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Routledge Handbook on Language Awareness (P. Garrett and J. Cots, eds.)

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REVISITING RESEARCH ON L2 LEARNER BELIEFS: LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD

Since the mid-1990s beliefs held by learners have started figuring in books about second language (L2) learning and teaching, discussed as one important individual difference (e.g., Ellis, 1994). In the beginning of the 2000s beliefs were viewed as one of the contributions learners brought into the classroom (Breen, 2001), along with cognitive styles, attitudes, learning strategies, and motivation, or as one characteristic of the psychology of an L2 learner (Dörnyei, 2005, revised later as Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). As such, beliefs play an important role in learners' awareness of their approaches in learning L2s.

This chapter focuses on beliefs about language, and language learning and teaching held by L2 learners (for beliefs held by teachers, see Borg, this volume, and for folk linguistics, see Preston, this volume). We have written a few reviews of the field before (e.g., Barcelos, 2003a; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2011; Kalaja, Barcelos, Aro, & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2016, pp. 8–13) but these will be updated here.

The chapter is organized as follows. In the first part we look back by critically reviewing the developments in research on L2 learner beliefs over the past few decades: definitions and approaches and their underlying assumptions, and ways of collecting and analyzing data. In the second part we look forward by summarizing a number of much more recent empirical studies carried out within the contextual approaches. In addition, we discuss their implications from the perspective of researchers by pointing out directions for further research and from the perspective of practitioners by addressing language awareness.

LOOKING BACK

In this first part we review the beginnings of research on L2 learner beliefs: terminology and approaches adopted by researchers. Broadly speaking, the term *learner beliefs* refers to the conceptions, ideas, and opinions learners have about L2 learning and teaching and language itself. Learner beliefs have, however, been studied from various perspectives and under numerous terms (for a review, see, e.g., Barcelos, 2003a), language ideologies and cognitions being among the latest ones in the field. The approaches to research on L2 learner beliefs have different definitions of what beliefs are, and, indeed, whether the focus of the study is called "beliefs" at all. Importantly, these definitions will affect how beliefs are studied and why they are considered worth studying. Definitions thus have a bearing on what the design and aims of a given study are. Beliefs are not an original concept in Applied Linguistics; it has been adopted from fields such as Anthropology, Philosophy and Education. L2 learner beliefs have intrigued applied linguists since the mid-1980s, starting with the pioneering work of Elaine Horwitz and Anita Wenden. Since its incursion in Applied Linguistics, the ways of investigating beliefs can be claimed to have become more and more all-

encompassing.

The complex task of analyzing and summarizing methodologies used in research on L2 learner beliefs has been taken up by several researchers, and it has been suggested that research can be grouped under the following approaches:

- Mainstream and discursive approaches (Kalaja, 1995);
- Normative, metacognitive and contextual approaches (Barcelos, 2003a);
- Psycho-cognitive, sociocultural and ecological approaches (Bernat, 2009); and
- Traditional and contextual approaches (Kalaja et al. 2016, pp. 8–13).

Terminology notwithstanding, we can say that initially the focus of research and analysis was on finding out **what** students believed about L2 learning and teaching. Later on, the focus shifted to **how** beliefs develop and vary in context.

The beginnings

Research on L2 learner beliefs builds on a discussion of what makes a good language learner. In the 1970s, researchers became interested in reviewing what kinds of learner characteristics (attitudes, motivation, aptitude, etc.) promoted success in learning an L2 (e.g., Rubin, 1975). Thus, learners' viewpoints or beliefs about language learning began to be seen as important. Beliefs would function as a filter, influencing learners' understandings of themselves, other people, and their surroundings (e.g., Abelson, 1986), and thereby become important stimuli for action. Beliefs could thus be good indicators of the decisions learners make (McDonough, 1995) and influence how they approach the task of learning an L2. This interest in learner characteristics and their possible effect on the learning of L2s gave rise to the traditional approach.

Traditional approach

A study by Horwitz (e.g., 1988) marks the beginning of one line of research within this approach, and it launched a novel research instrument to the field: a questionnaire known as Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory, or **BALLI**. *Beliefs* were defined as preconceived notions that students have about L2 learning. The aim of the study was to find out the possible effect of beliefs on learners' expectations and language learning strategies. If students should hold any beliefs that might prevent them from learning an L2, it was considered a teacher's responsibility to make them aware of these.

Studies by Wenden (e.g., 1987) constitute another pioneering line of research within the traditional approach. The studies were conducted with self-directed learning in mind, and made use of semi-structured interviews. This made it possible for learners to elaborate on issues in their own words – instead of ticking an item in a questionnaire (as was the case with BALLI). Beliefs could be judged based on whether they promoted learner autonomy or not. They were seen as a subset of *metacognitive knowledge*, consisting of both knowledge and beliefs (Wenden, 1991), forming a system of ideas that develops early on and remains fairly stable, although it may change over time.

Since the original studies conducted within the traditional approach, BALLI especially, has been widely replicated, adapted, or used as part of more complex research designs until the present day. However,

research from this kind of starting point has received criticism, firstly, for its perspective on the learning and teaching of L2s being etic; secondly, for studies being conducted very much out-of-context; thirdly, for its assumptions about the nature of beliefs, viewed as if possessed by a learner and residing in his or her mind; and fourthly, for methodological problems (e.g., respondents may interpret questionnaire items differently).

Contextual approach(es)

The contextual approach, or rather approach**es** (e.g., Barcelos, 2003a; Kalaja et al., 2016) grew as a reaction to the traditional approach and its criticism. These approaches see beliefs as embedded in students' contexts and use an array of diverse methodologies to study the learning of L2s from an **emic** perspective (instead of an etic one, as was the case with the traditional approach). Thus, ethnographic classroom observations, narratives in different modalities, and interviews have been some of the data collection methods used. These make it possible to gain insights into the learning and teaching of L2s as subjectively experienced by learners, with an emphasis on their personal meanings and interpretations.

One of the first and by now classic studies carried out within the contextual approaches is a study by Barcelos (e.g., 2003b). The study had Dewey's philosophy as its starting point, and its aim was to compare and contrast the beliefs held by three teachers of English and three of their students, originally from Brazil. The study took place at a language institute in the southern USA. A number of different data collection instruments were used, including ethnographic observation in the classroom, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and field notes. It turned out that teachers and students held different beliefs about issues such as the atmosphere in the classroom, the roles of teachers and learners, and the teaching of grammar. In addition, teachers influenced students' beliefs, and vice versa. The study showed how students' and teachers' beliefs are embedded in their experiences as their ways of interacting, adjusting, and readjusting to the environment. In this interaction, both teachers and students interpret each other's beliefs and actions, which help shape new experiences, and which in turn shape their beliefs. To sum up, the study provided evidence for beliefs being dynamic and context-dependent in nature.

A **discursive** line of research within the contextual approaches has its origins in the social sciences (e.g., Edwards, 1997), being introduced to the field of Applied Linguistics in the late 1990s. This involved a shift in focus from cognition to discourse. L2 learner beliefs are viewed as discursively constructed on specific occasions of talking or writing instead of assuming these to reside in a learner's mind and so be observable only by indirect means (Kalaja, 1995). Language thus gets a bigger role than in previous studies: it does not just reflect (with distortions) what goes on in the mind but through it the social world around the learner is constructed out of the mental stuff, including beliefs (and, e.g., motivation and attitudes). A study by Kalaja (e.g., 2003) on learner beliefs from this kind of starting point is a pioneering study. High-school graduates were asked to share their experiences of taking a high-stakes English test by keeping an oral diary and taking part in discussions. The beliefs held by the students turned out to be complex and dynamic, and shaped by the interactions they were part of, and used for different purposes in their argumentation. Studies along these lines refrain from saying anything about beliefs say in relation to learner actions, as the focus remains on discourse.

Other lines of research within the contextual approaches emphasize the contextual nature of L2 learner beliefs in their environment rather than in discourse. **Dialogism** is arguably the most discourse-oriented one of these, and it has been inspired by the ideas of the Bakhtin Circle (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981). Like the traditional

approach, dialogism focuses on the individual; and like in the discursive line of research, the object of study in dialogism is written or spoken discourse. However, dialogical research does not consider beliefs the property of the individual, nor does it limit its scope to text only. Beliefs are conceptualized as shared, necessarily both social and individual, and consequently contextual. Beliefs reflect the individual, social, and institutional viewpoints, or *voices,* the learner has interacted with during his or her life (Dufva, 2003). Learner beliefs also comprise both rational and emotional elements. This is evident, e.g., in the study by Dufva (2003) carried out as part of a longitudinal research project in Finland. When learners were interviewed about their experiences of learning English as a foreign language, many of the incidents recounted involved strong emotions such as anxiety or pride of accomplishment.

Probably the most widely used of the environmentally oriented views are the various **sociocultural** approaches, based on the ideas of Vygotsky (1978). These approaches focus on how beliefs are (co)constructed and mediated in social interactions and stress the role of other people and artifacts (or social tools) in beliefs, and the importance of speech in this process. While sharing the interest of the traditional approach in how beliefs affect actions, sociocultural approaches maintain that beliefs be seen as a fundamentally contextual phenomenon: finding out what influences beliefs is more important than mapping the beliefs themselves. A study by Alanen (2003) is a classic one from this kind of starting point. It focused on young Finns learning English as a foreign language from Grade 3 (or age nine) onwards, and discussed the sociocultural concept of *mediation* in relation to beliefs, suggesting that beliefs could be viewed as a type of mediational means. Beliefs would thus mediate human activity in the same way as signs and symbols. If learner beliefs function as a tool, they shape the action of learning. However, some beliefs are merely content items that are repeated. Some beliefs are thus recycled in social interaction and others (also) used as mediating tools for action.

Another term to rise out of the contextual emphasis in research on beliefs is the **ecological way** of thinking (e.g., van Lier, 2004). First a close relative of the sociocultural approaches, it later became associated particularly with complexity theory, which we will discuss in the second part of this chapter.

To sum up, within the contextual approaches, beliefs are co-constructed in interaction with others and are related to language, since language mediates all interactions and actions. As such, they are part of a socialization process of learners becoming members of specific communities. Thus, they are connected to the macro-context of ideologies, power structures, and statuses in a given society as these relate to the learning of L2s and their use.

LOOKING FORWARD

More recent twists and turns

In this subsection, we trace more recent developments in research on L2 learner beliefs by reviewing a few studies as they relate to the contextual approaches, most of which have already gained a strong foothold in the field of Applied Linguistics over the past few years: the discursive, sociocultural/dialogical, affective, and complexity/ecological approaches.

Discursive turn, research continued

As pointed out in the first part of this chapter, one line of research on L2 learner beliefs has been informed by a **discursive turn**, introduced to the field of Applied Linguistics in the late 1990s (theoretically) and early 2000s (with the first empirical studies published). In a more recent study by Kalaja (2016a), carried out as part of a longitudinal project, a large number of students at a university in Finland were asked to compare and contrast English, the language they had been studying as their major, with Finnish, their first language. This study was mainly about holding beliefs about the two languages, but also about the construction of **identities** by the students. They were asked to do a set of sentence completion tasks. The tasks were of the type "In my opinion, Finnish is …" or "If you ask me, compared with Finnish, English is …" and an open-ended question "What does English mean to you today". The tasks were done twice four or five years apart: at the beginning of their studies and just before or after graduation from a five-year MA degree programme. The completions varied from a few words or sentences to half a page of text, allowing discursive analysis as suggested, e.g., by Potter and Wetherell (1987).

A total of four *interpretative repertoires*, or recycled ways of talking about the two languages, were identified in the data: Affection, Aesthetics, Vitality, and Challenge. Overall, the students came to construct English and Finnish as being close or distant as languages, or with positive or negative feelings; beautiful or ugly as languages; local or global as languages; and finally, easy or difficult as systems or as languages to be learnt. There were only minor developments in the beliefs over time, but some *dilemmas*, or conflicting opinions, were (partly) resolved especially within the Affection and Challenge repertoires. In the second stage of the study, English is commented on as follows by a female student. She resorts mainly to the Vitality repertoire: "It is a language that opens the whole world. Part of my everyday life. Useful both in spare time and at work." The students had begun studying English for its own sake (i.e., out of interest or love). In the four or five years they realized that the language had instrumental value, too. English makes many things possible in their lives, and has even provided them with another view of the world, compared with Finnish, their first language. In contrast, clear developments were found in the construction of their identities when completing the tasks for the second time: from learners of English as a foreign language to users of English as a Lingua Franca and even to multilingual subjects – with some reservations, on the assumption that in order to be multilingual you would need to learn the languages from birth and have full command of each.

In a follow-up study to those conducted within the longitudinal project mentioned above, Kalaja (e.g., 2016b) came up with the idea of *envisioning* or *vision*, notions closely related to motivation (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014), and using narratives in looking forward in time. A group of university students were asked to make a drawing "My Language X class in a year's time from now" and explain in a few sentences on the reverse side of the task sheet what they would envision happening in the foreign language class that they would imagine giving – a year after graduating from a five-year MA degree programme. The multimodal data, consisting of visual narratives and their written commentaries, were subjected to content analysis.

The majority of the students envisioned, or believed, that their foreign language class would take place in an ordinary classroom with desks and a board. In spite of the traditional environment, the students would emphasize the social nature of learning, and so their teaching would focus on real language use or (oral) communication and aspects of culture(s). Use would be made of authentic texts rather than textbooks, and furthermore, of modern IT. As teachers they would act as guides in class, and their students would be expected to be willing to share and interact in pairs, small groups, etc. Overall, this discourse of *Future foreign language teaching*, based on their previous experiences of using (especially) English in out-of-school

contexts (travel, hobbies or spare-time activities, the media and the Internet) and studying on the MA degree programme and having already completed the Teaching Practicum, is in sharp contrast with another discourse of *Past foreign language teaching*. The latter discourse is based on their previous experiences of learning foreign languages in school contexts. The two discourses were identified in the pools of data collected for the project, and complemented with this more recent pool of multimodal data. Consider a class of German as a foreign language as envisioned by a female student (Figure 1). In this class, students would be working in groups and look for information about different cities in Germany by consulting different sources of information to compile travel guides. These guides would be shared in class and discussed.

FIGURE 1 about here

Figure 1. A class of German as a foreign language as envisioned by a female student (*ope*, a colloquial form, translates as 'a teacher').

Before graduation, most of the students said that they would draw on the principles and practices of the first discourse. One or two were still hesitant about their applicability in classes that they would offer in the future.

The two studies summarized above illustrate research on L2 learner beliefs from starting points that are quite different from those underlying research within the traditional approach, and show how what is inside his or her mind gets discursively constructed (and becomes observable) and used for specific purposes (e.g., in arguing for or against something) when an L2 learner is busy completing specific (learning) tasks.

Sociocultural/dialogical turn, research continued

The second line of research has been inspired by the developments in **sociocultural theory** and **dialogism** (for details, see the first part of this chapter). The studies by Alanen (2003) and Dufva (2003) conducted within a longitudinal project in Finland are classics from these starting points. As part of this project, Aro (e.g., 2009) followed a group of young learners of English over Grades 1–5 (aged 7–11) within the Finnish educational system. The purpose was to examine developments in the learners' beliefs about English, the first foreign language started in Grade 3, and in their expressed **agency**. The children were interviewed on several occasions, and data subjected to dialogically informed content analysis, using the notion of *voice*. The learners' beliefs were found to be multivoiced, but with the learners' own voices becoming gradually stronger. This was evidenced, e.g., by the increasing use of phrases such as "In my opinion …" over the years – earlier they had relied more heavily on others' opinions (e.g., "My dad said …"). Certain cultural truths, such as "English is needed abroad", were recycled year after year, and authoritative views represented by the school institution (e.g., "One must read in order to learn") had by Grade 5 become a filter through which other viewpoints were evaluated. With time, the voice of a carefree child, even indifferent to learning English, evolved into that of an English learner and user. In addition, the agency of most learners evolved from other-regulation to *self-regulation*, making them more independent as learners. However, some of the children fell to the role of passive recipients of formal teaching by Grade 5.

In a follow-up study Aro (2016a, 2016b) contacted some of the learners again after some 15 years. By that time they were young adults, studying towards their future professions. Out of the original class of 15 students, four agreed to be interviewed. While the learners now had much firmer views about how to learn

languages, school practices still formed the background against which learning activities were evaluated. Otherwise, the authority of the school had diminished: its authoritative voice had now been replaced by cultural voices, viewpoints widely shared by Finnish adults (e.g., "The best way to learn a language is to speak it in the target country"). Also the learners' sense of agency had strengthened. All interviewees expressed confidence in their skills as language learners: they felt that over the years they had also learnt the best ways to learn. By the age of 21, Emma, studying at a vocational school, had realized that she learnt best by simply using the language, e.g., by listening to music and watching TV (i.e., relying on the spoken word): "... the best way to learn is to use it yourself and when you hear it, at least for me it's worked better than just flipping through pages of books ..." (p. 60). In contrast, another student, Helen, a university student, had been happy with the way(s) English had been taught at school by studying textbooks and revising grammar rules (i.e., relying on the written word): "... I learn better when I read and write myself." (p. 61). By school standards Helen had fared better in learning English, compared with Emma.

The series of studies reviewed above illustrate the possibilities of truly longitudinal research, viewing beliefs in relation to L2 learner action, or agency, over as long a period as 15 years!

Affective turn, beginnings

The third line of research on L2 learner beliefs has been informed by the emotional or **affective turn** in Applied Linguistics since the early 2000s (e.g., Pavlenko 2005; Dewaele, 2010) with an initial focus on users of more than one language, or multilingual subjects. Emotions (or narrowly anxiety) have seldom been considered in textbooks or reviews of individual (learner) differences, and if this has been the case, viewed only as standing in a cause-and-effect relationship with other factors or learning outcomes (e.g., Pavlenko, 2013). Beliefs are not emotions, but they do have an **affective** dimension, as evidenced, e.g., by the dialogical study by Dufva (2003) cited in the first part of the chapter. The very first studies viewing beliefs in relation to emotions have only began to appear in Applied Linguistics.

Consider, e.g., the case studies of three students of English reported by Aragão (2011; his Ph.D. thesis of 2007 contains another four of these). The aim was to understand the "interactive nature of beliefs, **emotions** and **actions** in classroom foreign language learning" (p. 303) and to trace any changes in the beliefs held by the students about themselves, and importantly, viewed in relation to their emotions. The students were taking a pre-intermediate course in English at a federal university in Brazil, and they were considered in the context of a classroom environment and having interactions with their teacher and classmates. Data were collected by a variety of means but the findings summarized here are based on a set of interviews with three students. In these interviews they discussed their language learning histories, video-recordings of classroom sessions, and drawings. The sets of data were subjected to content analysis.

One of the three students, Arwen, believed she was shy and was afraid of speaking English in class. Due to this belief and her previous school experiences she decided to be quiet in class, considering this a way of passing the course, which she had failed before. One of Arwen's drawings depicted a face without a mouth, illustrating her shyness and highlighting her lack of voice in class, and another one her feeling ashamed (both feelings spelt in capital letters below the drawings). However, outside class the student spoke a lot.

Overall it turned out that there was "a tight relationship between beliefs and emotions" and "the feelings of fear and inhibition were strongly associated with [the] students' beliefs about [their] self-concepts in the foreign language classroom" (p. 307). The students' emotions were influenced by their beliefs about the others in class, too. The teacher was believed to have perfect knowledge of English, and so served as the

ideal model that the students felt still to be far from. Some of their classmates were considered to be more fluent speakers of the language, and so felt to be critical of the less fluent classmates, which they considered themselves. And so they felt intimidated. The students were given an opportunity to reflect on their experiences of learning English, and this seemed to help two of them in changing their beliefs and emotions over time, reducing the discomfort they had experienced in class. In contrast, Arwen stuck to her initial beliefs and emotions throughout the course, and kept sitting next to the door and a school bag in her lap, ready to leave the classroom any minute!

The study summarized above is one of the first empirical studies that have made an attempt to view the beliefs, emotions and actions of students as contextualized or as occurring in a specific foreign language classroom and tracing their close interplay over a period of time.

Overall, Aragão's studies (and a recent review by Barcelos, 2015) suggest a close interrelationship between beliefs and emotions. In other words, emotions can strengthen or weaken an L2 learner's beliefs depending on their functions and the context. In addition, emotions may also make an L2 learner pay attention to certain beliefs and not others. By the same token, beliefs may give rise to such emotions as fear, despair or joy. Thus, emotions and beliefs interact in complex ways. The interplay of these two concepts has only now begun to be explored in Applied Linguistics.

Complexity/ecological turn, beginnings

The fourth line of research on L2 learner beliefs is a result of the **complexity turn** being launched in the field of Applied Linguistics (e.g., Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008) as recently as the 2010s. Accordingly, it is emphasized even more than before that the beliefs held by a learner should not be viewed "in isolation", a point that is repeated from one article to another below. As a matter of fact, the beliefs about a learner him- or herself, whether correct or incorrect, make his or her **self**-concept (Mercer, Ryan, & Williams, 2012, p. 6; Mercer, 2012, p. 11). These beliefs have two dimensions (cognitive and affective) and should be considered not only in relation to other **learner-internal** factors such as motivation, affect, attitudes, and personal history, but also in relation to **learner-external** factors involved in learning an L2, such as contexts of learning, others involved in the learning process, including teachers and classmates.

In one of the first studies along these lines, Mercer and Ryan (e.g., 2010, Ryan & Mercer, 2012) make a distinction between explicit and implicit beliefs. Furthermore, implicit or core beliefs are viewed in terms of *mindsets* (e.g., Dweck, 2006), representing a version of Positive Psychology. Simply put, a learner (or basically anybody) can resort to one of two mindsets, depending, e.g., on the nature of intelligence and motivation. These can be viewed either as fixed, or as variable, something the learner can influence. If a learner adopts a *fixed mindset*, he or she might end up feeling unmotivated and thinking that as he or she does not have the qualities (e.g., being smart), he or she can easily give up whatever he or she has been pursuing in school or life. In contrast, if a learner adopts a *growth mindset*, it is possible for him or her to feel motivated and so he or she is prepared to work hard to make progress. The student does not have to be the best in class, but just do what he or she is capable of doing under the circumstances. It is emphasized though that the two mindsets should not be viewed as a dichotomy but rather as a continuum, along which a learner can be placed. Importantly, the mindset adopted will guide a learner's approach to learning.

After experimentation with a standard questionnaire on mindsets, Mercer and Ryan (2010, Ryan & Mercer, 2012) ended up carrying out a small-scale study with university students studying English in two countries,

Austria and Japan. The students were asked to write a short account, among others, of their understanding of the role of *natural talent* in their learning of an L2. The students seemed to believe there to be such a factor as natural talent, but it was claimed to interact with other factors, such as age and context, and thus contributing to success in learning an L2. To quote one student "… factors that I consider important in foreign language learning are: motivation, support, cultural understanding, interest and a bit of natural ability. Of course, all of these features are interlinked, which makes it almost impossible to tell them apart" (Ryan & Mercer, 2012, p. 82). It was concluded that the systems of learner beliefs are complex and dynamic, or subject to change over time.

In another study Mercer (e.g., 2011, 2012), drew on Dynamic Systems Theory or Chaos/Complexity Theory (e.g., Larsen-Freeman 1997). More specifically, the study was a longitudinal case study with Carina, a student who had been studying Spanish and English in an Austrian university. Her university studies were followed over a period of three years, or until she graduated with a BA degree. The study focused on Carina's **self-concept** as a learner of the two foreign languages. The beliefs held by the student were viewed in relation to her interactions in class and out-of-class, experiences of getting by using English and Spanish, making progress in studying the two languages, and receiving feedback from her teachers. The student kept a learning journal, and it was complemented by interviews with her over a longer period of time. The pools of data were subjected to content analysis. The learning of English was more trying for the student – with ups and downs – compared with Spanish. The following quote illustrates both dimensions of her beliefs about the two languages: "For English I really have to work, I really do. Spanish, oh my God, I don't make any mistakes. Not at all. Not written, not spoken, not at all. I have a [sic] huge vocabulary. I don't know why. And I thought in English it's the same but …" (Mercer, 2012, p. 19)

Overall, Carina's foreign language self-concept was found to be "a complex network composed of an interrelated web of multiple layers of self-beliefs across different domains at various levels of specificity and differently related to context" (Mercer, 2011, p. 343). Her beliefs as an aspect of her foreign language self could be characterized as "messy" in more than one sense, challenging thus "traditional discourses and thinking about beliefs and their development such as regarding the linearity of their development, their relative stability, the nature of supposed cause-and-effect relationships as well as the discreteness and distinctness of individual beliefs" (Mercer, 2011, p. 343).

The two studies reviewed above illustrate much more context-sensitive and in-depth qualitative analysis than before of learner beliefs, keeping their two dimensions in mind and viewed as interacting with other factors within larger systems at play in learning L2s. Overall, the studies mark the beginning(s) of research on L2 learner beliefs along quite new lines.

Suggestions for further studies and raising learners' awareness of their beliefs

In this subsection, we firstly, review the basic assumptions of this chapter and suggest further directions in research on beliefs. Secondly, we give suggestions how learners (and their teachers) can be made more aware of their beliefs.

The twists and turns recounted above are far from an exhaustive review of more recent research on L2 learner beliefs. It was simply an attempt by us to illustrate developments in research on L2 learner beliefs over the past few years and conducted from somewhat different starting points. What we have witnessed is a shift in focus from **what** to **how**, i.e., from a narrow focus on beliefs alone (and as if possessed by a learner) to an ever broadening focus on beliefs being constructed by a learner while interacting with

others, and both parties viewed as individuals who think, feel and act, and their interaction taking place on specific occasions of learning and teaching L2s. In addition, beliefs are viewed as **dynamic** as a system (or stable or changing across time and space) and their interplay with other factors involved as much more **complex** than thought before. This is also reflected in more recent definitions of beliefs, or rather **holding** beliefs (see, e.g., Kalaja et al., 2016, p. 10).

In this chapter, we have reviewed research on beliefs about L2 learning extending over more than 30 years, or since the traditional approach (reviewed in the first part of this chapter), with replications and adaptations of BALLI still being reported. By casual Internet search we ran into a dozen studies published as recently as in years 2014 and 2015. Unfortunately, even these studies show little awareness of any more recent developments in the field. In contrast, the contextual approaches and their more recent developments illustrated above have helped us better understand the nature of beliefs by challenging:

- the common view of beliefs having only a cognitive dimension (from facts to myths). Beliefs do in fact have an affective dimension, too, reflected, e.g., in the attachment a learner can have to a specific set of beliefs or core beliefs, and in the interactions of beliefs with emotions (Barcelos, 2015)
- the naïve assumptions of there being simple cause-and-effect relationships between stated beliefs and actions, and/or between beliefs and other individual differences such as motivation, learning strategies or styles, (language) anxiety or personality
- the common view of beliefs comprising a stable mental system residing inside a learner's head. It is now acknowledged that beliefs indeed constitute a dynamic system that interacts in complex ways with other factors involved in learning an L2 (some are listed above).

In spite of all these developments, further research is still called for. Firstly, we would need to broaden the range of beliefs being studied to cover any other aspects related to learning and/or teaching, such as: 1) the nature and status of the L2 being learnt (possibly compared and contrasted with other languages); 2) being a learner or user of the L2, or a multilingual subject; and 3) the process and outcomes of learning and/or teaching the language. Secondly, we would need to widen the type of learners whose beliefs we study: by age (from children and youngsters to adults and elderly people, the last group being a growing population of learners in the future), or by background, and importantly, learners viewed not as bundles of individual differences, but as whole persons with their histories and experiences, imbedded in specific contexts. Related to this, we would also need to investigate beliefs in a variety of contexts where L2s are learnt, e.g., regular language classes compared with content-and-language-integrated-learning (CLIL) classes or virtual environments; or study abroad; as well as how the languages are learnt and used informally, including spare-time activities, hobbies, and workplaces. Thirdly, all of this implies that we should explore further methodological options in investigating beliefs by using yet other ways of collecting and analyzing pools of data and also reconsidering our research designs, e.g., by conducting longitudinal studies proper, i.e., not just over a course, a term or a year but over much longer periods of time (see, e.g., Kalaja et al., 2016, for examples of this kind of research). Finally, one area that has not been explored much is raising learners' **awareness of beliefs**, a topic that we now turn to, offering some practical suggestions how this could be done in the L2 classroom.

Beliefs are present in the approach teachers take to teaching and in the approach learners take to learning L2s. The teaching of L2s is talked about as *reflective practice* (e.g., Richards & Lockhart, 1994), whereby teachers can gain a deeper understanding of how they go about teaching and why they do so. They do this

by comparing and contrasting their practical experiences with those of others and with the theoretical knowledge of the field – with all its controversies and unresolved issues. And as a result, teachers might end up reconsidering their ways of acting in class, or revising the principles and practices underlying their teaching. Similarly, it could be argued that the learning of L2s be viewed as reflective practice. In other words, it would be important for students – and equally for their teachers – to figure out how they go about the learning of L2s the way they do and why. Beliefs (about any aspect of learning an L2) are one aspect that students could be made to reflect on. Reflection makes it possible for students to become aware of their beliefs, consider them and possibly reconsider them. In our opinion, one of the roles of teachers is to help learners to become more aware of their own beliefs.

Teachers can raise students' awareness of their beliefs by making these explicit in class. This can be done in a variety of ways. Students (and their teachers) can become aware of their beliefs by sharing them, and this can be done in different modalities: either verbally, and then either orally or in writing, visually, or in more than one modality. Furthermore, it can be done alone, in pairs or small groups, or involving the whole class, or in various combinations. The sharing can be done by asking students first to complete an activity and then share the outcomes in class (and where feasible, these can be compared with findings of relevant empirical studies, see below), followed by discussion. Activities can be carried out in a structured or in a less structured way, and using the first language or the language students have been studying, depending on their skills and motivation, or type of activity (i.e., how challenging an activity is). To illustrate, find some suggestions below (for textbooks, see, e.g., Murphey, 2006):

- **discussions** organized in class to address any aspect or experiences of learning Language X.
- **questionnaires** to be filled out by students. These can consist of closed questions (e.g., the classic BALLI) or of open-ended questions, providing students with a profile or diagnosis (see, e.g., SILL), or their responses serving as a basis for structured discussions in class.
- **completion tasks** to be finished by students as they wish "In my opinion, Language X is/sounds …" or "If you ask me, compared with Language Y, Language X is/sounds …" (e.g., Kalaja, 2016a) or simply by adding a metaphor "Learning Language X is like …", "Language X is like …", "As a speaker/writer of Language X I'm like …" (e.g., Kramsch, 2003; Oksanen, 2005).
- **language learning histories** or LLHs (e.g., Oxford, 1995; Murphey, 1998) to be composed by students, following instructions such as "Tell your story as a learner of Language X" (possibly complemented with a set of prompt questions) to recollect their experiences of learning Language X in the course of their lives or school careers. The recollecting can be done visually (e.g., as a diagramme with ups and downs), orally, in writing, or multi-modally, i.e., text complemented with audio- and/or visual material (see e.g., Menezes, 2008). The texts produced can be analyzed, e.g., for their contents, metaphors or interpretative repertoires.
- **drawings** (or cuttings out of newspapers and magazines, or computer-generated artefacts) to be made by students following instructions such as "Make a portrait of yourself as a learner of Language X" (e.g., Kalaja, Alanen, & Dufva, 2008), as a user of Languages X and Y (e.g., Pietikäinen, Alanen, Dufva, Kalaja, Leppänen, & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2008), or as a multilingual subject "Draw yourself speaking the languages you know" (e.g., Melo-Pfeifer, 2015). Or students can be asked to complement a standard human figure with the repertoire of languages that they possess – by using pencils in different colours (e.g., Pietikäinen & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2013).
- **photos** to be taken by students of occasions or situations of learning and using Language X in different contexts (e.g., Nikula & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2008) and sharing these experiences in class, or

of uses of different languages in the environment or linguistic landscapes students find themselves in, noting the number and type of the languages that they are exposed to in their daily lives, and their functions.

- **collages/posters** (or combining cuttings out of newspapers and magazines, drawings, text) to be compiled by students in order to figure out what Languages X and Y mean to them "Language X and I" "Language Y and I" (e.g., Pitkänen-Huhta & Rothoni, forthcoming) followed by a discussion in class.

Students could be made to reflect not only on their beliefs but also on other aspects that have in more recent studies found to interact with beliefs, such as **emotions**, **agency**, and **identities** in the learning of L2s. Many of the types of data and activities suggested above lend themselves to or could be adapted equally for the discussion (or analysis) of these aspects to gain even deeper insights into the complexities of learning L2s.

As pointed out by Barcelos (2007), after having been given a chance to reflect on their beliefs in learning an L2, learners might simply end up reaffirming their current beliefs and practices (or actions) without any change in either but having at least become (more) aware of both. Secondly, learners might end up revising their beliefs without a change in practices, or alternatively, with a change in practices, too. Thirdly, a change in beliefs could start from the reconsideration of practices. In class, it is the teacher's task to observe these processes going on in students and consider when and how it would be appropriate to intervene, if needed (Swain 2011, p. 11).

To conclude, the relationship of a learner's beliefs and practices in (or approaches to) learning L2s is today acknowledged to be more complex than before, and in doing further studies, research designs and methodologies used should be sensitive enough to capture all these possibilities involved in raising learners' awareness of their beliefs.

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Figure 1.

FURTHER READING

Aro, M. (2009). *Speakers and doers. Polyphony and agency in children's beliefs about language learning*. Jyväskylä Studies in Humanities 116. Jyväskylän yliopisto. http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-39-3532-0

This Ph.D. thesis reports a longitudinal study of young learners' beliefs and agency from a dialogical/sociocultural point of view.

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This volume reports a total of seven very recent studies on learner and/or teacher beliefs carried out within the contextual approaches, all being truly longitudinal in their research design, and beliefs viewed in relation to other learner/teacher characteristics, including agency, identities, and emotions.

Barcelos, A. M. F. (2015). Unveiling the relationship between language learning beliefs, emotions and identities. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 5 (2), 301–312.

This review article attempts to reveal how beliefs, emotions and identities are interrelated.

RELATED TOPICS/KEYWORDS

Beliefs, learners, contextual approach(es), emic, awareness, reflective learning

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