

L2 Learner's Beliefs: An Overview

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Abstract

This paper overviews the research into L2 learners' beliefs through sketching some conceptualizations of beliefs from the psychological and educational literature as they appear in SLL/FLL (Second Language Learning/Foreign Language Learning) belief research. What beliefs are, how they are formed, and how they impact on language learning are reviewed by referring to different theoretical conceptualizations and SLL/FLL research done in this area. The final part of this paper proposes a categorization which views L2 learners' beliefs as a process of progression and concludes by suggesting new directions (some questions to consider) for future research.

Key words: L2 learners, beliefs, social/cultural representations, metacognitive knowledge, self-efficacy, control-beliefs, attributions, learner conceptions.

Introduction

The role and importance of beliefs have been of a great interest for many scholars from diverse disciplines. In disciplines where human behavior and learning are of a primary concern (namely, cognitive psychology, educational psychology and social psychology) beliefs are viewed as an important construct to be investigated in relation to their subsequent impact on people's behavior. Many theories of learning especially the ones which emerged from conceptual frameworks for the study of *human cognition* (e.g. Flavel's metacognitive theory: 1979) *expectancies*, *goals* (e.g. Fishbein and Ajzen's expectancy-value model: 1975. See also¹), *attitudes*, *motivation* (e.g. Socio-educational model of Gardner & Lambert: 1972), *social representations* (e.g. Moscovici's theory of social representations, 1976) utilized beliefs to comprehend human behavior.

Substantial amount of research regarding language learners' beliefs (directly or implicitly) has been conducted in diverse SLL /FLL contexts (Alanen, 2003; Barcelos, 2003; Benson &

¹ Weiner's attribution theory, 1986; Ajzen, 2002.

Lor, 1999; Castellotti, 2001; Castellotti & Moore, 2002; Cotteral, 1995; Dufva, 2003; Gardner *et al.*, 2004; Horwitz, 1987, 1999; Kalaja, 2003; Levine, 2003; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Riley, 1989, 1997; Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Wenden, 1986a, 1986b, 1999; White, 1999; Williams, 2002; Williams, Burden, Pulet, & Maun, 2004; Yang, 1999). Some of these studies looked for possible relationships between beliefs and SL/FL learners': a) use of strategies (i.e. metacognitive strategies); b) motivational paradigms; c) readiness for autonomy; d) approaches to language learning; e) attitudes towards language learning, learning materials, learning tasks, teachers, teaching, L2 culture, and use of L1 and L2.

Early research into language learners' beliefs and attitudes, can be traced back to the early 1970s within the motivational research studies of Gardner (for an overview see Gardner, 1979, 2001a, 2001b; Gardner, Masgoret, Tennant, & Mihic, 2004; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003).

Since the 1980s language learners' beliefs, with the influence of research in cognitive psychology, have received remarkable attention. These early studies mainly employed mainstream cognitive approaches as research orientations. Research studies using cognitive orientations considered beliefs as an internal autonomous property of the mind, and investigated language learners' *higher order representations* (beliefs that the individual is aware of, conscious about) to establish links between learners' beliefs and L2 attainments.

L2 learners' beliefs have also been examined from social psychological and sociocultural perspectives. Research into learner beliefs from a social psychological perspective looked into learners' beliefs under the rubrics of representations (see Castellotti & Moore: 2002; Zarate, Gohard-Radenkovic, Lussier & Pens, 2004) and attitudes (see, Gardner 1972, 1979, 2001a, 2001b; Gardner *et al.*, 2004; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). Both social psychological and sociocultural theories have stressed the influence of external factors and the knowledge which is acquired from the environment. Sociocultural approaches have tended to focus on how beliefs are (co)constructed, appropriated and mediated through social transactions. Sociocultural approaches, especially the ones mainly influenced by Vygotsky's constructivist model, have also stressed the part played by significant others and artifacts (social tools) in

belief-formation, with a special emphasis on the importance of ‘speech’² in dialogic exchange (see Alanen, 2003; Dufva, 2003).

What are Beliefs?

In the SLL/FLL literature, influenced by different theories and conceptualizations, language learners’ beliefs have appeared under different rubrics and categories such as: a) L2 learners’ metacognitive knowledge; b) mental and social representations; c) self-beliefs such as self-concept beliefs, and self efficacy beliefs; d) control-beliefs, such as self-regulatory beliefs, locus of control-beliefs; e) attributions.

However, these distinctions between different perspectives and conceptualizations seem to overlap at some points in the literature, and some terms (although defined differently) appear to be used interchangeably. At this point it may be useful to refer to psychological and educational literature to sketch different conceptualizations of beliefs which have been of interest to some SLL/ FLL researchers.

Metacognitive Knowledge

The term *metacognitive knowledge* originates from Flavell’s metacognitive theory and refers to the individual’s beliefs or knowledge (cognitions) about (his or others’) cognitive processes (Flavell, 1979). This knowledge, in return, is used by the individual to guide his/her cognitive activities (i.e., engage in or abandon a particular cognitive activity). Flavell proposed three categories of metacognitive knowledge: a) *person variables*: these are the individual’s beliefs about himself and other people (e.g. that s/he can learn better by memorizing vocabulary items, or his/her friend can learn languages better because s/he has a better memory etc.); b) *task variables*: these are the individual’s knowledge about a given task (e.g. whether the task is interesting, familiar, and whether it is within the capabilities of the individual to accomplish); c) and *strategy variables*: these involve selection of appropriate cognitive processes to fulfil a task (e.g. whether the task requires summarizing,

² In Vygotskian thinking speech is an important element in knowledge construction. According to this view language users shape their ideas and construct knowledge while speaking (Alanen, 2003).

analyzing, expressing personal opinion etc. or whether the individual needs to ask for further clarification etc.).

The term metacognitive knowledge has been used in SLL/FLL literature since the 1980s (see Wenden, 1986a, 1986b). Since then the term, although defined differently by some scholars, has been referred to in various belief studies in SLL/FLL literature (Alanen, 2003; Dufva, 2003; Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Yang, 1999; Wenden, 1995, 1998, 1999). Wenden (1999) refers to beliefs as a subset of metacognitive knowledge. Although she acknowledges that the terms metacognitive knowledge and beliefs are used interchangeably, she claims that "...beliefs are distinct from metacognitive knowledge in that they are value-related and tend to be held more tenaciously." (Wenden, 1999, p. 436).

However, many researchers now agree that the importance does not lie in the fact that knowledge differs from beliefs, but that beliefs themselves constitute a form of knowledge. The term metacognitive knowledge has also been used interchangeably with learner cognitions, and learner representations by some SLL/FLL scholars.

Mental & Social Representations

The concept of *mental representations* is a theoretical construct borrowed from cognitive science. According to CTM (Computational Theory of Mind) representations are information-bearing units, and are connected to one another to form networks of information which are stored in the mind. This view considers representations as a construct which belongs to individual minds. However, Durkheim defines representations as "(Representations are) group ideas which are widely shared and socially forceful because they are collectively created through the interaction of many minds." (Durkheim as cited in Riley, 1997, p. 127). Gremmo also emphasizes the role played by culture and society and claims that the aggregate of representations that learners hold about languages and learning (e.g. the idea that languages are learned through imitation, memorization and so forth) constitute their 'language learning culture', which, in return, guides learners' language learning behaviors (see Gremmo, 1993a).

Zarate *et al.*, (2004) stress the influence of positive and negative representations on learners' behaviors. They explain that "... positive representations lead to xenophile attitudes which

are generally expressed by a behavior and practice of openness to the ‘Other’, while negative representations lead to behavior that is displayed through xenophobic rejection and refusal of the Other.” (p. 27). Castellotti and Moore (2002) assert that representations are neither ‘wrong’ nor ‘correct’ nor ‘permanent’. They sustain that representations vary depending on the *macro-context* (curricular options, teaching orientations and relationships between languages in society as a whole and in the classroom), and *micro-context* (directly related to classroom activities, and the attitudinal and classroom dynamics).

The concept of *social representations* was introduced to social psychology by French social psychologist Moscovici (the concept was first introduced in 1961 and fully elaborated in 1976). This view rejects individuality of human cognition (Moscovici, 1997). According to this view representations are formed collaboratively in a society. In this respect Moscovici’s social representations theory shares similarities with Piagetian theory and other constructivist and sociocultural trends in psychology in that knowledge is treated as correlative and co-constitutive (Duveen and Llyod: 1990). According to Moscovici, social representations are composed of two complementary (interdependent) functions: a) *anchoring*: whereby the unfamiliar is absorbed into the familiar categories which are shared by the individuals who are members of the same group); and b) *objectivation*³: whereby representations are transformed into more significant images easily comprehensible by the individual.

The term social representations has been widely referred to in many studies which have looked into language learners’ beliefs (e.g. Castellotti & Moore, 2002; Zarate, 1993; Zarate *et al.*, 2004). More often the term has been used to refer to *common knowledge* such as stereotypes, attitudes, prejudices, images and so forth.

Self-beliefs

Self-beliefs have become a real research interest with Bandura’s social cognitive theory (see Bandura, 1986). His ideas have been widely referred to by SLL/FLL researchers (e.g. Dörnyei & Otto, 1998; White, 1995; Yang, 1999). According to Bandura these beliefs comprise a self-system, and the individual’s behavior is the result of the interaction between this system and external influences. Self-beliefs-- which learners create, develop, and hold to

³ The term *objectivation* has also been referred to as *objectification* by some scholars.

be true for themselves-- are considered to play a vital role in their successes and failures (Pajares & Schunk, 2002).

Self-beliefs are studied under different classifications such as: self-concept beliefs, self-worth beliefs, and self-efficacy beliefs.

Self-worth belief refers to the opinion the individual has about himself/herself. Self worth belief is assumed to be influenced by society and culture, school achievement, and opinion of others.

Self-concept belief is “a self-descriptive judgement that includes an evaluation of competence and the feeling of self-worth associated with the judgement in question.” “Self-concept beliefs reflect questions of ‘being’ and ‘feeling’.” (Pajares & Schunk, 2002, p.20).

Self-efficacy beliefs refer to personal beliefs (judgements) about one's capabilities to engage in an activity or perform a task at a given level (Bandura, 1986). “Self-efficacy beliefs revolve around the question of ‘can’.” (Pajares & Schunk, 2002, p.20).

Control-beliefs

Control-beliefs are “beliefs about the presence of factors that may further or hinder performance.” (Ajzen, 2002, p.1). Dörnyei and Otto refer to the term as “perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behaviour” (Dörnyei & Otto, 1998, p.56). It is assumed that learners who believe that they have sufficient control over the outcome exert effort towards achieving a behavior. Control-beliefs are considered to have an important impact on learning outcomes. Dörnyei & Otto state that there is significant evidence to show that “failure that is ascribed to stable and uncontrollable factors such as low ability hinders future achievement.” (Dörnyei & Otto, 1998, p.61).

The concept *locus of control* was first introduced by Rotter in 1960s. Locus of control-beliefs are people's beliefs about what causes their actions. These beliefs, in turn, guide what kinds of attitudes and behaviors people adopt. In other words a locus of control orientation is an individual's belief about whether outcomes of an action are within their personal control

(*internal locus of control*) or whether these events happen because of some external causes outside their personal control (*external locus of control*).

Learners' control-beliefs together with self-efficacy beliefs have proved to play an important role in *self-regulation* during L2 learning process. Thus, control-beliefs have increasingly been gaining importance in the SLL/FLL field (e.g. Dickinson, 1995; Dörnyei & Otto, 1998; White, 1999).

Attributions

Attributions are the individual's beliefs about causes (internal & external) of outcomes (Weiner, 1986). Attributions refer to individuals' interpretations of the causes of events that happen to themselves and others. A person's attribution about himself/ herself is also known as a locus of control belief. The difference between an attribution and a locus of control belief is that the latter is a belief that an individual ascribes as a cause for his/her own action and this belief guides the individual in his/her future behaviors. Attributions on the other hand can be made by individuals regarding other people's behaviours. Despite different conceptualizations and different definitions in the SLL/FLL literature attributions and locus of control-beliefs have been used interchangeably (e.g. Dörnyei & Otto, 1998; White, 1999).

How are Beliefs Formed?

How beliefs come into being is viewed differently by different scholars. To what extent beliefs are social and cultural but also mental and individual has been the major debate in the social and cognitive psychological literature. The scholars taking social psychological and sociocultural standpoints claim that beliefs are constructed in a social context. They, therefore, consider it to be inconsistent (inexact) to talk about beliefs without referring to the context in which they are shaped. The scholars defending cognitivist viewpoints, on the other hand, have paid little or no attention to the context where beliefs are constructed. These scholars have considered beliefs as *well-organized schema* (networks of connected ideas) and claimed that belief formation is an individual autonomous act and each belief bears the mark of the individual. Their main emphasis, therefore, has been not on the knowledge which is

acquired from the environment but rather on learners' acquired knowledge which is memorized and stored as the learners' knowledge reservoir.

However, today, both a cognitive perspective on the individuality of beliefs and a social psychological perspective on the social nature of beliefs are both considered to be justifiable and complementary (see Sperber & Hirschfeld, 1999 for comparisons between cognitive and social approaches). This dual nature of beliefs (being both social and individual) is supported by most sociocultural approaches⁴ (see Alanen, 2003; Dufva, 2003).

Castellotti and Moore (2002) stress the social nature of language learners' representations and claim that these representations are constructed and shaped through interactions between groups in a society. Similarly, Gremmo (1993a) argues that the society's general vision about language learning, and the learner's educational past, and personal experiences influence the formation of learners' representations and language learning culture.

Why are Learners' Beliefs Important?

Beliefs are very often associated with self. Interest in the learner as a self gained importance with the influence of Carl Rogers' humanistic approach. In Rogers' humanistic movement the *self* is considered to be the central aspect of personality. He believed that an individual needs positive regard both from the self (positive self-concept, self-worth etc.) and from others in order for self-actualisation and growth to take place (Pajares & Schunk, 2002). In language classrooms humanistic approaches contributed a shift toward the learner and his/her needs as a learner.

However, research into learner thinking and learner beliefs has gained ground with the developments of cognitive psychology. As a result of the influence of cognitive psychology, language learners are today seen as active and responsible participants who learn from their own experiences, make their own choices and respond to events as they perceive them (Meskill & Rangelova, 2000; Williams & Burden, 1997). Gremmo and Riley (1995) claim

⁴ Some sociocultural approaches, especially the ones which employ Vygotskian perspective, view beliefs as both individual and social (See Alanen, 2003; Sperber, 1999).

that both humanistic and cognitive psychology “...emphasize learning as a process resulting in extension of the range of meanings of which the individual is capable, as something learners do, rather than being done to them.” (p.153). They also claim that these two approaches (humanistic and cognitive psychology) form the methodological basis for the communicative approach to language learning and teaching (the approach which is widely advocated by SLL/FLL specialists).

From this perspective, which still dominates SLL/FLL today, efficient learning could not be accomplished without understanding learners and their interpretations of their personal learning experiences (Meskill & Rangelova, 2000).

Learners’ beliefs have proved to influence both the actions and experiences of language learners (Horwitz, 1999). Empirical findings have demonstrated that beliefs that language learners hold about a target foreign language and its culture affect their attitudes towards that language and together with other variables play a role in their L2 motivations (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005; Gardner, 1979, 2001a, 2001b; Gardner *et al.*, 2004; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). In the same vein, Castellotti and Moore (2002) claim that social groups’ shared images (representations) about other languages and learning these languages can influence learners’ attitudes towards other languages and finally their interest in learning these languages. Attitudes and beliefs have also been reported to have a notable effect on L2 learners’ strategy use, with negative attitudes and beliefs resulting in poor strategy use (Oxford, 1994).

White (1999) asserts that language learners’ expectations which are developed prior to their experiences are also influenced and shaped by their beliefs. According to White these expectations influence how individuals react to, respond to and experience a new environment. In other words, learners’ beliefs, which are formed through their experiences, guide them in their conceptualizations of language learning and influence the approaches they adopt to L2 learning (see Benson & Lor, 1999). If they believe that languages can only be learned through translation and explanation, they will expect the language instruction to be based on translation and explanation and will reject any approach adopted by the teacher which does not correspond to this expectation. If learners believe that languages are learned by memorizing and reproducing, they will adopt strategies to memorize vocabulary items and grammar rules to reproduce these whenever required (quantitative/surface approach to

learning⁵). If they believe that understanding the meaning and the communication is important they will adopt strategies to absorb the language in its natural context (qualitative/deep approach⁶) (Benson & Lor, 1999).

The beliefs that learners develop and hold to be true about their capabilities and skills they possess have an immediate impact on their learning behaviors. Pajares and Schunk (2002) suggest that research should focus on students' beliefs in order to understand why students choose to do certain activities and avoid others and why they achieve and why they fail to achieve. Zeldin and Pajares (2000) assert that learners who believe that they do not have the required skills will not engage in tasks in which those skills are required and these beliefs about their competencies will affect "the choices they make, the effort they put forth, their inclinations to persist at certain tasks, and their resiliency in the face of failure." (Zeldin & Pajares, 2000, p. 215). Similarly, Wenden (1995) maintains that learners refer to their self-concept beliefs and their perception of the task demands to interpret and act upon the learning activity. She sustains that learners choose to engage in activities when they perceive that they have sufficient competence to fulfil the task requirements. Learners who believe that language learning requires a special ability which they lack, for example: "Some people have a good ear for languages, they just pick them up, but I'm not one of them" (Riley, 1997, p. 134); or "I'm not gifted for languages" (Riley, 1989, p.70), would naturally not be motivated towards learning a foreign language. Riley (1997) states that subscription to any of these beliefs will have a direct consequence on the way learners learn. He maintains that although some of these beliefs can be considered as 'wrong' by SLL/FLL specialists they are still meaningful because they reflect the 'subjective reality', the 'truth' from the learners' point of view (Riley, 1997).

Benson and Lor (1999) maintain that language teachers need not only know what beliefs learners hold about learning but they also need to know whether these beliefs are 'functional' or 'dysfunctional' in order to be able to influence learners' attitudes and behaviors. In the same

⁵ Quantitative/surface approach : Intention to complete task requirements; memorise information needed for assessments; failure to distinguish principles from examples; treat task as an external imposition; focus on discrete elements without integration; unreflectiveness about purpose or strategies (Entwistle: 1987, p. 16).

⁶ Qualitative/deep approach: Intention to understand; vigorous interaction with content; relate new ideas to previous knowledge; relate concepts to everyday experience; relate evidence to conclusions; examine the logic of the argument (Entwistle, 1987, p. 16).

vein, Ellis (2001) maintains that it is important to identify learners' beliefs which relate to successful learning and beliefs which have a negative impact on language learning. He suggests that these beliefs be used to develop self-awareness in learners.

Thus, understanding language learners' beliefs is claimed to be vital to understanding learners and their approaches to language learning in order to be able to adopt appropriate language education policies and plan and implement consistent language instruction (Benson & Lor, 1999; Castellotti & Moore, 2002; Horwitz, 1999; Riley, 1997; Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Yang, 1999; Wenden, 1999; Zarate *et al.*, 2004).

Today in some institutions where foreign languages are taught, learner training or counselling programmes⁷ are integrated in language learning curricula to negotiate (mediate) learners' dysfunctional beliefs and help them to appropriate these in a more functional way. The Council of Europe has published various studies proposing different approaches for mediating language learners' representations and helping learners develop positive attitudes toward the target culture(s) and language(s) they are learning (see Byram & Planet, 2000; Fenner, 2001; Zarate *et al.*, 2004).

Research into Beliefs in SLL/FLL

SLL/FLL literature provides us with a rich body of theoretical and empirical studies about learner beliefs. Research into beliefs in the SLL/FLL domain can broadly be divided into two principal groups as regards the approaches they employ⁸: a) approaches based on mainstream cognitive orientations; and b) approaches based on sociocultural orientations (Dufva, 2003).

However, these two groupings should be viewed with caution since there is not a clear-cut distinction between cognitive and sociocultural approaches and there is neither a single cognitive nor a single sociocultural approach (Alanen, 2003). Thus, these two approaches should not be considered as mutually exclusive but rather points on a continuum where classical cognitive orientations are placed at one end and sociocultural orientations at the

⁷ CRAPEL (Centre de Recherches et D'Applications Pédagogiques En Langues) Université Nancy 2 has been using counselling services as part of their self-directed learning programme (see Gremmo, 1993b; Bailly, 1993).

⁸ Some studies use eclectic approaches which combine different research orientations.

other (see Table1). However, for the sake of clarity, only the characteristics of these two orientations, which represent two opposite-ends, are illustrated on the continuum. The characteristics of socio-cognitive and social psychological approaches, which are also assumed to represent points on the continuum, are not illustrated. The social psychological approaches and sociocultural approaches seem to have a lot of similarities and their characteristics may overlap at some points. Hence, social psychological orientations are considered to be comprehensive within sociocultural approaches. Socio-cognitive approaches on the other hand can be placed somewhere in the middle as they share some common aspects with both cognitive and sociocultural approaches.

SLL/FLL Belief Research Based on Mainstream Cognitive Approaches

As previously stated, the real interest in beliefs in SLL/FLL arose with research in cognitive psychology. From cognitive perspective the language learner was viewed as an active participant in the learning process, using various mental strategies in order to sort out the system of the language to be learned (Williams & Burden, 1997). This new conception of learning brought changes both into the language classrooms and the research done on language learning. Following cognitive assumptions, SLA/FLL researchers felt the need to access language learners' beliefs in order to understand how learners make use of cognitions to guide their cognitive activities in language learning.

According to the mainstream cognitivist viewpoint, all information-bearing structures (representations) are stored in the mind. These representations, or information units, are connected to one another to form a kind of network and can be accessed when required. From this standpoint, beliefs are considered to be static and individual. In this cognitive tradition, the role of the external factors and the context within which the beliefs come into being have almost never been referred to.

Early references to learners' beliefs focused on the content of learner beliefs (Riley, 1989; Wenden, 1986a). Riley referred to learner beliefs as representations and used Kreidler and

Kreitler's 'cognitive orientation model'⁹ to categorize them under different headings such as *general beliefs, beliefs about self, beliefs about norms and rules, and beliefs about goals*. Although these early works mainly displayed lists of learner beliefs, with little or no focus on how they impact language learning, they are prevailing in that they contributed to the rise of interest in *learners' thinking* --a shift towards the learner and learning rather than the teacher and teaching. Later studies took this idea a step further and tried to find a correlation between language learners' beliefs and the possible influence these might have on their L2 attainments. Wenden (1995, 1998, 1999), asserted that there are consistent relationships between learners' beliefs and the strategy use. Similar consistent relationships were also viewed by different SLL/ FLL researchers (White: 1995; Horwitz: 1999; Sakui & Gaies: 1999; Yang: 1999).

Researching beliefs from a cognitivist perspective is regarded with criticism by some SLL/FLL researchers (Dufva, 2003; Barcelos, 2003; Benson & Lor, 1999). Dufva (2003) sustains that mainstream cognitivist views emphasize the individuality of mental knowledge and see contextual influences as secondary. She adds that research into beliefs from this perspective assumes that "...properties of the mind are not crucially dependent on the outside influences and forces once they have been acquired and established." (Dufva, 2003, p.132). She refers to the research methodologies used in these works with criticism. She comments that these studies employed surveys, questionnaires and quantitative means of data analysis and they aimed at explanation and generalization disregarding what each belief represents to each individual. In the same vein Benson and Lor (1999) state that questionnaire data give only a 'snapshot' of learner beliefs and this would not be sufficient to understand the complexity of learners' beliefs.

Alanen (2003) on the other hand, sustains that early cognitive approaches have contributed to the foundations of the methodological and theoretical framework of the study of metacognitive knowledge. She also asserts that cognitive and sociocultural approaches are not incompatible with one another and that social aspects are being increasingly incorporated in contemporary cognitive psychology.

⁹ According to this model human behavior is guided by one's cognitive orientation and 'beliefs are cognitive units of meaning embedded in networks of belief.' (cited in Riley, 1989, p. 68).

SLL/FLL Belief Research Based on Social Psychological and Sociocultural Approaches

Social psychological and sociocultural standpoints, although they have slightly different perspectives, appear to share some major claims that:

- a) beliefs are context-dependent and that they cannot be looked into without considering the context in which they are formed;
- b) beliefs should be examined as regards the individual's past and present experiences.
- c) beliefs are formed through transactions with others;
- d) beliefs are both static and dynamic;
- e) beliefs are flexible and changeable; thus, they can be influenced and mediated.
- f) beliefs are both personal and social (Moscovici's social representation theory rejects individuality of beliefs; however, some SLL/FLL scholars, despite their social psychological orientations, share this claim).

Gardner and his associates' motivational studies, based on Gardner's socio-educational model, can be considered as the earliest research activities which viewed language learners' beliefs as a social psychological phenomenon (For an overview see Gardner, 1979, 2001a, 2001b; Gardner, *et al.*, 2004; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). In the latest version of his socio-educational model of second-language acquisition research study Gardner (2001b) claims that the personal family background and the socio-cultural milieu and "...a complex of social and personal variables that the individual brings with him or her..." can influence second language acquisition (Gardner, 2001b, p. 4). However these empirical studies have examined language learners' beliefs implicitly within comprehensive motivational research studies and have not offered a paradigm or approach on how to deal with these beliefs (attitudes) to the advantage of the learner.

Beliefs (or representations), as a social and cultural phenomenon, have been the foremost standpoint for some European and especially for some French SLL/FLL researchers (e.g. Beacco, 2001; Castellotti, 2001; Castellotti & Moore, 2002; Zarate, 1993, Zarate *et al.*, 2004). These scholars have emphasized the important role representations play on language learners' attitudes (e.g. towards the target language and its culture) and their interest in learning foreign languages. This social psychological viewpoint claims that representations are generated through transactions between individuals and between groups in a society. Zarate *et al.*, explain that "...Our vision of the world and our ways of thinking develop from our contact with others and shape our cultural representations." (Zarate *et al.*, 2004, p. 29). It is presumed that these representations, which are sometimes referred to as stereotypes,

images, attitudes, and prejudices, are partly shaped by media, literature, tourist information booklets, and various kinds of publicly available sources of information (Beacco, 2001; Castellotti, 2001; Castellotti & Moore, 2002; Zarate, 1993).

It is also assumed that representations come into being through a process whereby what is already known and familiar serves as a point of reference and comparison (anchoring) and new information is absorbed into what is already familiar and reassuring (objectivation). The learner's culture and mother tongue are postulated to be utilized as a point of reference when learning a foreign language. Castellotti claims that learners' mother tongue is in the core of their representations and constitutes a point of anchoring, therefore, people who are concerned with L2 learning cannot disregard this fact (Castellotti, 2001).

The social psychological theoretical perspective shares similarities with socio-constructivist/constructivist approaches. Moscovici (1997) claims that "... In fact, every constructive activity, at least so it seems to me, is 'syncretically' communication and representation, instrumental and symbolic..." (Moscovici, 1997, para. 15). He maintains that constructivist activity prolongs the anchoring and objectivation process and can be viewed as the outcome of this process.

SLL/FLL researchers who have adopted a sociocultural perspective for the study of beliefs about language learning have mostly employed socio-constructivist, constructivist, and dialogical, discursive approaches (see Alanen, 2003; Dufva, 2003;). Dufva (2003), who approached language learners' beliefs as a situated phenomenon, claims that analyzing beliefs without considering the social/cultural context they occur in would be a mistake. In her research she has been inspired by Vygotsky and Bakhtin's dialogical philosophy of language, and analyzed language learners' beliefs as subjective experiences. Dufva (2003) considered voice to be important and used it as a methodological tool to analyze 'what subjects say and how they say it'. She criticizes cognitivist research orientations (quantitative means of analysis and positivist philosophy) and, therefore, used interviews, group discussions and written narratives to collect data. During the interviews she used a negotiative technique where the interviewer was not an outsider but a partner who also expressed his/her personal opinion (objectivity was not her goal).

Alanen (2003) investigated a group of young language learners' beliefs from a sociocultural perspective. Her aim was to devise a theoretical and analytical framework appropriate for the study of 'how L2 learners' beliefs come about'. In her small-scale empirical study she used longitudinal interviews to gain insight into the process of belief formation. Through these longitudinal dialogical exchanges she observed how a group of young learners' beliefs were mediated through transactions with others.

L2 Learners' Belief Formation as a Progressive Process

In this final section, drawing upon the previously mentioned theories and SLL/FLL belief research studies, I will propose a categorization of L2 learners' beliefs (see figure 1). This hierarchical categorization views L2 learners' belief formation as a progressive process through anchoring and objectivation. This view presumes that learners' beliefs are (co)constructed, reconstructed and appropriated (fine-tuned) through gaining experience (through going up from one phase to another) and are internalized as part of the learners' L2 learning belief repertoire. The three phases, social/cultural context, the general educational context, and the L2 learning context(s), are the social environments where the learner (co)constructs his identity and his beliefs through interaction with others (parents, friends, teachers etc.) and with tools (media, textbooks, classroom activities etc.) provided with/within these social environments. Through out this progressive process of belief formation, in each phase, the learner's intra-personal mechanisms operate simultaneously, in parallel to the social activities s/he is experiencing.

The complexity and abundance of variables influencing L2 learners' beliefs makes conducting research in this area a difficult task. In this final section, therefore, I will pinpoint some prevailing aspects and propose a scheme which could serve as a guideline to research in this area.

Phase One: Society at Large and Learners' Cultural Representations and Cultural Beliefs

Cultural representations or cultural beliefs (such as values, prejudices, attitudes, stereotypes) constitute the substructure (phase one) in the learners' belief hierarchy and serve as a kind of reference to learners when shaping their beliefs about language learning (anchoring). In other

words, these collectively created beliefs which reflect views of the society the learner has been brought up in, form a kind of base on which the learner further constructs other beliefs. These cultural beliefs often precede the learner's experience in language learning. Before the learner starts learning a foreign language s/he already possesses some of these (culturally/socially constructed or collectively created) ready-made beliefs about foreign languages and, perhaps, beliefs about how foreign languages are/should be learned. However, these cultural beliefs might not always appear to have direct links with L2 learning itself. In some cases beliefs about a particular foreign language and the learner's interest in learning it seem to originate from other socially/culturally shared beliefs about that specific culture, its people, its economical and political status (see Csizér & Dörnyei 2005). The learner's knowledge about the shared historical past and political relations between the target foreign language culture and his own might also contribute to shaping his beliefs about and his attitudes towards learning that particular language and most often even before starting to learn it.

These representations can also be considered as raw beliefs which the learner may acquire unconsciously and accept as 'truths' before having any personal experience in language learning (Alanen, 2003). Later, through gaining experiences of learning in general and language learning specifically these cultural beliefs might be reinterpreted, fine-tuned, and internalized to become part of the learner's personal L2 belief repertoire.

Differentiating between functional and dysfunctional representations and encouraging functional cultural representations would help learners develop positive attitudes toward the target language(s) in question (see Zarate, 1993). This issue, therefore, concerns language policy makers. These cultural representations, which circulate in society, need to be uncovered and dysfunctional beliefs need to be detected so that policy-makers can adopt appropriate L2 policies. Large-scale surveys, questionnaires, interviews and text/discourse analysis can be employed to detect these dysfunctional beliefs (see Zarate, 1993; Zarate *et al.*, 2004). To mediate these beliefs, cultural awareness raising activities/programs are found to be useful (see Byram & Planet, 2000¹⁰).

¹⁰ This Council of Europe publication aims to build in intercultural competence among FL/SL learners with a specific focus on creating a European feeling among European SL/FL learners. However, the criteria are European and limit *Otherness* to the European context.

However, to my knowledge, there has yet not been any empirical data on whether there is a consistent functional change in L2 learners' language learning behaviors and attitudes after their beliefs have been mediated and appropriated. This issue, therefore, remains to be investigated.

Phase Two: The General Educational Context and Learners' Beliefs about Learning

Learners' beliefs about learning constitute the second phase in the learners' belief formation process. There is now abundant evidence that learning/teaching traditions may vary in different cultural contexts (e.g. learning may be conceived as a reproductive process through which learners store knowledge and reproduce it when necessary, teacher-centered approaches may be emphasized over learner-centered learning/teaching and so forth). Starting from a young age, learners are exposed to educational traditions and consciously or unconsciously they develop some beliefs about what learning and teaching are/should be and what the roles of learners and teachers are/should be. Moreover, at this stage learners have day-to-day experience in learning and they construct/reconstruct beliefs based on these experiences and internalize these, embedding them in other relevant beliefs in their belief repertoires.

Much L2 learning takes place in formal educational contexts, in classrooms, as is the case with other subjects. As a result, L2 learning is often perceived as the same as learning other subjects. In most cases learning other subjects precedes L2 learning and learners embark on the L2 learning process with some preconceptions about learning. However, these beliefs, often, do not seem to correspond to what FLL/SLL specialists consider as functional in L2 learning.

Literature from the field of educational psychology concerning *Conceptions of Learning* and *Student Approaches to Learning*¹¹ (SAL) (although research in this area has mainly concerned higher education and subjects other than SLL/FLL) would be useful to understand the role of beliefs in learners' conceptions of learning and the approaches they adopt to learning (see

¹¹ Biggs: 1994; Marton & Säljö :1976a, 1976b; Entwistle: 1987, 2002; Entwistle, McCune, & Hounsel: 2002; Prosser & Trigwell: 1999.

also footnotes 5 & 6). It is, therefore, important to discern what conceptions learners have about learning in general. This knowledge together with learners' conceptions of L2 learning would help us to make comparisons, and perhaps, understand why learners choose to do certain tasks and ignore others, why they resist or participate, why they show interest or lack of interest, and why they fail or succeed.

Phase Three: The L2 Context (s) and Learners' Beliefs about L2

The language learning context(s), learners' past and present experiences in L2 learning, forms phase three in the learners' belief formation process. Like general teaching/learning traditions, L2 learning traditions may vary in different educational contexts. In this phase learners have direct contact (experience) with L2 learning. The learners' cultural beliefs (attitudes towards and beliefs about the target language), their past learning experiences in general and L2 learning in particular, all contribute to shaping their beliefs about the L2, their conceptions of L2 learning. In this phase learners start to have well-established beliefs about how efficient they are in L2 learning, what their roles and their teachers' in L2 classrooms should be, and how L2 should be learned.

Teachers' approaches to teaching/learning, testing types used, learners' past experiences, and course expectations are all said to be factors influencing the approaches learners adopt to learning (Posser & Trigwell, 1999). Like L2 learners, L2 teachers also have some conceptions of L2 learning/teaching and they often modify the *espoused theory* (the 'official' theory) and adopt approaches which are compatible with their beliefs. That is, the espoused theory becomes the theory-in-use and it guides both the teacher and the learners in the teaching/learning process. (Biggs, 1994).

Consequently, to cope with L2 learning demands, learners use strategies which they believe to be effective in their L2 learning context. L2 learners' strategy use has long been of interest to SLL/FLL research; however, research into this area would be more meaningful if these strategies were looked into in relation to the learners' conceptions of L2 learning, the approaches they adopt to L2 learning and the approaches teachers adopt to teaching. Phenomenographic research methods, interviews, classroom observations, document analysis, and questionnaires would be useful to obtain an integral picture of L2 classrooms and to gain insights about learners' beliefs.

The Intra-personal Plane and Metacognitive Knowledge

Beliefs which have been (co)constructed in social planes through interactions between others and social tools (artifacts) are appropriated and internalized in the learner's psychological plane to become part of the learner's metacognitive knowledge (Alanen, 2003). This knowledge reservoir is used as a resource by the learner to guide his/her L2 activities. The learner, drawing upon his/her metacognitive knowledge (belief repertoire), makes some judgements regarding self, others and L2 tasks, and activates self-regulatory mechanisms to choose the strategies s/he believes to be suitable to fulfil the required language tasks.

Attributing learners' beliefs solely to their L2 learning experience, and attempting to investigate these beliefs without referring to the learner's past experiences would be inadequate. Research into L2 learners' beliefs, therefore, needs to allow a wider perspective to include both the learner's past and present experiences so that possible reasons for some dysfunctional L2 learning beliefs can be traced back. And the result of this research could subsequently be used to inform language learning/teaching policies.

Conclusion

To conclude, this progressive view of L2 learners' belief formation assumes that learners' beliefs come into being in society in different contexts (society as a whole, general educational context, L2 learning context) respectively and are reshaped and internalized in learners' intra-personal planes as L2 learning beliefs. We can also assume that through this process each belief is fine tuned and reshaped from: distant to closer; general to specific; social to individual; less relevant to relevant; unconscious to conscious and variable to stable.

I suggest that SLL/ FLL research go beyond accessing L2 learners' metacognitive knowledge about L2 learning and pursue other correlating forces which contribute to shaping these beliefs. I, therefore, propose the following questions to consider:

- a) Cultural beliefs about L2 related issues: What are they? How are they expressed? Are they functional/dysfunctional? Can they be mediated? How?

- b) Beliefs about learning: What conceptions of learning do learners have? How do learners perceive their roles and their teachers'?
- c) Beliefs about L2 learning: What are the learners' conceptions of L2 learning? How do learners perceive their roles and their teachers' in L2 classrooms? How do teachers perceive their roles and their learners' in L2 classrooms? What approaches do learners/teachers adopt to L2 learning/teaching? What types of assessment methods and tasks are used? How do learners/teachers approach the use of L1 and L2? Are there mismatches between testing/teaching/learning? Does the classroom environment encourage the learner to construct healthy self-concept beliefs?
- d) Self-beliefs: What kind of attributions do learners make in the face of failure/success? What personal interests/expectations do learners have regarding L2? How do learners regulate their L2 learning? Which strategies do they use? Are these strategies functional? What beliefs encourage the use of these strategies? How can learners be equipped with functional strategies?

About the Author

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Tables

Table 1

Approaches Employed in SLL/FLL Learner Belief Research

Classical Cognitive Orientations ←-----→ Sociocultural Orientations	
<u>Learners beliefs are viewed as:</u>	<u>Learners beliefs are viewed as:</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autonomous, personal • Occur in the mind • Representations or schemata stored in the mind • Stable • Context-free 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both personal & social • Occur on mental & social planes • Negotiated and expressed in communication with others (through scaffolding) • Stable & changeable • Context-dependent
<u>Research tools/methods (quantitative)</u>	<u>Research tools/methods (qualitative)</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surveys, questionnaires, interviews (e.g. descriptive statistics, statistics programs, factor analysis, correlations etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • *ethnography, activity theory, social interaction, classroom interaction, interviews (e.g. discourse/conversation analysis, verbal protocols etc.)
<u>Research Data:</u>	<u>Research Data:</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • generalization/explanation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • non-generalizable, phenomenological
<u>Important questions:</u>	<u>Important questions:</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What beliefs do learners' possess? • How do beliefs impact on learning? • How do beliefs regulate learning? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • *What is the nature of beliefs? • How are beliefs (co)constructed? • How do beliefs influence learners' behaviors? • How do beliefs regulate learning? • How can beliefs be mediated and appropriated?

Note: *(Alanen, 2003, pp. 67-68)

Figures

Figure 1. A categorization that views L2 learners' beliefs as a chronological/ hierarchical progression.

