



ความเชื่อในการเรียนภาษา : มุมมองจากการเรียน ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความปริทัศน์นี้กล่าวถึงความเชื่อของผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศในการเรียนภาษาที่สามารถมีส่วนช่วยให้เกิดความเข้าใจที่ดีขึ้นว่าผู้เรียนภาษาเรียนภาษาที่สองหรือภาษาต่างประเทศได้อย่างไร ภาพรวมเกี่ยวกับความเชื่อถูกนำเสนอเป็นส่วนแรก ตามมาด้วยการนำเสนอแหล่งที่มาของความเชื่อของผู้เรียนภาษาและอิทธิพลของความเชื่อที่มีต่อการเรียนภาษา บทความนี้ทิ้งท้ายไว้ด้วยแนวคิดบางประการเกี่ยวกับประโยชน์หลายๆ อย่างที่เกิดขึ้นจากการวิเคราะห์ความเชื่อในการเรียนภาษาซึ่งจะนำไปสู่หนทางที่จะช่วยให้เป็นผู้เรียนภาษาที่ดีขึ้น

คำสำคัญ : ความเชื่อ ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ ผู้เรียนภาษา

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Beliefs about Language Learning: An EFL Perspective

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Abstract

This review paper discusses how EFL learners' beliefs about language learning could contribute to the better understanding of how language learners learn a second or foreign language. First, an overview of beliefs is presented. Then, the source of learners' beliefs is introduced. The influence of beliefs on language learning is subsequently discussed. To conclude, the paper ends with some thoughts on benefits that an analysis on beliefs can bring about, leading to ways to help learners to become better language learners.

Keywords: Beliefs, EFL (English as a Foreign Language), Language learners

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Introduction

Language learners hold a set of beliefs about the nature of language learning, which Hosenfeld Ellis (1994) defines as ‘mini theories’ of second or foreign language learning. This is advocated by Wenden (1986) and Horwitz (1988) who argue that language learners indeed have some beliefs about language learning even if these beliefs may not always be explicit or consciously thought about. Here a belief is defined as a statement that is held to be true, that affects language learning practices. English Learners’ belief systems indeed cover a number of aspects, including beliefs about the nature of English, the speaker of English, the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), teaching activities, language learning, appropriate classroom behaviour, their own ability and about the goals for language learning (Richards, 1996).

Interestingly, a substantial amount of research has shown the potential of understanding learners’ belief systems. One clear benefit of recognising students’ beliefs is that it provides teachers with better understanding of ‘their students’ expectation of, commitment to, success in, and satisfaction with their language classes’ (Horwitz, 1988) It is also likely that some language learners may have been exposed to common and, in some cases, untrue beliefs about language learning, which might turn out as a barrier to language learning success.

The Basis of Learners’ Beliefs

Learners’ beliefs are derived from a variety of sources. The learner’s previous learning experience is one of the sources. According to Cotterall (1995) and Mori (1999) learners’ past experiences either in education, or specifically in language learning, play a major role in shaping the learners’ attitudes to language learning. Certain personality traits may also generate learners’ belief (Ellis, 1994). In addition, Tudor (1996) justifies that learners’ beliefs and expectations may result from not only their previous learning experiences and certain personality traits, but also from ‘the unthinking acceptance of popular wisdom’.

Teaching and learning practices may also influence the way in which learners perceive language learning. Language teachers therefore have to be

aware that what they do in the language classroom--for example, the linguistic input and the learning activities the teachers choose--might influence the development of the students' beliefs about learning in general and language learning in particular (Mori, 1999).

According to Spolsky (1988) learners' beliefs are 'rooted in the social context of language learning which includes the sociolinguistic environment of home and community, and the perceptions of the value of the target language'. Since social context constitutes one of the necessary conditions for second language acquisition, it is assumed that the learner's beliefs play a significant role in a theory of second language acquisition. Spolsky's study reveals that even though its influence was not as forceful as previous experience or preferred style, cultural background indeed contributes to the belief systems of foreign language learners. Since learners' beliefs are influenced by the social context of second language learning, learners from different cultural backgrounds embrace different belief systems (Tumposky, 1991).

In sum, learners' belief systems actually work as 'a sort of logic, determining--consciously or unconsciously--what they do to help themselves learn English' (Wenden, 1986). Thus the study of learners' beliefs constitutes an important area of inquiry (Ellis, 1994). It particularly helps to predict those beliefs of learners that are inconsistent with principles underlying communicative language teaching (CLT), an approach commonly employed by English language teachers, which highlights the importance of using the language for communication rather than focusing on 'correct' usage for its own sake (Horwitz, 1988). Such conflicts might result in frustration, anxiety, and lack of motivation in language learning. Differences between the learners' beliefs and those of the teachers may also contribute to learners' lack of self-confidence and satisfaction with the language class.

Since CLT approaches are popular in both ESL settings and EFL curricula, identifying beliefs and potential differences in beliefs is evidently important for teachers and administrators concerned.

Impact of Beliefs on Language Learning

Learners' beliefs have been found to have an impact on a range of issues. Wenden, (1986) claims that learners' belief systems can influence their approach to learning in terms of the kind of strategies they use, what they attend to, and the criteria they use to evaluate the effectiveness of learning activities and of the social context that gives them the opportunity to use or practise the language, and where they concentrate their use of strategies.

Beliefs can influence learners' motivation to learn, their expectations about language learning, their perceptions about what is easy or difficult about a language, and the strategies they choose in learning (Richards and Lockhart, 1996). Learners may have different goals for language learning. Some learners learn a language for the purpose of communicating with speakers of that language. The main goal for others may be to become proficient writers. Learners also show different perceptions of what is considered easy and difficult in language learning. Some may consider grammar as the most difficult task. With regards to learning strategies, learners are found to perform different strategies because they may have different expectations about language learning.

Growing evidence also suggests that learners' beliefs not only influence their approaches to language learning and acquisition but also affect the way they respond to teaching activities. Learners feel discontented and offer resistance if the teaching methods in which they are engaged differ from what they believed those teaching methods should be (Horwitz, 1988). According to Horwitz, some students prefer to have more free conversation rather than pattern drills. Some other students insist on their teacher's correction. If language classes fail to meet these kinds of expectations, students may end up being frustrated. This situation can in some ways hinder learners' progress in language learning. When language classes do not meet student expectations, students can lose confidence in the instructional approach and their ultimate achievement can be restricted (Horwitz, 1988).

According to Cotterall (1995) learners' beliefs are also important particularly in planning for autonomy as it is argued that autonomous language learning behaviour may also be supported by a particular set of beliefs or behaviours. Thus the beliefs held by learners may either contribute to or impede the development of learners' potential for autonomy. It is clear that the study of learners' beliefs is very important for pedagogy which helps learners to construct a good understanding of their language learning processes.

Also, fallacies about language learning exist. Some students may have been exposed to erroneous beliefs about language learning. They may bring these misconceptions with them, when entering their language class. Horwitz (1988) reports that learners in the foreign language classroom indeed hold beliefs which are inconsistent with the principles underlying teaching materials and activities. Her findings from groups of ESL students of Spanish, French and German revealed that beliefs about language learning are context-specific and learners from different cultures have different attitudes, approaches to and opinions about learning a new language. This is indeed in line with what Bacon and Finnemann (1990) and Mori (1999) found in their studies on EFL learners.

There is a need to eliminate these wrong or conflicting beliefs about language learning because as (Horwitz, 1987) points out, 'erroneous beliefs about language learning lead to a less effective language learning strategy'. If learners believe that errors in their second/foreign language production will impede their language learning progress, the learners may then refuse to engage in communicative activities, thus hindering their communicative competence.

Discussion

It is plausible that by identifying faulty beliefs and by guiding students in the language classroom, student frustration and misconceptions can be alleviated. Investigating what learners believe about language learning is 'a process of (self-) discovery which involves the learners themselves as much as the teacher' (Tudor, 1996). It enables the learners to develop a critical awareness of learning options (Wenden, 1986). For example, if learners are fully aware of their learning purposes

or goals of learning, they may develop certain strategies or styles to help them achieve such goals or purposes more effectively. This is clearly influenced by their expectations from and beliefs of the language learning.

Understanding the beliefs that learners hold about different aspects of language learning and the extent to which learners' behaviour is influenced by these beliefs is therefore important. This understanding can subsequently help teachers to promote learner autonomy and avoid confusions between their intended goals and learners' interpretation. Once having become aware of their learners' perceptions, teachers can plan and implement more effective strategies directed at fostering learner autonomy.

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