which to view teacher beliefs.

The research was therefore framed around the question: What are Cook Islands teachers' beliefs about English language learning and language teaching? It was decided that to answer the question a qualitative methodology would be employed. The results of this research will give teacher trainers some insight into what teachers believe in the area of language teaching and learning and this should prove helpful for course planning and decision making for both pre-service and in-service training.

There were two phases to the research. First, a general questionnaire was given to approximately one-third of the teachers working in Rarotonga. The responses gave a general view of teacher beliefs and gave direction for in-depth interviews and observations of a smaller group of teachers. The second phase involved exploring beliefs in detail with a smaller group of teachers. Three teachers were interviewed. They then took part in stimulated recall, where lessons in classrooms were observed and videotaped, forming the basis for subsequent discussion of aspects of their classroom practice. Time was spent talking with language advisers as part of the development of the interviews. Interviews were taped and transcribed.

In order to explore English language teachers' beliefs in the Cook Islands, it is necessary first to provide background contextual information. This includes a historical background of the Cook Islands with a focus on education, particularly language education, and a review of the roles of the two languages, Cook Islands Maori and English, in education during the course of history. This is done in Chapter Two. Chapter Three presents a review of relevant literature. The concept of beliefs is explored and literature concerning the nature and effects of beliefs is reviewed. Teachers' beliefs and the link between beliefs and practice are discussed, with specific reference to teaching English as a second language. However there is a limitation in that the cultural perspective on which much of the reported research is based is not locally grounded.

The methodology employed in this research is outlined in Chapter Four. The three methods used in the study to explore the nature of selected teacher beliefs were questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and stimulated recall. These are described in Chapter Four.

In Chapter Five the results are presented in three main parts. Firstly results from the teacher questionnaire are described. Secondly the in-depth interviews with three teachers are reported on individually using six broad groupings generated from the data. Finally there is a section summarising the key findings on teachers' beliefs. The results are discussed in Chapter Six. The key teachers' beliefs about language learning and language teaching identified in the results are discussed and comparisons with previous research findings are made. The effects of teachers' beliefs, especially effects on teachers' classroom practice, are explored. The sources of teachers' beliefs and the significance of these sources are discussed. Implications of this research for professional development for Cook Islands teachers are suggested in the final chapter.