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A review of five studies on learner beliefs about second language learning and teaching: exploring the possibilities of narratives

This article reviews five studies carried out within two projects in Finland on the subjective experiences of second language learning and teaching and the related beliefs held by university students of English or other foreign languages. The studies to be reviewed have been conducted using contextual approaches, and written or visual narratives. The aim is to explore how narratives have been used in doing research on learner beliefs by illustrating some of the units of analysis applied within different theoretical frameworks. In addition to summarizing the studies, the article will discuss the methodological lessons learnt and indicate directions for future research.

Keywords: second/foreign language, learning, teaching, beliefs, narratives

1 Introduction

One issue addressed in applied linguistics has been the beliefs that learners hold while they are learning a second language (L2). Research on **learner beliefs** can be traced back to the discussion of the characteristics of the Good Language Learner of the late 1970s. Since the first empirical studies published in the late 1980s, research on the topic has basically been conducted within two approaches (e.g., Kalaja, Barcelos, Aro & Ruohotie-Lyhty 2015: 8–12): the traditional approach, following the pioneering work of Horwitz and Wenden, and the contextual approach or rather approaches, drawing on quite different starting points and methodologies. Within the contextual approach(es) it has only recently been acknowledged that beliefs can indeed play a very important role in the efforts of learners to learn an L2: holding specific beliefs and acting accordingly can either enhance their learning of L2s or prevent them from learning the languages. By the same token it is acknowledged that learner beliefs and actions (and other factors possibly involved in L2 learning such as learner identity, motivation, and agency) might interact in complex ways, and this calls for a reconsideration of traditional research designs and methodologies.

Among other turns, applied linguistics, or L2 learning and teaching, has been undergoing a **narrative turn**. As pointed out by Pavlenko (2007), narratives make it possible to study aspects of L2 learning and teaching from three perspectives: as factual, as subjectively experienced, and as discursively constructed¹. In this context, narratives can be defined as stories told by learners about their experiences of L2 learning over a longer period of time (Benson 2004: 17). Competing terms abound in the literature, including memoirs, (auto)biographies, life stories, and language learning histories (LLHs). This article explores the possibilities of using narratives as data in research on a specific aspect of L2 learning and teaching, that is, the beliefs held by learners. This is done by comparing and contrasting some recent studies conducted within two projects in Finland and by discussing their methodological implications.

Developments in research on learner beliefs are first outlined as background (Section 2), before a review of five empirical studies (Section 3). This is followed by a critical discussion of the methodological lessons learnt from the studies and by suggestions for future directions in research on the topic (Section 4).

1 For more recent general reviews of narratives in applied linguistics, or L2 learning and teaching, see, e.g., Barkhuizen (2011) and Benson (2014), and for book-length accounts, see Barkhuizen (2013) and Barkhuizen, Benson & Chik (2014).

2 Research on learner beliefs: two approaches

The definitions of beliefs have evolved over the past few decades (for recent reviews, see, e.g., Kalaja & Barcelos 2013; Kalaja et al. 2015: 8–12) from fairly simple to more sophisticated ones. Originally, **beliefs** (or **metacognitive knowledge**, adopted from cognitive psychology) were defined as opinions held by learners and viewed as cognitive in nature (Wenden 1991: 34–41). Furthermore, they were said to concern three aspects of L2 learning, that is, learners, learning tasks, and the use of learning strategies. More recently, the term has been defined more broadly as

... a form of thought, constructions of reality, ways of seeing and perceiving the world and its phenomena which are co-constructed within our experiences and which result from an interactive process of interpretation and (re)signifying, and of being in the world and doing things with others. (Barcelos 2014)

In other words, holding a belief (or believing) can be said to occur when learners happen to reflect on aspects of L2 learning or teaching, relate these to experiences of their own or to those of others, and assign their own **personal meanings** to these aspects. An occasion like this would involve others, and so holding a belief would in fact be an experience **shared in time and space**. Again, competing terms abound, including learning philosophies, conceptions, perceptions, folk linguistics, and ideologies.

The two research approaches to learner beliefs, traditional and contextual, differ in their goals, the role assigned to language, the nature of beliefs, and the ways of collecting and analysing data (see Table 1). Most studies carried out so far on learner beliefs fall somewhere along a continuum between the two approaches in their basic assumptions.

As summarized in Table 1, **contextual approaches** are informed not only by discursive social psychology but also by sociocultural theory and Bakhtinian dialogism (for the by now classic studies, see Kalaja & Barcelos 2003). They have adopted an **emic** (or insider) view of language learning and teaching, and thus challenge some of the assumptions underlying the traditional approach and its ways of doing research. In line with these developments, the array of research methods used in studies on learner beliefs has been broadened to include, for example, **narratives**² as possible data. Interestingly, narratives come these days in a number of modes (e.g., Barkhuizen et al. 2014: 14–71): verbal (written or oral), visual, and even multimodal, or text complemented with sounds and/or images. Internationally and nationally, there are some studies that

2 For some earlier studies on narratives (and partly on beliefs), see Kalaja, Menezes & Barcelos (2008), a collection of articles on learning and teaching English as a foreign language.

have inspired us, especially some that have made use of visual data³ such as drawings, photos, picture collages (see studies by Nikula & Pitkänen-Huhta 2008; Aragão 2011; Chik & Breidbach 2011; Borg, Birello, Civera & Zanatta 2014; Pietikäinen & Pitkänen-Huhta 2014; Melo Pfeifer, in press)⁴. However, not all of these have had (beliefs about) L2 learning or teaching as their main focus; they have instead studied (beliefs about) bi- or multilingualism. These studies have analysed visual data as such or the talking (or oral commentary) around the visual data, or both.

TABLE 1. Research on learner beliefs (see, e.g., Kalaja et al. 2015: 8–12): two approaches contrasted.

	Traditional approach	(One) contextual approach
Goals of research	Description of beliefs, or establishing cause-and-effect relationships, e.g., with learning strategies Influenced by cognitive psychology	Description and functions of beliefs (or believing) Influenced by discursive social psychology
Role of language	Passive: a mirror (mental representation)	Active: a construction site (social reality)
Focus	Beliefs in the mind	Beliefs (or believing) on occasions of talking or writing (as discursively constructed)
Characteristics of beliefs	Cognitive; storable, stable, fallible	Discursive
Research methods	Questionnaires & interviews (subjected to content analysis)	Discursive analysis: repertoires, dilemmas, subject positions
Research data	Retrospective self-reports	(Naturalistic) discourse, spoken or written texts

3 Research on learner beliefs conducted in Finland: exploring the possibilities of narratives as data

In this section, five studies will be summarized that have focused on the learning and/or teaching of English or other foreign languages as subjectively experienced by learners. However, all of these studies have addressed beliefs as well, if not explicitly,

3 For a recent review of visual methods in applied linguistics, see Pitkänen-Huhta & Pietikäinen, in press.

4 Many of these have, however, appeared later than the studies reviewed in this article.

then implicitly, for instance in the discussion section of the study. The purpose here is to explore the possibilities of narratives when doing research on learner beliefs within the contextual approaches by illustrating variation in the **type of narratives** used as data and in the **units of analysis** exploited in research conducted within different theoretical frameworks. The studies are comparable in the sense that they have all been conducted with university students studying foreign languages at a Finnish university. Of the studies reviewed, Studies 1 and 2 were carried out within an earlier project, and they made use of the same set of written narratives. Studies 3 and 4 were conducted within a more recent project with another set of written and visual narratives. Study 5 is a follow-up study, and it is an analysis of yet another set of visual narratives.

3.1 The learning of English as constructed within thematic elements in written narratives

One of the pioneering studies in Finland on L2 learning and teaching as subjectively experienced, and related beliefs, is a study by Leppänen and Kalaja (2002). In Study 1, first-year university students (n=60), English majors and minors, were asked to recollect their experiences of learning English from the time of their very first contact with the language or its users and to write their language learning **autobiographies** around these recollections: "Tell your story as a learner of English". The students were provided with a fairly long list of prompt questions to make it easier for them to get started with the task. The autobiographies were written in Finnish, the students' first language (L1).

The data were subjected to discursive analysis, and a total of five **thematic elements** with different heroic roles, adapted from a traditional story grammar, were identified in the data. These elements – which had quite different meanings assigned to the learning of English – were: 1) Effortless acquisition, 2) Struggling, 3) Infatuation, 4) Suffering, and 5) Learning as a by-product (see Table 2).

TABLE 2. Thematic elements and types of heroic learners identified in autobiographies written by first-year university students of English.

Thematic sequence	Role of student	Characteristics	Roles of others	Role of language
1) Acquisition without effort	Hero (or heroine)	Gift for languages, good memory, risk-taker	-	Outcome of student's talents
2) Learning as struggling	Hero	Hard-working, diligent, persevering	Assistants and adversaries	Reward for struggle
3) Learning as infatuation	Hero	Fascinated, enthusiastic, masochistic	Assistants	Reward and beloved
4) Learning as suffering	Victim/martyr	Misunderstood, ridiculed, mocked, mobbed	Adversaries	Reason for suffering
5) Learning as by-product	Antihero	Pragmatic, selective, critical	-	Instrument to get something

Within these elements, the roles of the students ranged from heroes to victims and anti-heroes. The students had learnt English thanks to their own special, magical characteristics, to the time and effort put into the learning of the language, or to sheer luck. The role of others, including teachers, classmates, textbooks and trips abroad, varied accordingly from no role at all to being assistants and adversaries. Also the role of the language being learnt varied from being an outcome of the student's talent or a reward for having studied hard or having fallen in love with the language and/or its users to being a reason for their suffering, or being an instrument to get to do something else, possibly of greater interest to the students than simply mastering the language. Overall this study focused on the learning of English as experienced by the students. However, with subjective meanings given to aspects of the learning of the language, deep down the study was about students' beliefs as well.

3.2 Teachers of English as metaphorically depicted in written narratives

The second study to be reviewed is a study by Turunen (2003). Study 2 was cognitive in its starting points, as it emphasized the importance of metaphors in directing how individuals (including L2 learners) perceive the world, as suggested earlier by Lakoff and Johnson (1980).

Based on the same pool of data that had been collected for Study 1, the set of **autobiographies** written by first-year university students of English (n=60) was subjected to **metaphor analysis**. An established set of steps was followed in the analysis, and as its outcome a number of learner and teacher metaphors were identified in the texts and classified by type. To illustrate some of the main findings, Table 3 contains the teacher metaphor classes that were identified, providing some examples.

TABLE 3. Teacher metaphors identified in autobiographies written by first-year university students of English, listed in order of frequency.

Metaphor class	The teacher ...	Examples of metaphors
1) Motivator	creates a positive atmosphere and pays attention to the abilities of individual learners	<i>not a dictator, holding reins gently, a fantastic aunt</i>
2) Trier of patience	lacks teaching skills, frustrates and bores students	<i>a tiresome old hag, Mizz Spinster, a fusspot, an oddity, a low record</i>
3) Manufacturer	keeps strictly to the curriculum and lesson plans	<i>an Iron Lady, a fierce moped, keeps in check, grammar in deadly doses</i>
4) Target of mischief	has no authority, is incompetent, has given up	<i>a dream target, a sissy, a crybaby, a martyr, on the verge of a nervous breakdown</i>
5) Witch	has bursts of anger, frightens students, is too strict	<i>an old eagle owl, a monster, a vixen, the queen of sadists, a domestic terror</i>
6) Demigod	stands as a role model for students, is admired by students	<i>an absolute example, a gem among teachers, an idol, a rarity, a really cool bloke, a superb type</i>

The teacher metaphors were of six different types ranging from positive, including demigods (e.g., *idols* and *gems*) and motivators, to less positive ones such as triers of patience, targets of mischief and even witches (e.g., *queens of sadists* and *monsters*). As mentioned, Study 2 was cognitive in its basic assumptions. The data could, however, have lent themselves even to discursive analysis as the metaphors had been identified in full texts or discourse. Like an earlier study by Kramsch (2003)⁵, Study 3 focused on beliefs about L2 learning and teaching held by learners.

5 In contrast to Study 3, Kramsch (2003), (kind of) forced university students in the US to use metaphors in completing a sentence about learning L2s, "Learning Language x is (like) ...". So the task, context and body of students were different but the focus was the same: beliefs about L2 learning and teaching.

3.3 Memories of former teachers of English as discursively constructed in written narratives

The third study was carried out by Keski-Heiska (2009; see also Kalaja & Keski-Heiska 2012) in a project called *From Novice to Expert*, based at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Study 3 focused on the **memories** that students (n=123) had of their former teachers of English. The study views memories or recollecting as socially shared and discursively constructed (see, e.g., Middleton & Edwards 1990), and in this respect it stands out from previous studies conducted on the topic in other disciplines; there are none in applied linguistics.

A more recent group of first-year university students was asked to think about their experiences of learning English in the past and to write their **autobiographies** (for details of data collection, see Section 3.1). In their autobiographies the students came to recollect their former teachers of English fondly – or not so fondly.

The nearly 200 recollections were subjected to a **discursive analysis**, inspired by the work of Potter and Wetherell (1987: 158–175). By looking for similarities and differences in content and/or form, **interpretative repertoires**, or recurring patterns of talking about the former teachers, were found in the pool of data, and their functions established. The unit of analysis had been adopted from discursive social psychology (e.g., Potter & Wetherell 1987: 149; Edley 2001: 210).

It turned out that the memories were in fact not just about the teachers; they were also about the students themselves – or their relationship with the teacher. In the end, a total of seven interpretative repertoires were identified, and within each the student and his or her teacher took on complementary roles or identities (Table 4).

The excerpts below (translated from Finnish) illustrate three of the repertoires that the students made use of in their recollections, that is, the Routine (1), Terror (2) and Off-stage (3) repertoires:

- (1) Our new teacher turned out to be a very old-fashioned case that had not strayed from the familiar pattern for the last thirty years. So, after the first lesson we knew what the rest of the year and comprehensive school would be like.
- (2) (TEACHER'S NAME) had taught ... fourth to sixth graders in my previous school and her reputation as a nasty, repulsive person overall was nearly legendary. Naturally, the propaganda of the great and wise had hit me hard. My preconceptions of (TEACHER'S NAME) were great. And so it went that all of us third-grade sweethearts ended up hating (TEACHER'S NAME) unanimously.
- (3) (...) I created a text of which I am proud to date. The most vivid memory of studying English in my time in comprehensive school is the moment when the teacher hands me back that composition and asks: "Are you sure you wrote this by yourself? That

you didn't copy it from the internet..." In the teacher's opinion the text was too good and I took it as a compliment. I have preserved the composition as a small (token of) memory.

TABLE 4. Memories of former teachers of English as discursively constructed in autobiographies written by first-year university students.

Repertoire	Role/identity of teacher	Role/identity of student	Stronger role
1) Routine	Monotonous and unchanging teacher	Frustrated learner	Teacher
2) Progress	In control of the speed and direction of learning	Dependent on teacher's control	Teacher
3) Responsibility	The one who influences learning	The one whose learning is being influenced	Teacher
4) Terror	Mean authority-figure	Victim	Ambivalent
5) Incompetence	Failure as a provider of information	Active learner who needs more than the teacher can offer	Ambivalent
6) Evaluation	The one who is being evaluated	The one who evaluates	Student
7) Off-stage	Professional who is able to give a reliable evaluation of the student	Good language learner	Student

Within these repertoires, the teachers were discursively constructed as sticking to routines in their teaching, acting meanly, or being encouraging, and their students as being frustrated, victimized or proud of their performance in class, respectively. In addition, the students made use of specific rhetorical means within the repertoires, including **extrematization** and **consensus** (for details, see Potter 2006), to convince the reader of the credibility of their recollections. Overall, even though Study 3 focused on how former teachers were recollected, it also addressed students' beliefs about aspects of learning and teaching English as discursively constructed.

3.4 Mediational means in learning English as depicted in visual narratives

The fourth study summarized is a study by Kalaja, Alanen and Dufva (2008). Like Study 3, Study 4 was carried out in the project *From Novice to Expert*. It was the first attempt by

the research team to explore the possibilities of **visual narratives**⁶. Visual narratives are claimed to consist of two types of structures: **conceptual** and **narrative** structures (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 46). The latter describe processes or events, and their dynamicity or directionality is indicated by a vector in a picture or drawing. Furthermore, the study was informed by sociocultural theory (e.g., Lantolf & Thorne 2006), and so the learning of English was viewed as an intentional, goal-directed and, most importantly, mediated activity. Thus the study focused on the **mediational means** that a group of students had made use of in learning the language.

First-year university students (n=123) were asked to draw a portrait of themselves as learners of English, "This is what I look like as a learner of English", and in a couple of sentences provide their own interpretation of the drawing, or a commentary, on the reverse side of the task sheet. The data were subjected to theory-driven content analysis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009: 99–124), in contrast to data-driven content analysis.

Figure 1 illustrates some of the findings of this study.



FIGURE 1. Self-portrait of a learner of English: with books.

The student comments on her self-portrait (translated from Finnish) as follows:

This describes me when I was still at school (Years 10 to 12). I have already taken some courses at the university but what came first to my mind was me in those years memorizing words and grammar rules.

6 For a review of these explorations with visual narratives by the team or their colleagues or students, see Kalaja, Dufva & Alanen (2013) and Kalaja (in press). However, not all of these studies are concerned with learner beliefs or L2 learning and teaching; some are about being bi- or multilingual.

In other words, learning is described as a fairly mechanical task. The main findings of this study are summarized in Table 5.

TABLE 5. Mediational means used in learning English, as depicted in self-portraits drawn by first-year university students (n=110, metaphors excluded).

Mediational means (or symbols for these)	Drawings with ...		Drawings without ...	
	n	%	n	%
Other people	34	31	76	69
Print media	72	65	38	35
Other media	58	53	52	47

The majority of the students drew themselves as human (stick) figures either alone (69%), or with books (65%), or with other media (including television, radio, newspapers, the Internet) (53%), but much less frequently with other human figures (31%), such as teachers, classmates, or foreigners. A few students interpreted the task differently and resorted to metaphors, depicting themselves, for example, as a half empty (or full) glass being filled with water from a jug, as a quilt being sewn, with a few patches still missing, or a tree with some leaves growing and others withering.

Based on the visual narratives (and their commentaries), the students seemed to believe that the learning of English is a matter of acquiring the language, instead of interacting, or being engaged in dialogue, with their classmates and/or teacher in a classroom. They also appeared to have learnt the language (mostly in its written form) by studying written material (mostly textbooks). In other words, there is a written language bias in their efforts to learn English.

3.5 Giving a foreign language class as envisioned in visual narratives

The final study to be reviewed is a study by Kalaja (2015: 124–171; preliminary findings have also been reported in Alanen, Kalaja & Dufva 2013). Study 5 was a follow-up study to some of the studies conducted in the project *From Novice to Expert*, allowing **longitudinal** comparisons to earlier findings. Furthermore, the study explored the possibilities of **visual narratives** in research on beliefs, but this time narratives were used to look forward in time (and not back as previously). In other words, visual narratives were used for **envisioning**, an issue related to motivation (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova 2014).

Informed by sociocultural theory (e.g., Lantolf & Thorne 2006), the study aimed to find out what a group of teacher trainees believed or envisioned would be involved in giving a foreign language class or teaching a foreign language in the not-so-far distant

future, that is, a year after their graduation. Some of the students had taken part in Studies 3 and 4, too, four or five years earlier.

To investigate this, teacher trainees ($n=58$) majoring in English or other foreign languages and in the final stages of their studies on a MA degree programme were asked to draw a picture of a future foreign language class given by them: "Draw a picture 'My language x class in 2012'" (i.e., a year after graduation). In addition, they were asked to give a brief written account of what was going on in their class on the reverse side of the task sheet: "Say what is going on in your class". The visual narratives and their commentaries were subjected to content analysis that was partly theory-driven and partly data-driven (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009: 99–124). The analysis focused on the environments, artefacts, and interaction between the teacher and his or her students in the class. As in Study 4, a couple of the students opted for a metaphor as a way of envisioning their teaching in the future.

Figure 2 and its commentary illustrate some of the main findings of the study.

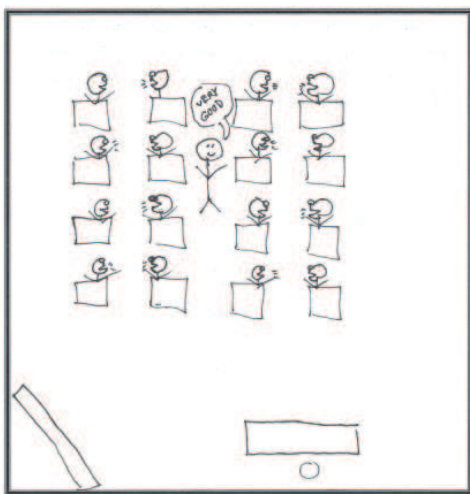


FIGURE 2. A class of English as envisioned in a visual narrative.

The student comments on his class (translated from Finnish) as follows:

I'll try and make my classes as varied as possible. My aim is that in each class there will be some oral practice in addition to completing exercises in the textbook. And I'll try to speak the language as much as possible so that my students will be exposed to more input.

As a rule, the teaching of foreign languages was envisioned by the students as taking place in a regular classroom, furnished with desks, a board (or two), ranging from black

and white boards to smart boards, and some modern technical equipment such as a computer, a CD/DVD player and a video projector. Interestingly, books (of any kind) would not play as important a role in class as in the past: the teacher trainees would rather use authentic texts, based on the needs or interests of their students.

Furthermore, in their teaching the future teachers, working mostly on their own, would put the emphasis on practising oral skills or using the language for real purposes and addressing cultural issues. The teacher would take on the identity of a **guide**, ensuring interaction among his or her students, irrespective of the classroom arrangements. In other words, it was believed or envisioned that the teaching of English and other foreign languages would be **social** in nature once the students entered the teaching profession. This is in sharp contrast to their own learning of English as reported in Study 4.

In conclusion, two discourses were identified in the study (partly based, however, on some other studies conducted within the project, e.g., Kalaja et al. 2008; Kalaja, Alanen, Palviainen & Dufva 2011): the teaching of foreign languages in the past and their teaching in the future. The first discourse was based on the students' own twelve years' experience of the formal teaching of foreign languages in school in the past (see Study 4 above), and the second on their previous experiences of using the languages in out-of-school contexts and on their recently completed teaching practicum as part of their pedagogical studies. The students ended up drawing mostly on aspects of the second discourse, believing that foreign language teaching should be student-centred, authentic, interactional, focusing on real communication and aspects of culture, and making use of modern technology. However, some of the students still had their reservations about its applicability in their future classes.

4 Discussion: lessons learnt from the studies reviewed

The point of this admittedly selective review of a few empirical studies (and admittedly with a very specific group of students in a specific context) was to explore how narratives have been used within the contextual approaches in research on learner beliefs, as outlined in Section 2, and to discuss the implications of the studies and their findings.

All the studies reviewed used narratives as data, and what they share is, firstly, a **narrow** definition of the term (Barkhuizen 2011). In other words, the studies were basically about events of learning and teaching English or other foreign languages, and learners were involved in both the processes. Aspects of these processes were experienced either positively or negatively and assigned personal interpretations by those involved. In each study, the analysis focused on the narratives themselves, but this

analysis was complemented with the learners' commentaries in Studies 4 and 5 to ensure that the interpretation of the drawings was accurate. Secondly, the narratives used as data in Studies 1 to 5 could be characterized as being **big** stories (e.g., Barkhuizen 2011), that is, they were produced as course assignments and basically collected for research purposes.

On the other hand, the studies also differed in some respects. They made use of narratives in two modes: **written** (Studies 1 to 3) and **visual** (Studies 4 and 5). This provided learners with different ways of accounting for events of learning and teaching foreign languages that had taken place in the past or were envisioned to happen in the future. As pointed out by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 46), each mode has its possibilities but also its limitations. It might even be the case that some things can only be expressed verbally, others only visually. Furthermore, the studies reviewed were conducted within different theoretical frameworks. Thus they also illustrate variation in the units of analysis, ranging from **discursive** units (thematic elements in Study 1 and interpretative repertoires in Studies 3 and 5) to **cognitive** (metaphors in Study 2) and **visual** ones (narrative structures) in the case of the drawings used in Studies 4 and 5.

What is clear from the review is, first of all, that Studies 1 to 5 illustrate only some of the ways that can be used in research on learner beliefs to analyse narrative data for their content and/or form (e.g., for a review in applied linguistics, see Barkhuizen et al. 2014: 72–92). The studies focused mainly on the narratives themselves (reported either verbally or visually) in accordance with the narrow definition of the term. A **broad** definition of narratives (e.g., Barkhuizen 2011) would make it possible to focus on the occasions when narratives are told (or visualized), shared and interpreted, or retold on later occasions.

Secondly, Studies 1 to 5 made use only of big stories, and so the types of narratives used so far in research on learner beliefs could be diversified: **small stories** occurring as part of everyday conversations (e.g., Barkhuizen 2011) could also be considered as data. In addition, **digitally mediated texts**, such as discussion forums, blogs (giving advice to L2 learners, for instance) or YouTube video clips (for example, on polyglots/ multilingual speakers) and their commentaries would be authentic written data (in contrast to data collected for research purposes, viewed as contrived in nature) and easily accessible for research purposes. This would be a way of bridging the still wide gap between the proponents of big and small stories in applied linguistics.

Thirdly, of the studies reviewed only one (Study 5) can be characterized as even partly **longitudinal** in its research design. Compared with a study by Borg et al. (2014) with teacher trainees, the period of observation was, however, much longer in Study 5: over a period of four or five years vs. before and after a methodology course. Further research is needed to trace developments, or transformations, in beliefs over longer

periods of time, as pointed out by Kalaja et al. (in press), while students are still being trained to become qualified teachers or after having entered the profession of L2 teaching with careers lasting over 40 years.

Fourthly, in Studies 4 and 5 a few students had interpreted the instructions differently from the majority of their fellow students⁷: they made use of metaphors in depicting themselves as learners of English or in envisioning their teaching of foreign languages in the near future. In the two studies, the metaphors were left out of the analysis. Further experimentation is needed in data collection, for example, by trying out different tasks and ways of giving instructions. Moreover, learners might have different preferences: some would rather account for events in writing or possibly orally, others visually, including not only doing drawings but taking photos or compiling picture collages, and yet others by multimodal means, producing texts complemented with images and sounds. In Studies 1 to 5, learners could not choose the mode, however. This is something that could be considered in future studies. On the other hand, greater variety in the types of data collected might pose challenges in the data analysis.

Fifthly, it might be advisable to complement one type of narrative data with another type or by other types, of data altogether, such as interviews, questionnaires and classroom observation (as has already been the case in most previous studies that have made use of visual data). By the **triangulation** of pools of data, deeper and more reliable insights could be gained into the beliefs held by specific groups of learners in specific contexts. In a case study by Kalaja, Alanen and Dufva (2011) carried out in the project *From Novice to Expert*, three learners of English, young women, recollected their experiences of learning the language not only verbally but also visually: two of the students were consistent in their accounts from one mode (a written autobiography) to another (a self-portrait as a learner of EFL), even though they highlighted different aspects in their learning of the language; the third was not.

To conclude, further, preferably explicit, research is called for on learner beliefs about aspects of foreign language learning and teaching, possibly extended to beliefs about bi- or multilingualism as well, either at one specific point in time or in their development over time. For this, use could be made of narratives of both types and in more than two modes, and they could be analysed from a variety of theoretical starting points, thereby applying different units of analysis. Finally, while in Studies 1 to 5 the participants had all been university students, and very successful in their language

7 In their study conducted from sociocultural starting points, Coughlan and Duff (1994) found that school tasks and instructions were interpreted differently by students in class, leading to additional variation in task outcomes.

studies, in future research it would be worth taking other types of learners and contexts into consideration.

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