

Theoretical Aspects of Studying Beliefs about Language Learning (based on the piloting of a research questionnaire)

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Abstract: *This paper examines some theoretical aspects and methodological implications in planning research on beliefs about language learning. It gives an outline of existing studies and looks at different definitions of beliefs. It also describes how a questionnaire was developed and piloted for the purposes of a study of beliefs in Ruse University.*

Key words: *beliefs about language learning, metacognitive knowledge, questionnaires*

INTRODUCTION

Language learners enter the classroom with a variety of beliefs about language learning which range from the difficulty of the studied language, their own abilities and disadvantages, and successful learning techniques to the way classes should be managed. Regardless of their origin, beliefs influence greatly the learning process and could either facilitate or hinder the successful language acquisition. If studying a language is considered important or interesting, students reveal a higher degree of motivation and perseverance and as a result their mastery of the language increases. On the other hand, for some students grammar and vocabulary are the most important aspects of studying a language. This attitude deters them from participating in activities developing their communicative competences, since they believe that „you should not say anything unless it is grammatically correct“. Students may hold various unrealistic beliefs that force them neglect certain aspects of the language or underestimate their abilities. The role of the teacher is to identify these beliefs and renegotiate their meaning so that students change positively their perceptions of the learning process and themselves as learners.

Studying beliefs, therefore, is essential in analyzing the learners' needs, expectations, and individual differences so that they are taken into account in the development of teaching materials, planning classroom activities and the organization of the teaching process.

With reference to this, the paper outlines the key theoretical aspects of learner beliefs and the approaches to investigating them. In addition it reports on the development of a research tool and its piloting. This research work is part of the ***Studying Learner Beliefs about Language Learning (Developing an Innovative Instrument)*** project which is carried out by members of the Foreign Languages Department at Ruse University with funds provided by the National Science Fund. The objectives of the project are to develop a research instrument suited to the particular learning environment of Bulgarian students at Ruse University. It also aims at gathering qualitative and quantitative data for the needs of the foreign language teaching process.

THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF PILOTING THE INSTRUMENT

Theoretical aspects of Learner Beliefs about Language Learning

In cognitive psychology, learner beliefs about the nature of knowledge and learning or epistemological beliefs, have been investigated with the idea that they are a part of the underlying mechanisms of metacognition (Flavell, 1987, Ryan, 1984). From this perspective, beliefs about language learning are viewed as a component of metacognitive knowledge (Flavell, 1987) which include all that individuals understand about themselves as learners and thinkers, including their goals and needs. According to Wenden (1999) students' metacognitive knowledge makes up "a system of related ideas, some accepted without question and others validated by their experience" [26 as cited in 4: 436]. Apart from being seen as a component of metacognitive knowledge, other definitions have identified them as mini-theories (Hosenfeld, 1978), insights (Omaggio, 1978), culture of

learning (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996), learner assumptions (Riley, 1980), implicit theories, self-constructed representational systems (Rust, 1994), conceptions of learning (Benson and Lor, 1999) or "general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning, and about the nature of learning and teaching" [26:224]. Dörnyei (2005) has examined beliefs about language learning in the context of individual differences of language learners. In his book, *The Psychology of the Language Learner*, he examines a range of learner attributes such as personality traits, motivation, language aptitude and he classifies learner beliefs under the heading of other learner characteristics alongside with creativity, willingness to communicate and self-esteem. However, he points out that 'the concept of language learner beliefs carries theoretical ambiguities' and needs further clarification. He suggests that "learner beliefs research in second language acquisition studies may need to be continuously informed by corresponding investigations in educational psychology, following Mori's (1999) example". He outlines two basic tasks: 1. "Identify a closed system of basic beliefs about second language attainment that are relevant to language learners across diverse learning contexts" and 2. "Keep the categories separate from related and well established individual differences categories such as language attitudes or self-efficacy/confidence beliefs" [8:217].

Theoretical Aspects of Studying Learner Beliefs about Language Learning

Students' perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and metacognitive knowledge play an important role in the learning process and in many cases influence the ultimate success. Studies on language learning beliefs began with research in individual differences between successful and less successful learners (Wong and Fillmore, 1979 as cited in Altan, 2006). A lot of studies are based on Horwitz's (1988) questionnaire, the *Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory* (BALLI) which consists of 34 statements to which the students were asked to state their agreement. The statements were grouped in 5 sections: difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, the nature of language learning, learning and communication and motivation and expectations. Further studies have been conducted in different academic settings, across different cultures and among learners of different target languages. Some researchers have not tried to replicate Horowitz's original study and have developed their own instrument. (Kuntz, 1996; Coterall, 1999; Sakui and Gaies, 1999). One of the main contributions of later studies is the application of factor analysis to make the relationship between the observed variables clearer. (Sakui and Gaies, 1999; Rieger 2009). Using questionnaires or inventories seems to be the most widely spread method of studying beliefs, but besides it, other methods have also been used, including interviews, learner diaries, case studies, classroom observation, informal discussions and stimulated recalls, discourse analysis and others. A very popular combination proved to be administering a questionnaire and conducting an interview afterwards. This combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods was seen as an attempt to overcome the limitations of both types of methods. Finally it should be noted that some studies aimed to examine beliefs on their own, others sought to find links between learner beliefs and other individual differences, such as motivation, use of learning strategies, etc. and yet a third group tried to find out how teacher beliefs shape learner beliefs.

Development of a Questionnaire

Having these considerations in mind an instrument was developed and it was decided that it would be a combination of two existing questionnaires (Horwitz, 1985; 1988 and Coterall, 1995). This strategy is endorsed by Dörnyei (2010) when discussing how the item pool of a questionnaire should be drawn. He outlines three sources to get the actual statements. First the survey specialists write as many items as they could think of without restricting themselves to any number limitations. Nunnally (1978, as cited in Dörnyei, 2010) recommends that the item pool (i.e. the collection of statements the researchers

come up with) be one and a half to two times larger than the final scales (i.e. the approved items that are included in the questionnaire). Secondly "researchers can draw from qualitative exploratory data gathered from respondents such as notes taken during talks and brainstorming in focus or discussion groups, recorded unstructured/semi-structured interviews and student essays written around the subject of the enquiry" [9: 40]. And finally researchers can borrow questions from established questionnaires. It is argued that "questions that have been used frequently before must have been through extensive piloting and therefore the chances are that 'most of the bugs will have been ironed out of them" [25:120 as cited in 9:40]. So the second recommended source of getting the items was not employed in this project to save time but is viewed as a possibility in future studies.

Thus, the first version of the questionnaire consisted of two sections. The aim of the first section was to collect information about personal details while the aim of the second one was to elicit data concerning key aspects of beliefs about FL learning such as the nature of language learning, the role of the teacher, attitude to feedback, the learner's sense of self-efficacy, the use of strategies and the dimensions of the strategies-related behavior. The 68 items in this section were grouped under 10 headings representing the above mentioned categories of beliefs. An open-ended item "Other" was added with the intention to allow respondents to share their perspective. The questionnaire was translated into Bulgarian to facilitate students with lower proficiency in English.

Part Two

Please, tick the option which best describes your beliefs. You can tick as many options as you like. Also, rank the options 1 (the most important), 2 (very important), 3 (less important) 4 (the least important). Write the numbers opposite each option.

I believed that the teacher should be an expert

- in teaching languages
- in learning languages
- in showing students how to learn
- other.....

Fig. 1 Initial version of the questionnaire (an extract)

PILOTING OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

It was decided that the piloting of the instrument would be done among students that had taken part in Erasmus exchange programs. It was assumed that the stay abroad had raised their language learning awareness and they could share useful insights as to the suggested pool of Beliefs categories. Therefore, for the purposes of the piloting the questionnaire was further modified. Each heading of the initial version appeared twice in the new questionnaire, for example "*I believed that the role of the teacher was to ... I believe that the role of the teacher is to*" thus forming two mirror-like parts titled "Before the Erasmus exchange program" and "After the Erasmus exchange program" which would make it possible to compare the changes in the students' beliefs (see Fig. 1). A third section with open questions was added to gather information concerning situations, tasks, people, or reasons that might have led to changes in beliefs.

Before the ERASMUS exchange program	After the ERASMUS exchange program
I believed feedback on my language learning provided by	I believe feedback on my language learning provided by
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the teacher helped me most • other people helped me most • myself helped me most • other..... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the teacher helps me most • other people helps me most • myself helps me most • other.....

Fig 2 Revised questionnaire for the piloting

12 students, 7 girls and 5 boys, took part in the pilot study. The level of their language proficiency before the stay abroad ranged from Intermediate to Upper-Intermediate. They spent from 2 weeks to 5 months in an English speaking academic environment in host countries where the official language was not English. The purpose of their stay abroad was to write a Bachelor's Thesis (2 students) and to study for a semester (10 students).

The questionnaire was sent to the participants via e-mail and was accompanied by a brief letter stating the purposes of the project and the questionnaire in particular. The participants did not receive any additional instructions as to how to answer the questionnaire and had to rely entirely on the instruction in the questionnaire itself.

When filling in the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to mark the items they considered relevant to their experience and also rank them as: 1 (the most important), 2 (very important), 3 (less important), 4 (the least important) by writing the numbers opposite each item.

This method was chosen in an attempt to simplify the original five steps in a rating scale and further limit the pool of beliefs to those specific to the particular learning environment.

RESULTS OF THE PILOTING

Useful data was collected and the findings are consistent with research on the correlation between beliefs about FLL and a stay abroad. As Amuzie (2009) points out, most of the students who have spent time studying abroad experience a change in their beliefs on learner autonomy and the role of the teacher. This is proved by the pilot study where a distinct change is seen in comments on the following statements: *The role of the teacher is to explain why an activity is done*. It is important for 6 students before the stay abroad while after the stay abroad their number increases to 8. 5 students say that *The role of the teacher is to inform about progress* before the stay abroad while after the stay abroad this statement is marked by 8 students. The number of students who have marked *To set learning goals* as an important role of the teacher has decreased two times after the stay abroad.

With reference to the changed role of the teacher, attitude to feedback is also perceived in a new way. After the stay abroad a greater number of the students state *I know best how well I'm learning*. 8 students report that before the stay abroad *The teacher helps me most*, while after the stay their number decreases to 5.

A very distinctive change is also noticed in attitude towards feedback received through correcting mistakes (see Fig. 3). This is not surprising since *Making mistakes is a natural part of learning* is chosen by 6 students before the stay abroad while their number goes up to 10 after the stay abroad.

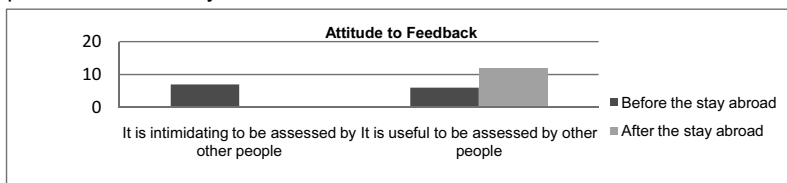


Fig. 3 Attitude to assessment

An increased sense of self-efficacy and learner autonomy is another major outcome of the study abroad program. A considerable number of students report an improvement in their use of metacognitive and communicative strategies (see Fig. 4).

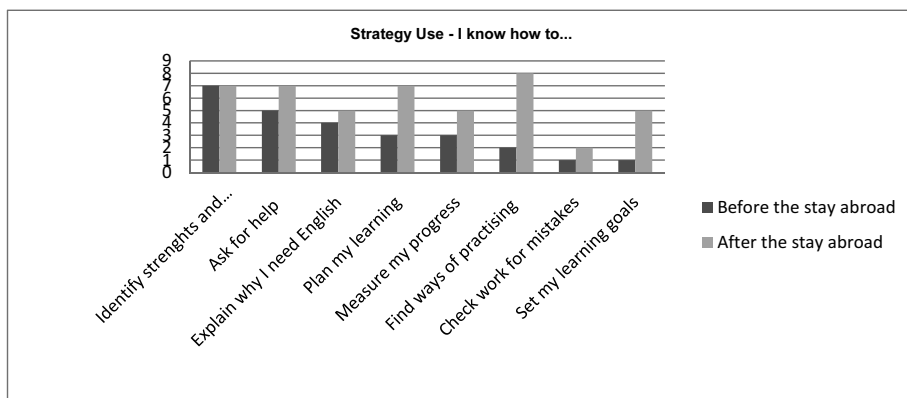


Fig. 4 Strategy use before and after the stay abroad

CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

The developed instrument proved to be a useful tool for gathering information and showing whether learners of English at Ruse University share the same beliefs with students of other countries, examined in previous studies.

Nevertheless, some changes should be made so that it is improved. First, the number of items must be reduced and reordered to ensure greater validity. The length of the questionnaire led to loss of interest because some of the items towards the end of the questionnaire were not marked by all respondents. Second, the layout and the administration of the questionnaire must be improved. Students have to be instructed, or receive detailed and clear written instruction how to respond to the items. Finally, the method of ranking the statements needs redefinition so that reliable and valid quantitative data is gathered for further analysis.

What is more, to see if there are any beliefs peculiar to Bulgarian students, a second stage of the research should be planned involving brainstorming sessions, interviews and writing essays to serve as a source of new ideas for another pool. In addition, new categories (e.g. motivation, etc.) so that overlapping between categories are avoided.

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