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Beliefs about Language Learning: Current Knowledge, Pedagogical Implications, and New Research Directions

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Beliefs about Language Learning: Current Knowledge, Pedagogical Implications, and New Research Directions

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Abstract

This paper argues for an interdisciplinary approach to beliefs about language learning research, and suggests that current studies in this area do not go far enough to examine the extent to which stable factors, such as individual learner differences, account for the nature of beliefs. Next, it elucidates how cognitive and personality psychology provides a foundation for a possible relationship between learner beliefs and personality, and emphasizes the need for further research and a strong theoretical foundation before any attempts to change language learners' beliefs are made in the classroom context.

Introduction

Beliefs are a central construct in every discipline that deals with human behavior and learning (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen, 1988). In one sense, beliefs–or personal "myths" about learning–do not differ from the majority of myths about the human race, nor do they differ from those of the majority of psychologists and educators. Bruner, Piaget, Rogers, Socrates, and Kelly hold myths about learning, and the controversy about the relative merits of their myths has hidden the more interesting congruence that each student constructs a viable myth of their own (Harri-Augstein, 1985).

In the classroom context, the perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and metacognitive knowledge that students bring with them to the learning situation have been recognized as a significant contributory factor in the learning process and ultimate success (Breen, 2001). For example, second or foreign language students may hold strong beliefs about the nature of the language under study, its difficulty, the process of its acquisition, the success of certain learning strategies, the existence of aptitude, their own expectations about achievement and teaching methodologies. Identification of these beliefs and reflection on their potential impact on language learning and teaching in general, as well as in more specific areas such as the learners' expectations and strategies used, can inform future syllabus design and teacher practice in

the course. Pedagogy has the capacity to provide the opportunities and conditions within which these learner contributions are found to have a positive effect upon learning and may be more fully engaged (Breen, 2001; Arnold, 1999).

This paper argues that, while research on learner beliefs about language learning so far has provided us with valuable insights, it has stagnated, investigating which beliefs are fundamental to the exclusion of other important factors. The question central to this paper is what shapes learner beliefs? Despite what we know about beliefs, we have very little knowledge about the psychological mechanisms involved in creating, shaping and guiding these beliefs, which are byproducts of a number of internal as well as external factors.

The Nature and Origin of Beliefs

Terms such as knowledge and beliefs are treated differently within the research community, depending on varying theoretical orientations. Early psychological studies into learner perceptions and beliefs about learning "opened a whole new Aladdin's cave of personal beliefs, myths, understandings, and superstitions as they were revealed by the persons' thoughts and feelings about their learning" (Thomas & Harri-Augustein, 1983, p. 338). They concluded that beliefs about learner capacity and personal models of their own processes were more central to understanding the individuals' learning performances than universally accepted theories of learning; these personal "myths" explained more about individual differences in learning than such psychometric measures as intelligence or aptitude (Thomas & Harri-Augustein, 1983).

In cognitive psychology, learner beliefs about the nature of knowledge and learning, or epistemological beliefs, have been investigated with the idea that they are part of the underlying mechanisms of metacognition (Flavell, 1987; Ryan, 1984), form the building blocks of epistemology (Goldman, 1986), and are a driving force in intellectual performance. Psychologists have begun to acknowledge the pervasive influence of personal and social epistemologies on academic learning, thinking, reasoning, and problem solving (Schommer, 1993), persistence (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), and interpretation of information (Ryan, 1984; Schommer, 1990).

From this perspective, beliefs about language learning are viewed as a component of metacognitive knowledge (Flavell, 1987), which include all that individuals understand about themselves as learners and thinkers, including their goals and needs. Flavell (1979, 1981) emphasizes the study of meta-cognitive knowledge in second language learning and focuses on the person. He calls this "person knowledge." Person knowledge is knowledge learners have acquired about how cognitive and affective factors such as learner aptitude, personality, and motivation may influence learning. In addition, it includes specific knowledge about how the above factors apply in their experience. For example, is it the learners' belief that they do, or do not, have an aptitude for learning another language or, that their particular type of personality will inhibit or facilitate language learning (Wenden, 2001)?

According to Wenden (1999) metacognitive knowledge makes up "a system of related ideas, some accepted without question and other validated by their experience" (p. 436). She views beliefs as separate from metacognitive knowledge, because beliefs are "value-related and tend to be held more tenaciously." Wenden also distinguishes metacognitive knowledge from metacognitive strategies and refers to the former as information, which learners acquire about learning, while the latter consists of general skills that allow learners to "manage, direct, regulate, and guide" the learning process" (1999, p. 436). Wenden (2001) provides further insight on the function of language learners' metacognitive knowledge in learning. She focuses on the nature of the interaction that defines the relationship between what learners know and how they self-direct their learning. Following Flavell's (1979, 1981) classification of metacognitive knowledge, Wenden (2001) emphasizes three categories of knowledge: person, task and strategy (p. 46), based on eight selected excerpts of language learners' accounts, which were analysed to illustrate how this knowledge performs in the self-regulation of language learning. Wenden notes that metacognitive knowledge is a prerequisite to the deployment of the self-regulatory processes leading to autonomy. She points out that the foundation for the development of learner autonomy is planning, monitoring and evaluating.

Apart from being seen as a component of metacognitive knowledge, other definitions of beliefs–depending on one's theoretical perspective–have identified them as:

- mini-theories (Hosenfeld, 1978),
- insights (Omaggio, 1978),
- culture of learning (Contazzi & Jin, 1996),
- learner assumptions (Riley, 1980),
- implicit theories (Clark, 1988),
- self-constructed representational systems (Rust, 1994),
- conceptions of learning (Benson & Lor, 1999), and

- "general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning, and about the nature of language learning and teaching" (Victori & Lockhart, 1995, p. 224).

Beliefs have also been said to "act as very strong filters of reality" (Arnold, 1999, p. 256).

Interdisciplinary research suggests that learner beliefs about learning are intertwined with factors such as self-concept and identity, self-efficacy, personality, and other individual differences (Epstein, 1990). For example, students may be directly influenced by their perception of success in learning and levels of expectancy (Yang, 1999; White, 1999; Bernat, 2004)–with realistically high helping to build confidence, and low (or unrealistically high) expectations helping to build incompetence (Puchta, 1999). Truitt (1995) discusses expectancy (based on Pintrich & DeGroot's (1990) concept) as students' beliefs about their abilities and responsibilities to perform tasks. Values are considered by Pintrich and DeGroot to be related to students' goals and beliefs about the relative importance and interest of the task. Truitt (1995) further addresses self-efficacy as beliefs about ability, similar to expectancy.

Learners' self-efficacy beliefs have also been a focus of recent research. Breen (2001) for example, investigated how learners' attributes such as beliefs, aptitude, personality, or the concept of identity affect their conceptions of themselves and the learning environment. The author asserts that learners work selectively within their learning environment, and upon the linguistic and communicative data made available to them in that environment. This selectivity derives from the learners' conceptualizations of the conditions that they believe to be facilitating or hindering their learning and their conceptualizations of the language to be learned. He also points out that such conceptualizations are imbued with the learners' feelings and attitudes, leading to the conclusion that affect, inter alia, shapes one's cognitive conceptualizations or beliefs. Research evidence indicates that even on the neurobiological level emotions are part of reason (Domasio, 1994) and underlie most, if not all, of cognition in language learning (Schumann, 1997).

Beliefs about Language Learning Research

While a considerable amount of research has so far been conducted in the language acquisition area, Wenden (2001) argues that foreign and second language learner beliefs, so far, have been a neglected variable. Language educators have long recognized that learners bring to the language classroom a complex web of attitudes, experiences, expectations, beliefs, and learning strategies (Benson, 2001; Nyikos & Oxford, 1993; Oxford, 1992). As a result, research reveals that attitudes toward learning, and the perceptions and beliefs that determine them, may have a profound influence on learning behavior (Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Como, 1986; Cotterall, 1995; McCombs, 1984;) and on learning outcomes (Martin & Ramsden, 1987; van Rossum & Schenk, 1984; Weinert & Kluwe, 1987). They are also central to the learner's overall experience and achievements (Ryan, 1984; Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Schommer, 1990; Weinert & Kluwe 1987). Furthermore, some note that successful learners develop insights into beliefs about the language learning processes, their own abilities, and the use of effective learning strategies (Anstey, 1988; Biggs, 1987; Ehrman & Oxford, 1989, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1986).

In the past decades, the body of research literature on language learning beliefs has grown greatly, beginning in the 1970s (Papalia, 1978). As these studies have been investigated within various research paradigms (see Barcelos (2003) for a review), researchers have recently attempted to classify them. Benson and Lor (1999), for example, organize them according to the enquiry methods employed by investigators. A typical research strategy involves completing an inventory of different belief statements, to which learners indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement (Horwitz, 1987). Another popular strategy employs interviews and focus group discussions (Wenden, 1986b, 1987). Kalaja (2003) refers to these approaches as "mainstream" and "alternative." Barcelos, (2000, 2003), on the other hand, distinguishes three main approaches: nominative, metacognitive and contextual. This classification is based on a definition of beliefs, research methodology, and the relationship between beliefs and other factors. We adopt it here for the purpose of classification of the following studies.

The Normative Approach

The normative approach is characterized by the use of Likert-scale questionnaires in the investigation of learner beliefs. Horwitz (1985, 1987) is generally credited with initiating significant research into beliefs with the development of the BALLI–Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory. Horwitz (1985, 1987) used this 34-item questionnaire to explore students', teachers', and pre-service teachers' beliefs. Due to its high popularity, BALLI was consequently used in a number of small and large-scale research studies (see Horwitz (1999) for a review of BALLI studies). For example, three large-scale American studies assessing teacher and student opinion on a variety of issues related to language learning (Horwitz, 1988; Kern, 1995; Mantle-Bromley, 1995) produced similar results, though a few items differed such as:

1. learners underestimated the difficulty of language learning;
2. they held misconceptions about how to learn foreign languages; and
3. they gave more value to accent than teachers did.

Studies undertaken by Chawhan and Oliver (2000), Cotterall (1995), Kim-Yoon (2000) and Yang (1992) extended their research into different contexts. Chawhan and Oliver (2000) investigated the beliefs of 54 overseas learners in Australia, Cotterall (1995) examined almost 140 respondents in New Zealand; Kim-Yoon (2000) identified the beliefs of 664 EFL learners in Korea, while Yang (1992) explored the beliefs of over 500 students in Taiwan. The findings of these studies suggested that learner beliefs about language learning are context-specific. The results also indicated that there were significant differences between groups of diverse language background students. These studies support the fundamental arguments raised by previous researchers that understanding of learner beliefs can enhance the language learning process. They concluded that ESL teachers' consciousness of learners' expectations "may contribute to a more conducive learning environment and to more effective learning" (Chawhan & Oliver, 2000, p. 25).

Apart from the BALLI, other Likert-type questionnaires were developed to investigate language learner beliefs (e.g., Cotterall, 1999; Kuntz, 1996; Sakui & Gaies, 1999). For instance, Sakui and Gaies (1999) investigated 1,296 Japanese EFL learners' beliefs at public and private institutions of higher education using their own instrument. The study aimed to validate a 45-item questionnaire and examine the value of interview data to complement and explain the questionnaire data, and to describe Japanese learners' beliefs, as well as to determine the organization of these beliefs. Their findings suggest that beliefs about language learning are dynamic and situationally conditioned. The results provided a tentative support for the view that Japanese learners have internalized a coherent set of beliefs about methodological options for the EFL classroom instruction.

The Metacognitive Approach

A number of research studies on language learner beliefs adopted the metacognitive approach in their inquiries (e.g., Goh, 1997; White, 1999, 1999a). Wenden (1986a, 1986b, 1998, 1999, 2001) conducted important studies within this framework, and described beliefs as stable, statable, although sometimes incorrect knowledge that learners acquired about language, learning and the language learning process (Wenden, 2001). Employing semi-structured interviews and self-reports to collect data, Wenden (1987) explored learners' explicit prescriptive beliefs with the purpose of determining whether the learners held such beliefs, and if so, what those were, whether those beliefs were reflected in what learners reported they did to learn a second language, and finally, what the significance of such beliefs was. The participant group comprised 25 adults who had recently arrived in the USA and were enrolled in the advanced level classes of a language program at a university. The findings revealed that learners held prescriptive beliefs, which Wenden categorized into three main groups. The first group was the importance of using the language in a natural way by practicing as often as possible, thinking in the second language and living and studying in an environment where the target language was spoken. The second group was concerned with the learning about the language such as learning grammar and vocabulary, taking a formal language course, learning from mistakes, and being mentally active. The third group emphasized the importance of personal factors such as the emotional aspect, self-concept and aptitude for learning. Some of the beliefs that were found in Wenden's study were different from the beliefs in the BALLI. Others were themes that could expand into separate sets of beliefs, for example, the role of culture. The researcher drew a conclusion that such differences lead to the development of "a more comprehensive and representative set of beliefs" (Wenden, 1987, p. 13).

To expend an understanding of the function of metacognitive knowledge in language learning, Goh (1997) investigated forty ESL learners' metacognotive awareness about listening. She accessed to this knowledge by asking learners to keep a 'listening diary' where they described the way they listen, react to, and perceive the information. In her study, Goh (1997) applied the same classification of metacognitive knowledge as Wenden (1991) used in her study: person knowledge, task knowledge and strategic knowledge. She also developed subcategories for each of these three main groups. The study revealed that the learners had a high degree of metacognitive awareness and were conscious of their learning strategies in listening. As it is seen from the data, the students were able to both observe their cognitive processes as well as articulate their beliefs about learning to listen in English. One of the strengths of this research is that learners become aware of their learning styles, strategies and beliefs that could lead them to improve their own learning processes in other contexts.

The Contextual Approach

A number of research studies have employed the contextual approach to explore language learning beliefs (Allen, 1996). In this approach, beliefs are viewed as embedded in students' contexts. Research studies within the contextual approach are qualitative in nature and contribute to an interpretive paradigm. The contextual approach uses ethnography, narratives, and metaphors (Kramsch, 2003). A feature of the studies within this approach is that they are not only diverse in the theoretical frameworks they employ, for example, phenomenographical (Benson & Lor, 1999; White, 1999), neo-Vygotskian socio-cultural (Alanen, 2003), Bakhtinian (Dufva, 2003), Deweyan (Barcelos, 2000), but also vary in methods of data collection that include case studies, ethnographic classroom observations, informal discussions and stimulated recalls (Allen, 1996; Barcelos, 2000,) diaries (Hosenfeld, 2003), discourse analysis (Kalaja, 2003), naturalistic interviews, ranking exercises, scenarios and yoked subject procedures (White, 1999).

White (1999) contributed to the body of research by undertaking a longitudinal study of 23 novice distance learners of Japanese and Spanish. The five phases of the research study aimed to develop an understanding of the way learners experience, interpret and present their experiences of a non-classroom, solo context for language learning. The results of the study revealed three central constructs: the learner-context interface, tolerance of ambiguity, and locus of control, which are imperative for understanding beginning learners' experience. In this study, the students viewed self-instruction as requiring the use of their cognitive abilities in order to create an effective working relationship with the target language learning materials. The study reports that while the majority of learners shifted from external to internal locus of control during their experience in a new learning context, a small group of learners retained an external locus of control. The research suggests that some individual differences between learners may be accountable for less predisposing to be able to adjust to language learning in a less conventional context. The study also reveals that learner predispositions contribute to how learners conceptualize and experience their initial self-instructed learning.

To better understand the complex area of learner beliefs about language learning, Benson and Lor (1999) proposed to take into consideration three levels of analysis: conception, belief, and approach. The authors explored whether or not a higher order of conceptions of language and language learning could be identified, and whether the notion of approaches to language learning could help understand the functions of beliefs in context. Based on their research with 16 first-year undergraduates, they found that learners' conception of the object and process of learning were influential in the learner's beliefs, and subsequently learning strategies. The researchers showed that conception of learning constitutes a higher level of abstraction than beliefs. In their view, a conception of learning is significant because it helps to classify learner beliefs, and the approach to learning forms the level at which conception and beliefs function.

The notion of approaches to learning seems central to perceiving the ways in which conception and beliefs are open to modification. Benson and Lor discovered that in order to modify beliefs, the learner must also modify the underlying conceptions on which they are based and pay attention to the context in which they function. This conclusion could provide practical implications for language teachers who need to know whether their learners' beliefs are functional or dysfunctional, and how dysfunctional beliefs can be changed. However, the authors have not suggested how one can "modify an underlying conception."

Discussion of Methodologies

The abovementioned studies point to the researchers' different ontological and epistemological assumptions, which are clearly reflected in their research paradigms. The diversity of theoretical frameworks in language learner beliefs research creates a rich tapestry of complimenting studies. However, none are without limitations. On one hand, while quantitative, etic research methods in the normative approach provide clarity and precision through the use of well-designed questionnaires and descriptive statistics, can include a large number of respondents and afford them anonymity, they do have limitations. The beliefs profiled in normative studies are only those identified by the researcher and therefore, are not all the beliefs learners might hold about language learning. There is also potential for misunderstanding of questionnaire items. Furthermore, a construct as intellectually and affectively complex and rich as is one's personal belief system, cannot presume to be fully captured by people's responses to a set of normative statements (Wilkinson & Schwartz, 1989; Weinstein, 1994).

On the other hand, qualitative, emic research methods such as those used in the metacognitive and contextual approach, or the discursive approach (Kalaja, 2003), are most often studies of small-scale, in-depth, descriptive and interpretive analyses. They can include, inter alia, interview techniques, journal or diary entries, use of metaphors, and classroom observations. They also allow for triangulation of data. However, the limitations of such studies are reflected by selectivity of data, a degree of interpretive subjectivity, and context-specificity resulting in lack of application to broader SLA contexts. Consequently, the choice of research methodology in language learner beliefs studies will depend on the investigator's purpose and questions of enquiry, as well as the adopted view of the nature and function on

learner beliefs.

Discussion of Pedagogical Implications

Since beliefs about language learning have been found to have a significant impact on the language learner, the focus here is on various possible teaching implications reported by the literature. Preconceived beliefs may directly influence or even determine a learner's attitude or motivation, and precondition the learner's success or lack of success (Kuntz, 1996). Supportive and positive beliefs help to overcome problems and thus sustain motivation, while negative or unrealistic beliefs can lead to decreased motivation, frustration and anxiety (Kern, 1995; Oh, 1996). Many successful learners develop insightful beliefs about language learning processes, their own abilities, and the use of effective learning strategies, which have a facilitative effect on learning.

On the other hand, students can have "mistaken," uninformed, or negative beliefs that may lead to a reliance on less effective strategies, resulting in a negative attitude towards learning and autonomy (Victori & Lickhart, 1995), and classroom anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Students who believe, for example, that learning a language primarily involves learning new vocabulary will spend most of their energy on vocabulary acquisition, while older learners who believe in the superiority of younger learners probably begin language learning with fairly negative expectations of their own ultimate success. In addition, an unsuccessful learning experience may likely lead students to the conclusion that special abilities are required to learn a foreign language and that they do not possess these necessary abilities (Horwitz, 1987). Such beliefs can also inhibit learners' perceptiveness to the ideas and activities presented in the language classroom, "particularly when the approach is not consonant with the learners' experience" (Cotterall, 1995, p. 203). Kern (1995) found that differences between student and teacher beliefs might create tension in the classroom; and Yang (1992), in her review of foreign language anxiety research, promotes learner beliefs as one of six primary variables affecting anxiety. As negative beliefs can lead to dissatisfaction with the course and anxiety, Mantle-Bromley (1995) suggests that if teachers attend to the affective and cognitive components of students' attitudes as well as develop defendable pedagogical techniques, they may be able to increase both the length of time students commit to language study and their chances of success in it. However, Stevick (1980) argues that success depends less on the materials and teaching techniques in the classroom and more on what goes on inside the learner.

As a result of various research findings that indicate learners hold both facilitative and inhibitive beliefs about language learning, teaching implications have become a primary concern. Researchers have suggested possible measures teachers might take to promote positive beliefs in the classroom and eliminate the negative ones. Horwitz (1999) points out that while teachers cannot tailor instruction to each belief of each student, and must out of necessity deal with groups of students, the investigation of beliefs which inform different behaviors in the language classroom is useful in making teachers aware of different learner types that need to be accommodated. Additionally, Wenden (1986a) proposes that if we are to discover what characterizes successful language learning, we need to discover what students believe or know about their learning and provide activities that would allow students to examine these beliefs and their possible impact on how they approach learning.

Discovering students' attitudes and beliefs is possible, as it is generally accepted that language learners are capable of bringing this knowledge to consciousness and articulating it (Willing, 1988; Kalaja, 2003; Hosenfeld, 2003). No doubt, such dialogues are important since they form an essential component for gaining firsthand insight into learners' conceptual frameworks in second or foreign language acquisition. Consequently, Kalaja (2003) suggests using the discursive approach of social psychology to the study of learner beliefs, pointing to discourse analysis as a "more sensitive [method] than the traditional methods of data collection . . . or analysis . . . " (p. 106).

Other recommendations come from Bassano (1986), who recognizes that students have different needs, preferences, beliefs, learning styles, and educational backgrounds, but argues that the imposition of change upon these factors can lead to negative reactions. The author offers teachers six steps towards dealing with student beliefs:

1. become aware of students' past classroom experiences and their assumptions about language learning;
2. build students' confidence;
3. begin where the students are and move slowly;
4. show them achievement;
5. allow for free choice as much as possible; and
6. become aware of the students' interests and concerns, their goals and objectives.

Morgan (1993) suggests that four aspects of classroom persuasion should be considered in attempting to change students' attitudes and beliefs:

1. learning content should require active learner involvement;
2. the classroom environment should be of "change or novelty";
3. students need to struggle with complex material and reach their own conclusion; and
4. students should become aware of their attitudes toward language and culture.

Furthermore, Dörnyei (2001) believes that in order to rectify students' erroneous assumptions they:

(a) need to develop an informed understanding of the nature of second language acquisition and reasonable criteria for progress;

(b) should be made aware of the fact that the mastery of a second or foreign language can be achieved in a number of different ways, using diverse strategies; and

(c) a key factor leading to success is for learners to discover for themselves the methods and techniques by which they learn best.

While the suggestions provide sound pedagogical advice and reflect a humanistic approach to language teaching, it is not clear to what extent, if any, they will have an effect on the learner's beliefs about language learning. There is currently a paucity of literature on intervention methods in classroom research that report on the degree of success such methods might have in changing learner beliefs.

Some Pedagogical Concerns

Some researchers suggest the need for studies on how beliefs differ across learners, particularly in terms of individual differences (Horwitz, 1999; Wenden, 1999; Rifkin, 2000). Although beliefs about language learning have been studied in relation to a number of variables, no study so far has been conducted on their relationship to stable individual learner characteristics, such as personality type, although a possible correlation was first suggested some time ago (Allport, 1966; Burt & Dulay, 1977) and more recently (Abraham & Vann, 1987; Rifkin, 2000; Tudor, 1996). Yet, interdisciplinary research has already shown clearly that beliefs are fairly stable in the populations that have been tracked over time, and that they are a real part of people's personality (Furnham et al., 1985; Langston & Sykes, 1997; Pratt, 1980), and, as mentioned earlier, intertwined with such factors as their identity, self-concept, and self-esteem (Epstein, 1990).

So far, attempts to answer the riddle of beliefs' origins and shaping factors in the literature have produced a number of explanations. Some are results of empirical research, though many refer to inference, anecdotal evidence, or generalized assumptions. The origins of learning beliefs have been assumed to be acquired consciously as well as unconsciously (Larsen-Freeman, 2001) and derive from a number of origins at various stages of one's life. Research has shown that beliefs about learning are a fairly stable body of knowledge (Arnold, 1999; Dweck, 1999; Nespor, 1987), which develops early in elementary and secondary school children (Chin & Brewer, 1993; Paris & Byrnes, 1989), and mid-to-late adolescence (Cantwell, 1998; Schommer, 1993), or by the time a student gets to college (Weinstein, 1989).

Factors that have been thought to determine or influence learner beliefs are numerous and include:

1. family and home background (Dias, 2000; Schommer, 1990, 1994);
2. cultural background (Alexander & Dochy, 1995);
3. classroom/social peers (Arnold, 1999);
4. interpretations of prior repetitive experiences (Little, Singleton & Slivius, 1984; Gaoyin & Alvermann, 1995; Kern, 1995; Roberts, 1992), and
5. individual differences such as gender (Siebert, 2003) and personality (Furnham, Johnston & Rawles, 1985; Langston & Sykes, 1997).

In addition, Rifkin's (2000) 3-year BALLI study found that the level of language instruction, the nature of language studied, and the type of educational institution also played a role in shaping learner's beliefs, but that "individual learner differences such as personality . . . may play just as or more important role than the factors considered in this study" (p. 407).

Another shaping factor is cultural difference deriving from learner backgrounds. For example, Prudie, Hattie and Douglas (1996) found "clear differences" between Australian and Japanese high school students' conceptions of learning (p. 25), while Tumposky (1991) compared the beliefs of Soviet and American students and found:

> *[C]ulture does contribute to the belief system . . . in ways which may relate to motivation and strategy selection, but may not be as potent as a force as other factors, such as previous experience or preferred [learning] style. (p. 62)*

Truitt (1995) found that Korean university students studying EFL held different beliefs than those in Horwitz's (1987, 1988) original study both of Americans studying foreign languages and of international students studying English in the U.S. The beliefs reported by Truitt's study were also different than those of other research (Park, 1995; Yang, 1992, 1999). Truitt interpreted these differences as possibly culturally based. However, Horwitz (1999) concluded that it was premature to explain inter-group belief differences in terms of culture; the differences likely reflect the relative status of language learning in the various countries and indicate that social, political, and economic forces can also influence learner beliefs (Dias, 2000; Horwitz, 1999). Further, she notes that if significant intra-group differences in beliefs exist, these could also be explained in terms of learning setting and individual characteristics, which may include personality.

In fact, a number of studies found beliefs to be related to such stable factors as one's personality traits. In early psychological literature, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) reviewed a number of studies in which personal factors (trait inferences) played a major role in the formation of inferential beliefs. More recently Langston and Sykes (1997) found that that the "Big Five" traits of personality (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, openness) strongly related to subjects' general beliefs about people and the world. Furnham et al. (1985) found a close relationship between personality and beliefs in a study of demographic and other factors that predicted peoples' beliefs in the heredity versus environmental determinants of specific features of human nature. Moreover, Pratt (1980) found that effects of cultural belief differences depend on personality and vice-versa.

To this end, a study by Alexander and Dochy (1994) examined subjects' personal theories of what constitutes knowledge and beliefs, what factors shape these beliefs, and whether these were believed to be stable or subject to change. The sample consisted of 54 adults. The researchers classified the conditions that shaped one's beliefs, presented by their respondents, into factors that appeared to influence one's beliefs. Specifically, 101 factors were generated by the adults in their sample, classified into five categories:

- information/knowledge (32%)
- education/experience (31%)
- personality (21%)
- nature of beliefs (11%)
- "other" (6%)

It is interesting that approximately one in five responses fell under the "personality" category, indicating that subjects believed personality traits to be the key factor in shaping beliefs. The analysis of results revealed interesting trends; within the category of education/experience influence on beliefs, the adults noted that changes in beliefs were contingent on the age or maturity of the believer. To a number of respondents, whether beliefs changed or not, involved aspects of personality (e.g., emotional state, self-esteem, patience) of the belief-holders, and whether they were willing to be open-minded and questioning about their beliefs. A quotation from one of the expert study participants succinctly concluded: "Beliefs are changeable, if you can change the propositions with which the beliefs are entangled. So I am suggesting that they are not easily changed" (Alexander & Dochy, 1994, p. 239).

Yet, little research has been done that involves investigations into the stability of beliefs and effects of instructional interventions based on students' beliefs about language learning. Peacock's (2001) longitudinal study investigated changes in the beliefs about language learning held by 146 trainee ESL teachers over their 3-year program at the City University of Hong Kong. It was hoped that while trainees might have had some mistaken ideas about language learning at the beginning of the program, these beliefs would change as they studied TESL methodology. Data were collected using the BALLI, and upon its analysis Peacock reported, "Disturbingly, no significant changes were found" (2001, p. 1).

This research has shown that subjects failed to "update" their beliefs in response to new evidence with bearing on previously held beliefs. In cognitive theory, for beliefs to be "updated," a certain condition exists namely:

> *[O]n the assumption that prior beliefs are largely true, new prospective beliefs are examined for consistency with prior beliefs, since a necessary condition of a belief being true is consistency with all other true beliefs. (Goldman, 1986, p. 100)*

This represents a significant potential complication and raises ethical concerns, as until now language teachers were assumed to be able to simply take on the role of educational "psychotherapists'" and rid students of their "irrational" and "destructive" beliefs. However, Mantle-Bromley (1995) notes that "we do not yet know enough about the nature of incoming students' beliefs to design effective curricular intervention addressing those beliefs (p. 377).

Furthermore, since learner attitudes and beliefs about language learning "may be quite well entrenched" (Kern, 1995, p. 76), intertwined in stable personality factors (Furnham, Johnson & Rawles, 1985; Langston & Sykes, 1997), and resistant to change (Weinstein, 1994), they may not automatically alter when learners merely become exposed to new teaching methodologies. Paradoxically, while Holec (1981) claims that "a deconditioning process is necessary for students to rid themselves of ineffective and harmful preconceived notions of language learning" (p. 27), Weinstein (1994) reports that "a number of students professed a goal of resisting new information that might conflict with their existing beliefs" (p. 298), and warns that the ramifications of such personal intentions can have serious consequences for trying to change students' conceptions.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This paper has attempted to illuminate the complex nature of beliefs, including the social, cultural, contextual, cognitive, affective, and personal factors that shape them. It has provided a synopsis of research conducted on the beliefs of second and foreign language learners in various contexts, using a number of approaches. It has also outlined a few interdisciplinary studies which could provide a foundation for further research into learner beliefs. It is argued that such a foundation is crucial if we are to address beliefs in the classroom context and fully understand their impact.

Specifically, research questions that should be addressed concern:

1. the effectiveness of possible intervention methods, particularly, if beliefs about language learning are found to be related to such stable factors as personality traits;
2. whether intervention methods should be implemented overtly or covertly;
3. which theory or approach should be used in possible intervention methods;
4. whether language teachers are qualified to deliver intervention measures; and,
5. what consequences will such "cognitive therapy" have on the learners, given that beliefs may be resistant to change?

Woods (2003) admits, "[A]s yet, we have not had a great deal of studying the success or failure in producing a restructuring of beliefs" (p. 226), pointing the problematic nature of incorporating change into classroom pedagogy.

So far, Mantle-Bromley (1995) presents the only intervention study to date having a theory-based approach (attitude change theory) in a foreign language classroom setting. However, as pointed out earlier, not all beliefs are attitude-driven, and therefore cannot be changed merely by addressing the belief-holder's attitudes. Beliefs are complex in nature and, as shown here, are shaped by multiple factors. Moreover, there is evidence of a progressive construction and crystallization of beliefs about learning, and such beliefs are argued to influence increasingly the more situationally-specific learning behavior (Cantwell, 1998), where this situation specificity could easily reflect a language learning context.

More research is needed in this area to determine to what extent (if at all) can and should various classroom intervention methods be applied in order to bring about change in learner's beliefs about language learning. Mainly, research needs to address the question of the extent of stability of language learner beliefs, particularly if they are found to be intertwined with such stable individual differences as personality, as suggested by various cognitive-psychological studies. However, to achieve such a foundation requires an understanding of the broader theories and interdisciplinary research on beliefs outside the boundaries of the SLA field.

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