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Changes in two migrant learners' beliefs, learning strategy use and language achievements in a New Zealand context



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ABSTRACT

Substantial amount of research regarding L2 learners' beliefs has been conducted in recent years. However, less attention has been paid to the interactions among the three constructs: learners' beliefs, learning strategies and language learning achievements. This longitudinal case study investigated changes in two Chinese migrant learners' beliefs and learning strategy use, and gains in their achieved proficiency in New Zealand. Through the triangulation of various data sources, this study revealed both learners changed the beliefs they held to varying degrees. Common to both learners were changes in their beliefs about approaches to language learning from an initial analytical approach to a later more experiential one. In addition, a new belief about collaborative learning emerged after the learners had been exposed to new approaches to language teaching in New Zealand. Like beliefs, the learners' strategies also evolved. Both learners started employing social strategies which they had not attempted in China. Although both learners' language did improve, there was a noticeable variation in the extent to which their language proficiency was achieved. The results suggested the complex relationship between learners' beliefs and learning strategies and challenged the linear relationship between the two variables as suggested by previous quantitative studies.

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1. Introduction

Studies on language learners' beliefs in SLA started in the mid-1980s when it was first introduced into the field by [Horwitz \(1985, 1987, 1988\)](#). Early studies are more descriptive in nature, identifying and classifying beliefs that language learners hold by using quantitative methods ([Horwitz, 1985, 1986; Wenden, 1987](#)). Recent years have seen an increasing emphasis from scholars on using more situated, holistic, qualitatively-orientated approaches to investigating the dynamism in learners' beliefs ([Zhong, 2014; Barcelos, 2003; Peng, 2011; Woods, 2003; J. Yang & Kim, 2011](#)). Another line of recent research is examinations of the interactions between beliefs and other variables, for example, the relationship between beliefs and strategies ([N. Yang, 1999](#)), between beliefs and language proficiency ([Tanaka, 2004](#)), the effects of beliefs on learning autonomy ([Zhong, 2010, 2013a; Cotterall, 1995](#)) and on learners' willingness to communicate ([Zhong, 2013b](#)).

Despite these recent developments in research, studies on learners' beliefs, according to [Ellis \(2008\)](#), are fairly marginal compared to other individual learner factors, such as motivation, aptitude, learning strategies and personality. Many areas have yet to be investigated. For example, what role do contexts and culture play in the formation of learners' beliefs? To what extent do beliefs direct learners' behaviours and manage their learning? How do learners' beliefs mediate the learning

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process and eventually affect learning outcomes? The purpose of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it attempts to understand changes in learners' beliefs and learning strategies as a result of a new learning context in New Zealand. Secondly, it aims to examine the interactions between learners' beliefs and learning strategies during their learning process and their joint impact on learning attainment.

2. Literature review

2.1. Research into language learner beliefs

Most of the early belief studies treated learner beliefs as static, resistant to change and a ready-made mental entity, and sought to quantify the strength of learner beliefs in different populations of learners (e.g. Horwitz, 1988; Wenden, 1998). Recent years have seen a shift of focus in research towards a more contextualized understanding of learners' beliefs. It is argued that beliefs may change over time and across situation, and that they are socially constructed and contextually situated (Barcelos, 2003). Amuzie and Winke (2009), for example, combined quantitative with qualitative introspective measures to investigate changes in 70 international students' beliefs as a result of a study abroad program in the United States. The results revealed statistically significant beliefs transformation relating to learner autonomy and the role of teachers. The learners reported that while abroad they came to believe more strongly that they themselves should find opportunities to use their L2 and that success in L2 learning depended more on their own efforts outside class. In his longitudinal study, Peng (2011) employed the case study method to trace changes in one Chinese first-year college student's beliefs in an EFL context over a seven month period. The findings revealed substantive changes in the student's beliefs systems as mediated by classroom affordances. Similar results were also reported in Zhong's (2014) longitudinal study of five migrant learners in New Zealand. The results revealed that some positive beliefs emerged after the learners had been exposed to new approaches to language teaching in New Zealand, and that learners changed their beliefs about approaches to language learning due to the new language learning environment. These studies have provided empirical evidence that beliefs are dynamic, fluid and context-responsive.

2.2. Learners' beliefs and learning strategies

As learners vary considerably in terms of the quality, quantity and frequency of strategy use, it is believed that the variations are due to a range of different factors. These include social and environmental factors (e.g. learning context, learning tasks, teaching methods and country of origin) and individual learner factors (e.g. age, gender, learner beliefs, motivation, career orientation, cognitive style and language proficiency, see Takeuchi, Griffiths, & Coyle, 2007). For the current study, I will only review studies on the effects of learner beliefs on the choice of learning strategies as they are the most relevant.

Dörnyei (2005) posits that conscious strategy use is logically influenced by learners' beliefs. Ellis (2008) also believes that learning strategies are influenced by learners' explicit beliefs about how best to learn. A handful of researchers have attempted to examine the effect of beliefs on the choice of learning strategies. In their study of 480 students from primary schools, secondary schools and a tertiary institution in Botswana, Magogwe and Oliver (2007) investigated the relationship between language learning strategies, proficiency, age and self-efficacy beliefs. A modified version of Oxford's (1990) *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* (SILL) was used to collect data on strategies and the *Morgan-Jinks Student Efficacy Scale* (MJSES) was used to collect self-efficacy information. The results revealed that there was a statistically significant but moderate relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and the use of language learning strategies across all proficiency levels of the participants involved. Using Horwitz's (1987) *Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory* (BALLI) and the SILL, Abedini, Rahimi, and Zare-ee (2011) examined 203 Iranian university EFL learners' beliefs and strategies and the relationship between them. Similar results were yielded that language learners' self-efficacy beliefs and their perceived value of learning a language were strongly correlated with their use of all types of language learning strategies but metacognitive strategies which the majority of students did not attempt in their language learning. The study also revealed negative correlation between beliefs about formal practices and the use of functional-practice strategies. In other words, when students believed that learning grammar, vocabulary and translation were the most important parts of learning a language, they were unlikely to seek or create opportunities to use or practice the language skills. However, different results were yielded in Bonyadi, Nokou & Shahbaz's study (2012). In their investigation of 130 Iranian first year university students, they reported there was no correlation between self-efficacy beliefs and strategy use and the most frequently used strategies were metacognitive.

Review of the literature indicates the majority of the previous studies on learner beliefs and learning strategies focus on learners in a study abroad and/or an EFL context. Studies on migrant learners in the ESL environment are lacking in literature. An in-depth understanding of beliefs and strategies of this group of learners will add value to current scholarship. In addition, previous studies of language strategies mostly employed large scale survey methods to collect cross-sectional data on reported learning strategies. Studies are needed to examine learners' strategy use from emic perspectives over a period of time. Finally, although a handful of quantitative studies have been conducted to examine the relationship between learner beliefs and learning strategies, results from these studies revealed a causal and linear relationship between the two variables. It is not clear if learners always act upon the beliefs they hold. An in-depth, qualitative inquiry is needed to examine the complexity of the interactions between the two constructs.

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