

# **Beliefs about language teaching and learning. Different contexts and perspectives**

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"El saber de mis hijos  
hará mi grandeza"

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# Recent developments on beliefs about language learning and teaching

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## Introduction

Beliefs about language learning and teaching have intrigued applied linguists since the mid-1980s starting with the pioneering work of Elaine Horwitz (1985) and Anita Wenden (1986). Since then, the interest in this topic in the field of Applied Linguistics has increased, with the publications of books on the theme (Bernat 2009; Borg, 2006; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003) as well as several thesis, dissertations and journal articles. As a construct, beliefs have eluded researchers since the beginning being labeled as "messy" (Pajares, 1992) and complex. Several terms have been used to refer to beliefs such as *folklinguistic theories of learning* (Miller & Ginsberg, 1995), *representations* (Riley, 1994), *metacognitive knowledge* (Wenden, 1986), *learning culture* (Riley, 1997), *the culture of learning languages* (Barcelos, 1995), and *culture of learning* (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996), *teacher cognition* (Borg, 2003), and *BAK (Beliefs-Assumption-Knowledge)* (Woods, 1996). This profusion of terms is not necessarily negative. To quote Freeman (1991), "the issue is not the pluralism of labels, but the recognition of the phenomenon itself" (p. 32).

Whereas the focus in the mid-1980's was on understanding *what* students and teachers believed about the language learning process, now the focus seems to be on *how* beliefs develop, fluctuate and interact with actions, emotions, identities or



affordances and how they are constructed within the micro- and macro-political contexts of learning and teaching languages (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011). In the most recent collection of papers on beliefs (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011), researchers, drawing on the contextual approach, go beyond describing beliefs and focus on how beliefs become appropriated and negotiated in interaction with significant others. Thus, beliefs are seen as increasingly complex and fluctuating.

The aim of this chapter is to present an overview of research on beliefs. In order to do that, I first present a summary of research on this topic in Brazil within a decade (1995-2005) presenting briefly the sorts of topics and methodology that have been used to investigate beliefs. I then explore the recent developments on belief research and conclude with suggestions for further research.

### Research on Beliefs in Brazil

Since the mid-90s, research on beliefs about language learning and teaching in Brazil has increased and developed extensively. In 2007, I conducted a state-of-the-art study reviewing a ten-year span of research in graduate programs in Brazil, looking at the thesis and dissertations on beliefs about language learning and teaching. I summarize the results of this research in the paragraphs below (for more information, see Barcelos, 2007).

Fifty studies (master's thesis and Ph.D. dissertations) were analyzed. These studies were conducted in Brazil between the years of 1994 through 2006. Research on beliefs about language learning and teaching in Brazil is very extensive and it can be divided into three periods: *the initial period* (1990-1995), *the development period* (1996-2001), and *the expansion period* (2002-to the present).

In the *first* period of investigation of beliefs in Brazil, the studies were still incipient. There were only three master's thesis and one Ph.D. dissertation. Most of the studies focused on myths, representations and conceptions. The term beliefs was used in only one of the studies and as part of the concept of *the culture of learning languages*. Three studies investigated pre-service teachers and one investigated in-service teachers.

The *second* period of investigation constituted fertile soil for research on beliefs in Brazil with 14 studies. In this period, there were more studies that used the concept of *the cultures of learning and teaching* as a springboard for beliefs, as well as the *culture of evaluating*, which refers to teachers' beliefs about assessment. Studies on specific beliefs also began to appear in this period, such as beliefs about the good teacher, public schools, and autonomy, as well as studies on beliefs about other foreign languages such as Spanish and French. Most studies focused on in-service or pre-service teachers and in public institutions.

The *third* period consisted of 17 studies. In this phase, an increase was observed in the investigation of specific beliefs such as beliefs about vocabulary, grammar, good learner, anxiety, technology, teaching and learning English in public schools, error correction, motivation, reading and writing and studies concerning beliefs about other languages, such as Spanish.

In regards to methodology, most studies are qualitative (case studies and ethnographic-based studies) with the use of different data collection instruments such as interviews, classroom observations, open-ended questionnaires, narratives, and drawings. A few studies use the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI, Horwitz, 1985), but it is never used by itself. Other instruments such as interviews or narratives were used to complement this inventory. This is important since it provides triangulation of data. In addition, some studies include member-checking and bring the teacher's views to the study. A few studies also address the relationship between teachers' beliefs and actions as well as teachers' and students' beliefs. Quite a few studies show an interest in beliefs about the public school context in Brazil.

This variety of instruments is a sign of the researchers' understanding of the complexity and dynamicity of belief systems. The analysis in that state-of-the-art article (Barcelos, 2007) has suggested that more instruments seem to be more adequate to capture the paradoxical nature of beliefs. These studies use the term *belief system* to indicate their complex nature and interrelationship in a network where one belief connects to another, although not all beliefs are



coherent and, sometimes they may be contradictory with each other. The next section discusses this more indepth.

### Approaches to Investigating Beliefs

To discuss the nature of beliefs, it is important to situate them within the approaches that have been used to investigate them as well. Thus, in this section I address the different approaches, based on Barcelos (2003).

The Normative Approach (Barcelos, 2003) includes studies<sup>1</sup> that have used Likert-type questionnaires to investigate beliefs about SLA (Second Language Acquisition). Thus, data collection is done mostly through the use of closed questionnaires, such as BALLI, the most widely used questionnaire to investigate beliefs developed by Horwitz (1985). Although the questionnaire may be a valid instrument, it also presents limitations and one of them is that beliefs are measured out of context within an etic perspective. This is problematic. Firstly, because students may interpret the items very differently from what the researcher originally intended. Second, the beliefs presented by the researcher may be different from the beliefs students think are significant in their learning. Third and finally, if students do have some of those beliefs, what does it mean? Do they behave in accordance with these beliefs? How do they interact with these beliefs? Why do they acquire these beliefs? These are important questions to ask if one is to understand students' beliefs.

The metacognitive approach takes a step further and places more importance on students' own voices, defining beliefs according to the framework on metacognitive knowledge, advocated mainly by Wenden (1987, 1998, 1999, 2001). The implicit assumption within this approach is that students' metacognitive knowledge also constitutes their "theories in action", that help them to reflect on what they are doing and to develop potential for learning (Wenden, 1987, p. 112). Metacognitive knowledge is defined as "the stable, stable although sometimes incorrect knowledge that learners have acquired about language, learning and the language learning process" (Wenden, 1987, p. 163). Although Wenden describes this knowledge

<sup>1</sup>For a list of the studies in each approach, please see Barcelos (2000, 2003).

as relatively stable, she does recognize that this knowledge may change over time.

The use of interviews allows learners to reflect on their experience. In addition, the studies within this approach provide information on metacognitive knowledge as related to self-oriented learning. However, beliefs are not inferred from actions, but only from intentions and statements. Although beliefs are connected to experience, the context and its influence on students' beliefs are not considered. Defined as metacognitive knowledge, beliefs are seen in these studies as ways to transform learners into better learners, into *good* and *successful* learners, thus creating a *moulding of the ideal learner*, as Benson and Voller (1997) have criticized in talking about learner training.

The studies in the contextual approach use diverse theoretical frameworks, different types of data collection instruments (such as ethnographic classroom observations, metaphor analysis, and discourse analysis), and varied data analysis procedures. Beliefs are described as embedded in students' contexts and students' emic perspectives are taken into account. The studies usually use methods that are grounded in students' own interpretative meanings and perspectives. Context, understood as learners' constructions of their experiences, is crucial for this type of analysis. Beliefs are then seen as dynamic and social.

According to Barcelos (2003), this approach presents a much more positive view of learners than the normative and metacognitive approaches, by portraying them as social beings interacting in their environment. As Riley (1997) has suggested, researchers should "look at the learning conditions in which learners find themselves" (p. 141) in order to understand their beliefs about SLA. In summary, beliefs about SLA should be investigated interactively, where beliefs and actions interconnect and interrelate with each other. Dufva (2003) mentions that "...it is a mistake to analyse beliefs without considering the social and cultural context (past and present) they occur in" (p. 135).

In the contextual approach, context is understood as "an integral element of cognition" according to Dufva (2003, p. 136). Context is seen not as a static concept or a recipient for social interaction, but a



"socially constituted, interactively sustained, time-bound phenomenon" where "each additional move within the interaction modifies the existing context while creating a new arena for subsequent interaction" (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992, pp. 5-6). Thus, understanding beliefs within the contextual approach, means asking: *How? Why? What for?*

Understanding beliefs within the contextual approach also means understanding the concept of "belief ascription" (Kramsch, 2003). In other words, "people produce and ascribe beliefs against a social background of expression, enactment and tacit assent (or dissent) of belief" (Kramsch, 2003, p. 113). Hence, Kramsch (2003) refers that beliefs "might be an opportunity to display originality and creativity, or to vent one's frustration at having to fill yet another questionnaire. The social practice of sentence completion questionnaires, in its linguistic and non-linguistic aspects, plays a constitutive role in defining the space of possible beliefs" (p. 113). In other words, what gets displayed in a questionnaire must be considered within the social practice of the event of filling out questionnaires for students or teachers, who might see it as an opportunity to complain, compliment or just express their frustration in being research subjects.

In short, in the contextual approach, beliefs are part of a meaning making process and are co-constructed in interaction with others, helping us to make sense of world phenomena. They are related to language, since language mediates all interactions and actions. They also express the accommodation of certain meanings and discursive practices in certain communities where we learn or use a language. They are part of a socialization process of becoming members of a community (English teachers or learners, or language users or speakers in certain contexts in specific countries or imagined communities). Beliefs are related to the macro-context which includes ideologies, power structures and status in a given society as related to language learning/teaching and language use.

The classification of these approaches was part of the research I concluded in the beginning of 2000 (Barcelos, 2000). At that time, studies concerning beliefs were still few compared to today. There are many studies that use only closed ended questionnaires as means to investigate beliefs and I see that as problematic for the



reasons cited above. However, many studies also combine different instruments, thus making it difficult to classify these approaches in the same way. In Brazil there are studies in which have used BALLI, interviews and other instruments such as language learning histories, drawings, and metaphors as well. These kinds of studies have been seen as part of the contextual approach. More recently, sociocultural and dynamic systems theories have played a major role on how researchers have started understanding beliefs (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011). Thus, perhaps we can say that nowadays we have a mainstream approach to beliefs and a contextual approach that involves the recent developments such as sociocultural theory and complex systems. These themes are explored more in the next session.

### Recent Developments on the Nature of Beliefs

Since the eighties, the concept of beliefs has undergone a transformation. The literature has moved from a simplistic view of beliefs, previously seen as mental, stable and individual, to a more complex view of beliefs as paradoxical, dynamic and contradictory (Barcelos, 2003; Barcelos & Kalaja, 2003; Dufva, 2003; Kramsch, 2003). Beliefs have also been described as ecological, situated in context, emergent, socially and contextually constructed. As Barcelos & Kalaja (2003) stated, "beliefs become articulated as we act and as we talk about it" (p. 233). Beliefs are also mediated, that is, they can be seen as instruments, available tools for us to use or not depending on the situation, task and people interacting with us (Alanen, 2003; Dufva, 2003).

More recently, with the advent of Sociocultural Theory (Johnson, 2009) and Complexity Theory (Larsen-Freeman, 2008), a more sociocultural and complex approach to beliefs has emerged (see Feryok, 2010; Special Issue of *System* on Beliefs, 2011). These recent developments suggest new characteristics of beliefs. First, beliefs are now seen as a complex, multidimensional and dialectical system which is both stable *and* dynamic. Second, beliefs are fluctuating, i.e., they fluctuate and have a complex trajectory about different aspects at different times. Thus, a teacher or student may have different beliefs which evolve during

different times in their teaching or learning processes. Third, beliefs are related to the micro- and macro-political contexts and discourses. As such, they are socially historical and political products, connected to the broad socio-political contexts (De Costa, 2011; Negueruela-Azarola, 2011; Pan and Block, 2011). Although they are social in origin, beliefs are also dynamically and personally transformed in the process of internalization (Negueruela-Azarola, 2011). On the one hand, beliefs are other-oriented. In other words, significant others can affect a person's decisions to incorporate new beliefs or reinforce old ones. On the other hand, beliefs are closely related to emotions and self-concepts, and intrinsically connected to one's emotions (Aragão, 2011; Barcelos, 2013).

Having presented the recent developments in how we understand beliefs, I now conclude with future perspectives and suggestions for research on beliefs.

### Future Perspectives on Research on Beliefs

One of the recent developments in Applied Linguistics (and in other fields as well) has been the increase in the interest of emotions. Emotion is essential to human cognition (Dewaele, 2005) and inseparable from cognition (Van Veen & Lasky, 2006). The relationship between beliefs and emotions is now being researched (Barcelos, 2013; Garret & Young, 2011). According to Frijda, Manstead and Bem (2000), emotions "are at the heart of what beliefs are about" (p. 1). There is a reciprocal relationship between emotions and beliefs and "beliefs establish meta-affective contexts for the experience of emotion and emotion stabilizes beliefs" (Hannula, Evans, Philippou, & Zan, 2004, p. 7). In addition to this, emotions influence beliefs in a number of ways. First, they provoke changes in mental operations (image production) and bodily change (Damasio, 2004). Second, they validate and provide evidence for beliefs, by guiding attention towards relevant information (Winograd, 2003). That is, when we believe something, we look for evidence of what we believe, so our attention to what we think is relevant is guided by our emotions. Third and finally, emotions awaken, intrude into, shape beliefs, by creating, altering, making them more resistant to change by ampli-



fying them (strengthening or intensifying them) or decreasing their strength (Frijda et al., 2000).

Woolfolk Hoy, Davis and Pape (2006), in their review of teacher beliefs, demonstrate that self beliefs seem to be particularly important with regard to teachers' implementation of reforms. The authors (2006) mention, "Research on teacher identity, efficacy, and change reminds us that the teacher's motivation, emotional responses, and openness to change are closely tied to beliefs about self" (p. 729). Kubanyiova (2009) makes a point that if we aspire to understand the complexity of language teacher cognitive development, we need to investigate the motivational and affective factors along with the cognitive and contextual ones. Kubanyiova (2009) also shows the intricate relationship between teachers' identity, emotions and cognitions. She believes that teachers' awareness of the discrepancy between who they are and who they desire to be, "is accompanied by emotional dissonance" and "is critical in triggering people's self-regulatory activity towards achieving such a condition" (Kubanyiova, 2009, pp. 320-321). In her work, she has found that teachers' "fear of not meeting students' expectations becomes a factor inhibiting change when associated with an imminent threat to the teacher's identity goals..." (p. 327). Teachers' fear of identity may "hinder change (i.e. being perceived as a teacher who is 'not serious enough', 'incompetent', and therefore 'not appreciated' by the students) and may be accompanied by negative emotions such as anger, embarrassment and disappointment" (ibid, p. 327). Thus, we can see how important it is to study emotions, beliefs and identities together, something that authors have begun to explore (Barcelos, 2013).

A second aspect on belief research refers to investigating how the different methods to investigate beliefs affect how teachers reflect on beliefs as well as the different types of beliefs we can identify with different instruments (Borg, 2003). In other words, what counts as evidence of beliefs on research? What role does the researcher play in eliciting beliefs and in how interview questions and questionnaire items are formed?

Third and finally, future studies could investigate the spaces that belief investigation open up for students and teachers in the language classroom. In other words, how the types of beliefs teachers

and students hold help them to construct positive self-images of language users who act agentively in the world? How do beliefs help students and teachers build communities of practice as well as imagined communities in a given context? And finally, how can the study of beliefs contribute to better learning instruction and quality of life in the language classroom?

### Implications for Teaching

Beliefs are a key aspect of the language learning and teaching process. As such, teacher educators, teachers and students need to understand this concept so that it can be integrated into their teaching and learning practices. For teacher educators working with teachers, knowing about teacher beliefs is essential since the extent to which teachers will learn teaching depends on the kinds of beliefs they bring and how this gets unpacked during their studies in the language teaching courses. For language teachers, it is necessary for them to understand their own beliefs. It would be best if this was learned in their language teaching course through activities, self-reflection tasks and explicating of, and sometimes, deconstructing of beliefs. When teachers do not have opportunity to do this in their language teaching courses, then they will have to do this by themselves and this can be quite difficult, unless they have a trustable colleague or a group of colleagues that can help them to make their beliefs explicit and reflect on them. I believe that only when teachers are aware of their own beliefs and know about beliefs, can they use it with their students in class. This is important, because students also come to class with a lot of beliefs about the language learning process that may hinder their best performance or cause conflicts with the teacher's methods or approaches. If the teacher is not aware or does not know their students' beliefs they may tend to blame students for aspects such as motivation and interest when in fact there may be a cognitive conflict of beliefs between teachers and students. In addition, if students learn to become aware of their own beliefs, they may be less harsh on themselves and become better language users.

In this chapter, I aimed at presenting a review of studies on beliefs in Brazil, pointing out the different data collection instruments



and definitions of beliefs that have prevailed within a decade in that country. I also pointed out how our understanding of beliefs have changed and moved from an individualistic perspective to a broader view of beliefs as complex, fluctuating, dynamic and dialectical, according to more recent studies. These developments will certainly influence future studies and researchers' choices of instruments and ways of conducting research with teachers and students. There are many factors involved in researching beliefs and recent research has only begun to reveal those factors, such as identities and emotions, as discussed in this chapter. I hope this chapter has contributed in unveiling some of the complexity of beliefs and in helping both teachers and researchers to understand this key concept in the language learning and teaching processes. We have only begun to explore the tip of the iceberg of what beliefs are. The explorations shall continue.

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