

Understanding the Construct of Learner Beliefs about Language Learning

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Abstract

Language learning is a complex phenomenon involving multiple cognitive, affective, social and cultural influences (Izzo, 1981). With the recent learner-centered approach to teaching, researchers and practitioners are more focused on the cognitive and affective makeup of the learners that shapes their learning process. One such factor is the set of beliefs that language learner possess regarding the target language, target community, or the language learning process in general. This paper dissects the edifice of language learners' beliefs about language learning (process) by critically discussing its conceptual foundations based on a synthesis of prior research. This includes the different approaches that have been taken in studying the language learners' beliefs about language learning (BLLs) and the studied effect of BLLs on learner achievement, learners' use of learning strategies, and learner autonomy. The study condenses the pedagogical implications of the awareness of learners' BLLs among learners and teachers and the possible influence that these BLLs may have on the learners' language learning. The suggestions are put forward that the metacognitive knowledge of language learners and an empathetic attention of teachers to learners' BLLs can maximize learner achievement.

Keywords: *Learner beliefs, learner autonomy, language learning*

Introduction

With the widening enthusiasm of applied linguists in language ideologies, there has been an increased interest in studying the interplay of multiple layers of factors in language learning. The *restive problematization of the given* (Pennycook, 2002) is an essential part of applied linguistics and emphasizes that the process of teaching and learning is more than the overt proceedings and performances carried out in the classroom. Social and cognitive variables of learners play a crucial role in the language learning process (Bacon & Finnemann, 1990). Learners' set of beliefs about language learning (BLLs) is one such socio-cognitive factor that determines their journey of the language learning process. Through the analysis of literature on BLLs, this paper explores the major approaches and trends in the existing research in the field. The paper proceeds on to discuss the potential role of BLLs in the language learning process based on theoreticians' recommendations.

Dissecting the Construct of Beliefs about Language Learning

Researchers have defined the construct of 'beliefs' in different ways. Some focused on them as pure cognitive constructs (Kalaja, 1995; Wenden, 1987) while others highlighted the social and cultural situatedness of beliefs (Barcelos, 2003; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996) on the basis that

these beliefs are "born out of our interactions with others and with our environment" (Barcelos, 2003, p. 8).

BLLs have also been described in various ways. Horwitz (1987) and Kuntz (1996a) explain them as preconceived ideas or notions about different aspects of second language acquisition (SLA) that the learners bring to their language learning classes. Victori and Lockhart (1995) define beliefs as "general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing learning and about the nature of language learning" (p.224). Bernat and Gvozdenko (2005) presented a more comprehensive definition that explains how learners' BLLs are different than learners' other beliefs,

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. (p. 1).

Language beliefs are influenced and shaped by a myriad of factors that include past learning experience, cultural background, and social and political contexts of language learning. While some beliefs are unique in each individual; certain beliefs appear to be shared (Campbell et. al., 1993). Although, it has been established that learners' beliefs do play a crucial role in the language learning process, yet very little is known as to how exactly these beliefs affect language learning (Horwitz, 1987).

There has been much overlap and confusion between the construct of beliefs and knowledge in past. Wenden is one of the pioneers to set up theoretical foundations of beliefs as a metacognitive construct. He (1987) initially equated *metacognitive knowledge* with learner beliefs. But in his later theorizing (1999), he argued that learner beliefs are a subset of learner's metacognitive knowledge that consists of "information learners acquire about their learning" (p. 436). Though in his opinion beliefs are held stronger and are related to one's values more than the otherwise metacognitive knowledge. He argues that beliefs are dynamic in nature that can either be acquired unconsciously through imitation and observation or consciously in interaction with explicit discussions. While differentiating knowledge and beliefs, Wenden (1999) argued, "Beliefs are viewed as individual subjective understandings, idiosyncratic truths, which are often value related and characterized by a commitment not present in knowledge" (p. 517). Whereas, he saw knowledge as "factual, objective information acquired through formal learning" (p. 517).

Riley (1997) talks about BLLs with the distinction Beliefs about Talk (BATs) and Beliefs about Language Learning (BALLs). Inspired from Giles, et al (1992), he frames BATs as the shared group ideas about the appropriateness and patterns of interaction that vary from one culture to the other. These BATs also contain beliefs about what language to use when and what code is appropriate for what expressions. Whereas, his notion of BALLs is equivalent to Horwitz's concept of BLLs that shows beliefs specific to language learning.

Categorizing learners' beliefs about language learning, Victori and Lockhart (1995) identifies two types of beliefs: *insightful beliefs* that successful learners hold and the *negative or limited beliefs* which poorer learners hold. Because of their binary description, their categories are too limited to encompass the complex nature of learners' beliefs. Yet these categories lie implicit in many research studies and in researcher's interpretations of language beliefs that view them either "enabling" or "detrimental" (Horwitz, 1988).

Approaches to Research in Learner Beliefs

As complex as they are, BLLs have been conceived and researched in a variety of ways. By studying the existing research, Barcelos (2003) presented three possible approaches that have been or can be used to study learner beliefs about language learning that are Normative, metacognitive, and contextual approaches. *Normative approach* to examining beliefs is the one that views learner beliefs as the indicators of the students' behavior such as being an autonomous learner, success in language learning, the use of learning strategies based on beliefs and so on. This approach views beliefs primarily as myths, preconceived notions or misconceptions that generally serves as a hindrance in the learning process. Therefore, studies conducted under normative approach have primarily presumed BLLs to be erroneous and counterproductive (Holec, 1987; Horwitz 1988).

These studies mainly use Likert-scale type questionnaires and data analysis is usually through descriptive statistics. The most widely used questionnaire in this regard is BALLI (Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory) by Elaine Horwitz, the pioneer in systematically studying learner and teacher BLLs (Kuntz, 1996). BALLI has 3 versions depending on the setting it is used in: BALLI for foreign language teachers (1985), BALLI for ESL students (1987), and BALLI for foreign language students (1988). All BALLI scales focus on beliefs in 5 primary areas: foreign language aptitude, difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation and expectations. Researchers either used BALLI in its original or modified form (Abdolazadeh & Nia, 2014; Alsamaani, 2014; Kern, 1995; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Park, 1995; Rifkin, 2000; Tumposky, 1991; Yang, 1992) or created their own scale (Campbell et al., 1993; Cotterall, 1995; Kuntz, 1996b; Mori, 1997; Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Tanaka, 2004). The primary objective of these studies is the identification of prevailing BLLs in learners.

Metacognitive approach to examining beliefs is the one that views learner beliefs as metacognitive knowledge, advocated mainly by Wenden (1987). The implied assumption is that "the students' metacognitive knowledge also constitutes of their 'theories in action' that help them to reflect on what they are doing and to develop potential for learning" (Wenden, 1987, p. 112). The studies with this approach use self-reports and semi-structured interviews with the belief that learners do think about their learning process and can articulate some of their beliefs. Content analysis is used to gather learner beliefs from these verbal accounts. Some studies incorporate questionnaires as well to triangulate their data. There have been fewer studies (Victori, 1992; Victori & Lockhart, 1995; Wenden, 1987) conducted in this kind of research as compared to normative studies (Barcelos, 2003).

Contextual approach is the relatively more recent perspective that views BLLs as dynamic, socially constructed, and contextualized phenomena (Barcelos, 2003). Such studies generally use a variety of data collection sources like open-ended interviews (Christison & Krahne, 1986; Victori, 1999), classroom observations (Allen, 1996; Barcelos, 1995; De Costa, 2011; Kern, 1995; Zhong, 2008), diaries and narratives (Miller & Ginsberg, 1995), metaphor analysis (Ellis, 1999, 2001), retrospective self-reports (Wenden, 1991) and discourse analysis (Holec 1996; Riley, 1989; Kalaja, 1995; Grigoletto, 2000). All of these sources help the researcher to explore and interpret students' beliefs in their contexts with an emic perspective. Thus, beliefs are recognized as being shaped by students' experiences and environment, rather than being sole metacognitive entities. Ellis (1999) analyzed different metaphors to study learners' beliefs (that he calls perceptions) about their distinct language learning experience. Riley (1994) has also suggested the use

of metaphors to study learner beliefs in his 3 approaches to investigating learner beliefs (that he calls ‘representations’). Kalaja (1995) was the first one to propose a discursive approach to the investigation of beliefs.

Encapsulating Existing Research in BLLs

Most research studies in BLLs have tried to enumerate prevalent beliefs of learners rather than investigating the *how* and *why* of their pedagogical significance. In spite of the fact that most of BLL studies are quantitative in nature, most researchers (Christison & Krahne, 1986; Kajala, 1995; Kern, 1995; Wetherell, 1987) have argued that beliefs can not be comprehensively studied quantitatively because they are immensely dynamic constructs of delicate layers of cultures, norms, values, preferences, experiences and so on. It has been argued that questionnaire data can help find “consistency rather than variability” (Wetherell, 1987, p. 197) and they do not produce discourse that is crucial in understanding the complex nature of beliefs (Kajala, 1995). Such researchers recommend the use of multiple tools for data collections and multiple methods to provide a contextualized picture of the complex phenomenon of beliefs.

Most research agrees with Kalaja’s (1995) theory that language learning and learners’ BLLs are equally dynamic and socially constructed phenomena. While questionnaire studies can be good in assessing and comparing learner beliefs in groups, they may not prove very reliable in investigating individual beliefs. Kalaja also suggested to replace “mainstream” studies with “discursive” studies in studying learner beliefs. These discursive approaches include the examination of the learners’ stretch of talk or pieces of writing about different aspects of SLA. Kajala (1995) suggested that such naturalistic discourses that are “actual occasions of talk or writing” (Kajala, 1995, p. 197) can help understand the dynamic and contextualized learners’ beliefs about language learning.

Learners’ Beliefs in Shaping Language Learning Process

Success depends less on materials, techniques, and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom. (Stevick, 1980, p. 4)

Applied linguists have long been interested to explore what else goes on in the learning process other than the pedagogical practices. Yet, the interest in the metacognitive and affective constructs has expanded now since 1990s to their broader level of social side of these constructs. Most studies in learners’ BLLs have focused primarily on the identification of prevalent beliefs to examine the possible ways these beliefs affect the process of language learning. Although, these studies rarely make direct connection of BLLs to students achievements except a few (Diab, 2000; Ellis, 2002; Mori, 1999; Tanaka, 2004; Zhong, 2008), they certainly inform how these beliefs shape different aspects of language learning like the use of specific learning strategies (Abraham & Vann, 1987; Bacon & Finnemann, 1990; Erlbaum et al., 1993; Ghavamnia et al., 2011; Pratolo, 2019; Riley, 1997; Su, 1995; Yang, 1992), learner autonomy (Cotterall, 1999; Victori & Lockhart, 1995; Melvina & Suherdi, 2019; Wen & Johnson, 1997), motivation (Abu-Melhim, 2009; Kouritzin et al., 2009), attitudes (Kormos, et al., 2011) and teacher beliefs (Barcelos, 2000; Kern, 1995). Researchers have also tried to link BLLs with other variables less directly influencing learning process like emotions (Rodrigo, 2011), anxiety (Sadiq, 2017), personality traits (Bernat et al., 2009), gender (Al-Bataineh, 2019; Bacon & Finnemann, 1992; Bernat & Lloyd, 2007; Daif-Allah, 2012; Javid & Al-malki, 2018), self-efficacy (Genç et al., 2016; Stracke, 2016). These studies have explored many learning settings: foreign language learners in USA (Horwitz, 1988; Kern, 1995; Kuntz, 1996; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Tumposky, 1991), ESL learners in USA (Horwitz, 1987; Tumposky, 1991), EFL learners in other countries (Alsamaani, 2014;

Barcelos, 1995; Sakui & Gaies, 1999). Due to the limited space, this article has only analyzed a few vital ways that the research has shown BLLs influence learning process that include student achievement, the use of learning strategies, and achievement of learner autonomy.

Learners' Beliefs about Language Learning and Language Achievement

There have been relatively fewer efforts in studying the link between learners' BLLs and their language proficiency or achievement. But almost all of them have related a positive correlation between both constructs. For instance, Ehrman and Oxford's (1995) study on determiners of language learning success reported that Language proficiency was significantly correlated with the belief of learners that they can learn a language well. Similarly, the research of Abdolazadeh and Nia (2014) in Iran has found a positive correlation between language learning beliefs and language proficiency. On the contrary, there have been a few studies like Diab's (2000) study on Lebanese learners of English and French language and Tanaka's (2004) study in two different ESL and EFL settings where no significant relationship was found between learners' language proficiency and their BLLs.

Mori's (1999) study is among the first to compare epistemological beliefs about learning with learners' BLLs. He analyzed both sets of beliefs of 187 Japanese language learners in two US universities. He views learner beliefs as a "complex system consisting of multiple independent dimensions" (p. 381). His study explored the relationship between belief factors and achievement variables (exams, quizzes, course achievement and so on) to see whether a learner success can be attributed to his/her beliefs about learning and BLLs. This is also a normative study using a shorter version (40 items) of Schommer's (1995) questionnaire to examine epistemological beliefs and a 92 items questionnaire to study their language learning beliefs. His findings show that the learners' general beliefs about learning process were independent of their BLLs as no significant correlation was found between both types of learning beliefs. Though he found a modest yet significant correlation between learners' BLLs and their achievement in the language. Mori analyzes that this correlation can be interpreted in both ways: either successful learners develop a belief that the target language is easy or the learners who believe target language is easy become successful learners.

Moreover, Ellis (2008) reports on 3 different studies exploring the change of BLLs over time and their correlation with the developing language proficiency in those learners. One of the studies he reports on is his own research study (2002) in which he studied the learner beliefs through metaphor analysis of six L2 adult learners of German in England. Due to the perceived constraints in self-report methods (questionnaires and interviews), he used participants' personal diaries to extract metaphors of their language learning experience. Major metaphors of learning as a journey, as a puzzle, as a suffering, as a work were the basis of his conclusion that learners' major beliefs relate to the problems they had experienced while learning. These metaphors showed a constant struggle, both cognitively and affectively. These beliefs stated in the study are way different than what quantitative studies, primarily Horwitzian, have sought to measure. These beliefs are fears and struggles that the learners might be afraid to express directly as expected in normative studies of BLLs. One thing to mention here is the fact that Horwitz (1986) did talk of somewhat similar phenomenon through his construct of *foreign language anxiety (FLA)* but for that too, Horwitz tried to measure anxiety quantitatively through his scale *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)*.

The second study Ellis reports on is Tanaka's (2004) mixed methods research on Japanese English language learners' beliefs and their correlation with language proficiency. The study

used two discreet groups of learners: one group (n=63) studied ESL in New Zealand and the second group (n=63) studied EFL in Japan. A 27 item instrument was used (much similar to BALLI) that measured learners' beliefs about language learning twice (pretest and post-test). This data was complemented by the interviews of some learners at the end of the 12 weeks course and the diaries of 5 learners. Learners' proficiency was also tested twice through Oxford Placement Test (listening and grammar sections) and oral task completion. The beliefs of the group in New Zealand changed for more realistic and positive ends than the group in Japan. About the correlation of beliefs with proficiency development, there was very weak correlation as shown by the results. Quite unexpectedly, there was no significant difference of proficiency for the group living in the English speaking country (New Zealand) after a 12 weeks course other than a little improved speaking. The researcher does not clarify the objective behind the use of these two different groups of learners with two different backgrounds. Neither did he make any reference to the nature of socialization of the EFL learners in New Zealand that might affect their language proficiency.

Zhong's (2008) study is the third study discussed by Ellis (2008) that made use of a case-study of a migrant Chinese EFL learner in New Zealand to examine the change of beliefs during a 10-week course and to study the relationship between her BLLs and her proficiency. Zhong made use of two interviews, once in the beginning and the other at the end of the course, along with 3 classroom observations. The proficiency was measured by Oxford Placement Test, vocabulary tests, and oral narrative task. The participant gained more self-confidence and autonomy as a learner that changed his beliefs about self-efficacy. Her proficiency change was most obvious in her vocabulary. The researcher concluded it to be a significant correlation between her beliefs and proficiency. The conclusions are not sound due to the inherent weakness in the assumptions that her language achievement was *only* due to her positive beliefs or proper use of strategy.

Learners' Beliefs about Language Learning and Learning Strategies

Learning strategies can be very effective in facilitating the learning process for the learners as they enable them "to take command over their learning and to apply procedures that will assist them in retaining and using important language skills" (Chamot & O'Malley, 1990 as cited in Horwitz, 1987, p. 120). Learners make conscious or unconscious use of many learning strategies in the process of language learning. These strategies are adopted and modified based on the dynamic language belief system of the learner. Soon after the interest in BLLs was evoked, Wenden (1987) recognized the need of exploring the relationship of language learner beliefs and their choice of learning strategies. 1990s is primarily dominated by studies (Berg, & Dodd, 1993; Su, 1995; Yang, 1992; Riley, 1997) exploring the relationships between learner beliefs and learning strategies (as cited in Barcelos, 2003). While many studies concluded a significant role of learners' BLLs in the use of learning strategies (Abraham & Vann, 1987; Yang, 1992) few found that this is not the case (Su, 1995). Similarly, Abraham and Vann (1987) explain that learners' philosophy guides their approach to language learning. Their philosophy will be manifested "in observable (and unobservable) strategies and directly influence the degree of success learners achieve" (p. 96). In the words of Horwitz (1987),

The ultimate purpose of studying learner strategies is, of course, an applied one; researchers and teachers hope to determine which strategies are most effective and help students adopt more productive learning procedures. (p. 126)

Bacon and Finnemann (1990) conducted a study to evaluate the relationship between foreign language learners' perceptions of language learning strategies, motives, and attitudes with

their affective and cognitive responses to authentic (written or oral) input. They used a 100-item Likert scale questionnaire that was developed over 8 months period of piloting. Out of its 11 stable factors, six factors were about general perception of language learning attitudes and motivation while five were about authentic input. They claimed that beliefs may be self-fulfilling: "if a student is not interested in listening, his/her comprehension is likely to be impaired" (p. 469). They concluded that learning strategies and preferences for learning activities are closely connected to social and affective variables. The authors have failed to explain many terminologies. This is especially crucial for the major terms like "authentic input" which appears to be taken in the form of real-world communication in target language rather than classroom practice. Moreover, they have taken the term "beliefs" in a rather vague way by equating them with "perceptions". Replicating Yang 's (1992) study on Taiwanese university students and Liu's (2004) study on Taiwanese senior high school students, Chang and Shen (2010) examined the correlation of BLLs and the use of learning strategies among 250 junior high school EFL learners in Taiwan. In contrast to other two studies, Chang and Shen chose far off remote areas as the setting of the study, with the assumption that the countryside EFL learners have some 'erroneous' beliefs about language learning. They also explored whether learner variables like gender, extracurricular use of English, and the length of learning the language affect their beliefs and strategy use. They used Horwitz's BALLI (1988) and Oxford's SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning, 1990).

Even though the population of remote area was chosen with the hope of yielding higher or different reports of prevailing beliefs and strategy use, their results showed fairly consistent findings with those of Yang (1992) and Liu (2004) in almost all regards. They found moderate correlation ($p = .000$, $r = 0.444$) between the use of strategies and learners' BLLs. About different learner variables of gender, extracurricular use of English, and the length of learning the language, the results reported that strong overall beliefs and higher use of strategies were observed in females than males that is parallel to Bacon and Finnemann's (1992) findings. Similarly, stronger beliefs and higher use of strategies was observed in learners with extracurricular language learning than those who only studied English through curriculum, and in people learning English for longer time than beginners.

Learners' Beliefs about Language Learning and Learner Autonomy:

In SLA context, autonomy is referred to the learner's "ability to take responsibility of one's learning" (Victori & Lockhart, 1995, p. 223). Most normative style studies in exploring the relationship between learners' BLLs and autonomy view beliefs as a deficit and possible obstacle to the attainment of autonomy. Therefore, "learners are viewed, compared, and judged according to an ideal view of a good and autonomous learner" (Barcelos, 2003, p. 14). The implicit assumption from this point of view is that learners with *productive* beliefs will have successful learning strategies and behavior while learners with *unproductive* beliefs will have unsuccessful strategies and behavior. On the other hand, studies on metacognitive trend work with the belief that learner beliefs act consciously or unconsciously as the logic that determines learners' strategies and activities in gaining autonomy in language learning (Wenden, 1986a).

Victori and Lockhart (1995) have proposed the use of conscious metacognitive knowledge as an organized intervention in L2 teaching in the way of preparing the learners for their own autonomy, especially in self-directed language learning. He gives the example of two programs in which counselors made extensive use of this principle through "cyclic diagnosis of learners' beliefs about language learning preferred styles, learning needs and objectives in order to endow the learners with criteria for choosing optimum strategies, resources and activities for

their individualized programmes” (p. 223). Cotterall (1999) conducted a follow-up quantitative study of her earlier study (1995) to investigate the effect of 6 factors of language learning (role of the teacher, role of feedback, learner independence, learner confidence in study ability, experience of language learning, preference for learning strategies) on learner’s autonomy through assuming responsibility of their own learning. By using a questionnaire of diverse items, she aimed to examine’s learners’ beliefs about these factors to see their self-readiness in the learning process through factor analysis. She believed that these 6 factors are essential for gaining autonomy and she found that students’ beliefs about these factors were mostly significantly positive. The majority of students (76%) realized that their responsibility was more than the teacher whose role is to create opportunities for practice. Similarly, a large proportion of learners (96%) learners agreed that committing mistakes is a natural part of language learning and 82 % agreed that language learning takes a long time. Moreover the learners showed willingness to adopt a range of strategies in the learning process that shows another important element of autonomy. The only two strategies the participants were not confident about doing or employing are the self-analysis of progress and self-evaluation of errors. This showed a low perception about self-efficacy.

One thing missing in the study is the realization that beginner learners have lower self-efficacy than advanced learners. The study makes no reference to the proficiency level of the participants that keeps the findings incomplete in this sense. Unlike most of her contemporary researchers, Cotteralldoes not see language beliefs as a hindrance; rather she sees it as a source of providing useful information to teachers to frame their syllabus, classroom activities, pedagogical practices, and assessment strategies.

Extending the Concept of Learners’ Beliefs about Language Learning

Quite recently the literature has started focusing on the dynamic nature of learners’ beliefs and their social construction (Pan & Block, 2011). One study that studied learner beliefs in a contextualized way is by De Costa (2011). He conducted a year-long ethnographic case study (2008) on 5 immigrant ESL Learners in an English medium school in Singapore to explore the effect of language ideologies and ‘positioning’ on their learning outcomes. His view of positioning takes into account ‘intentional positioning’ (how learners positions themselves) and ‘interactive positioning’ (how learners positions others). Deriving from multiple sources of data (observations, interviews, and artifacts) and using multiple methods of studying language beliefs of one of the subjects, he concluded that beliefs can better be studied and understood contextually with the help of in-depth interviews of subjects’ opinions and his participants’ positioning had an impact on her language learning.

Another recent development is the etic approach to evaluating learners’ believes in contrast to the majority of BLL studies that have tried to study these beliefs from an emic perspective of what language learning is about. Researchers like Bonny Norton and Stephen May have gone a step farther to show a critical perspective that is heavily shaped by ideologies, experiences and power relationships around learners. Norton’s (1995) constructs of ”investment” emphasizes the need to address ”how relations of power in the social world affect learners’ access to the target language” (Norton, 2013, p. 2) and who holds the right to speak. May (2005) has also talked about the same right to speak through the minorities’ population who limit their language’s functionality due to the low prestige attached with it. These relations of power in the social structures define and shape the belief systems of language speakers and learners based on the identity they carry with themselves or the part of the imagined community they feel associated with. These critical studies have shown the outside perspective on the learners’ beliefs about their language,

language rights, investment, and right to speak in contrast to the traditional BLLs studies that focus on the learners' view points.

Pedagogical Implication

The research in language learner (and teacher) beliefs is critically related to applied linguistics. Research in BLL has shown consensus that the knowledge of learners' beliefs can be helpful in the learning and teaching process in many ways. Positive attitudes and beliefs lead to a more productive language learning while negative attitude and mistaken beliefs act like hindrances to the learning process (Horwitz, 1987; Vibulphol, 2004). One interesting thing to remember is the fact that beliefs are volatile and can be molded for the best of outcomes (Holec, 1987). As an applied linguist, it will be useful and essential "to determine how student beliefs change over the course of language instruction" (Horwitz, 1988, p. 291) and what brings about that change. Moreover, as shown by the research, it is utterly significant that learner (and teacher) beliefs should guide language instruction methodologies, instruction strategies, curriculum development, materials design, and program design (Kuntz, 1996). Researchers (Cotterall, 1999; Wenden, 1986a) have agreed that for successful learning, there has to be an awareness of learners' BLLs in the teachers and the learners themselves. This article discusses pedagogical implications of the knowledge of learners' beliefs about language learning in three categories: Learners' self-awareness, teachers' awareness, and ways to modify these beliefs.

Learners' Self-Knowledge of Learners' Beliefs about Language Learning

Research (Riley, 1996; Cotterall, 1995) confirms that learners' beliefs may directly determine their attitudes, motivation, and behavior that affect language learning process. This is why learners' self-knowledge of these beliefs is utterly important to target their energies towards the right goal and through the right path of action. Horwitz (1987) suggests that the students' (and teachers') language beliefs should be made available to their conscious knowledge through discussion and sharing so that they can compare their beliefs with others. She has suggested the use of instrument like BALLI for language courses and teaching methods courses. This will not only help learners drive their erroneous beliefs away but will also help teachers frame their teaching content and methodology based on this data.

One significant way in which the self-knowledge of learners' BLLs can facilitate their language learning is through the proper use of effective strategies that erroneous beliefs can hinder (Horwitz, 1987). Learners determine the use of different strategies based on their BLLs. These strategies are key to the effectiveness of learning process. By affecting beliefs, the teachers can influence the strategy use (or vice-versa). For example, if a student holds the belief that using wrong language forms is not acceptable, he will probably avoid speaking most of the time. Quoting a study by Champagne (1980) in Canada, Horwitz (1988) states how the French teachers and learners shared a belief in the hopelessness of achieving phonetic accuracy. Not surprisingly, the learners failed to achieve native-like accents.

Moreover, learners' motivation is highly affected by their BLLs (Abu-Melhim, 2009). It is possible to use these beliefs towards encouraging both instrumental and integrative motivation, though instrumental motivation is hard to instill when the target language does not offer much gains. Being a teacher of a critical language in United States, I have to continuously motivate my students about the worth of the target language in today's world of world-wide communication.

Teachers' Knowledge of Learners' Beliefs about Language Learning

In addition to learners' self-knowledge, teachers also need to know their learners' prevalent BLLs because these beliefs shape the attitudes of learners. Parallel to Horwitz' (1987) sug-

gestion, Vibulphol (2004) suggests that an understanding of learners' BLLs can help language teachers enhance learners' success through promoting facilitative beliefs and refining debilitating beliefs. Although I personally believe in the fact that "generic student and generic teacher do not exist" (Kern, 1995, p. 82), yet I do believe that the exploration of learners' language beliefs can give helpful insights to the teachers to make the learning process more effective through fostering "a reflective partnership between students and teachers" (Kern, 1995, p. 82).

These beliefs become visible in language classrooms through instances of resistance by a student to an instructional activity or a teaching approach. Thus, the teachers can plan the teaching materials, activities, and methodology based on this knowledge. In the teaching contexts in Pakistan, students have a belief that a good teacher holds an authority in class and traditional GTM (Grammar Translation Method) is considered to be an effective teaching approach. Communicative tasks are assigned only one day in a week and if a teacher brings in more communication, the students believe that he/she is not prepared enough for grammar teaching. Similarly, these beliefs can inform the process of syllabus design (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005). Campbell et al. (1993) has also emphasized,

The teacher who is aware of the 'baggage', both good and bad, brought by students to class on the first day will be better prepared to tailor both the methodology and the teaching style to fit student needs. (p. 29)

Cotterall (1999) suggested that teacher should take some time out to examine their learners' beliefs as this is a crucial intervention in reinforcing the learners' self-efficacy that is an important factor in language learning. She believes that many L2 students feel lost in classes because they do not have an initial belief in their own self-efficacy. Horwitz (1988) also explained how learners' self-efficacy is influenced by their beliefs by stating, "adults who believe in superiority of younger learners probably begin language learning with fairly negative expectations of their own ultimate success" (p. 283). Whereas, autonomous learners are more likely to have a *robust sense of self* (Breen and Mann, 1997).

Moreover, another important aspect of teachers' identification and management of learners' BLLs is to deal with the mismatch between the expectations that the learners bring to language classes and the reality that might not appear too optimistic in the beginning. This mismatch might bring frustration, lack of motivation, anxiety, and often abandoning the study of L2 (Kern, 1995). By identifying the learners' BLLs, the teachers can provide thoughtful guidance to set realistic goals for the learners to avoid future disillusionment.

Modification of Learners' BLLs for Better Ends

Keeping in mind the view that language beliefs can be impediments to the learning process, the question is how to modify them! But, there is no clear-cut or easy prescription for this. Holec (1980 as cited in Horwitz, 1988) calls it a *deconditioning process* or the psychological preparation to get rid of the negative beliefs they possess about their language learning.

Mantle-Bromley (1995) discusses the attitude change theory to bring a positive change in the attitude and beliefs of learners through reframing classroom curriculum and practices. Based on Gardner's (1985) Socio-educational Model of Language Learning, his explanation of the theory states 3 components of attitudes: affect (emotional reactions), cognition (beliefs and knowledge), and behavior (observable actions). Based on Triandis' (1971) Change Theory, he explains that attitude change takes place when there comes a dissonance between these components. For example, an EFL learner who dislikes British community, believes that they are not good people and speaks against their colonialism, will tend to change his attitude if any of these components

become contrary of other. If such a learner falls in love with a British person, his affect has come in dissonance with his cognition and behavior. This brings a change in the attitude of the learner, and other components as well. I believe that beliefs and attitudes can be molded for fruitful and constructive gains if the teacher gets to identify the prevalent beliefs of his/her learners and tries to bring in elements that may change the discouraging beliefs and attitudes of the learners. In my opinion, the most effective way to modify erroneous beliefs is to present the learner with new information and new pedagogical practices that prove those beliefs wrong (Horwitz, 1988). In this regard, the use of selective documentary videos, cultural artifacts and written material of the target culture in classrooms can enhance positive beliefs in the language learners by broadening their vision. Moreover, it is helpful to develop a rapport with one's learners and create an atmosphere of trust and respect in the classroom. It not only strengthens students' self-confidence and self-esteem but also gives a placebo effect to the errors as being process of learning rather than signs of incapacities. Mantle-Bromley concludes his study by suggesting, "If we attend to the affective and cognitive components of students' attitudes as well as develop defendable pedagogical techniques, we may be able to increase both the length of time students commit to language study and their chances of success in it" (p. 383).

One thing that I am personally interested is to explore the influence of learners' beliefs about target community on their motivation, attitude, and performance in the target language. It is interesting to see how languages of prestige are learnt with high motivation even when the learners have adverse feelings towards the target language and target community. In my experience, my EFL learners in Pakistan are highly motivated to learn English based on the instrumental value they attach to it as the language of power and progress. In class discussions with my EFL students, I noticed a resentful attitude towards English language and its importance in the education system and practical life. The recent political situation with America has mingled with their prior distrust for British who colonized that area for about 100 years. I wish to study if the attitude of Pakistani EFL learners towards these English-speaking communities shape or influence their attitude to, motivation for, and beliefs about English language learning.

Conclusion

What they [learners] believe will influence their learning much, much more than what we believe, because it is their beliefs that hold sway over their motivations, attitudes and learning procedures. (Riley, 1997, p. 128). Learners' beliefs about language learning are among the significant factors of language learning that are deeply rooted in the learners' (and teachers') lives. They are a complex, socially constructed, continuous, relational and unfinalizable construct that equates these beliefs with "a changing stream that is characterized by continuous interaction of human thought with our personal, social, and material environment" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 39). This complicated structure and the *unfinalizability* (Bakhtin, 1993) makes it difficult to identify and understand them.

The abundant research studies conducted in BLLs have shown how significant it can be in the teaching and learning process to know these learners' beliefs. The knowledge of these beliefs is important to be for both teachers and learners to help learners become "thoughtful, independent, strategic language learners" (Mori, 1999, p. 407). These beliefs can spread the *can-do spirit* in the language classrooms. On a concluding note, the statement of Campbell et al. (1993) is apt to condense the whole discussion,

Knowledge about student beliefs can help teachers make intelligent decisions about how best to adapt methodology and teaching style to achieve what should be the ultimate goal of today's language teacher – to meet student learning and communication needs. (p. 37)

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