



# Changes in beliefs about language learning among Chinese EAP learners in an EMI context in Mainland China: A socio-cultural perspective



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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a longitudinal study of changes in beliefs among Chinese EAP learners during a transitional period at an EMI university in Mainland China. Data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, which were administered at two phases over one academic year. The study revealed significant changes in the learner beliefs after they studied EAP for an academic year at the EMI University. The changes were found to arise from the mediation of an array of socio-cultural factors in the EMI setting, which include content subjects taught in English, extracurricular activities, formative assessments, and important others such as teachers. The study illuminates the nature of learner beliefs as a socially situated construct, and has pedagogical implications for English language teaching in EMI contexts.

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## 1. Introduction

Research on beliefs about language learning, which is an important aspect of the learner variables in second language acquisition, used to be dominated by a cognitive perspective (Horwitz, 1999). However, the recent rise of socio-cultural theory has shifted researchers' attention to the contextually situated nature of learner beliefs and their relationship with socio-cultural environment (Negueruela-Azarola, 2011). This new line of research contends that learner beliefs are mediated by multiple socio-cultural factors (Mercer, 2011; Yang & Kim, 2011), and much of the research focused on learners either in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts or in native English-speaking contexts. Little attention, however, is paid to those EFL learners who are undertaking academic studies in English as the medium of instruction (EMI) settings in EFL contexts (Tatzl, 2011). Given the recent global expansion of EMI education (Evans & Morrison, 2011), exploring how learners construct and re-construct their perceptions about English learning within such educational settings is becoming an increasingly important matter for language teaching research.

In recent years, there has been a substantial outflow of Chinese students going abroad to pursue EMI higher education at English-speaking countries and regions. This transition to overseas English universities has been found a daunting task to

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Chinese students because of the divergence between Chinese and English educational contexts (Skyrme, 2007). English is a required subject at Chinese high schools, and is often taught in large class size, with a focus on a teacher-led and exam-oriented instruction of grammatical knowledge and basic skills. This is sharply different from English teaching in university EMI settings, where the primary goal is to prepare students for the study of academic subjects, with a focus on English for Academic Purposes and English literacy skills. Formative assessment is also often adopted to promote students' active engagement (Liu, 2013). Owing to these contextual differences and the expansion of EMI education into Mainland China, an investigation into how Chinese students view English learning in such an EMI environment will not only be of paramount importance to language teachers and educational administrators in EMI institutions, but increase our knowledge of beliefs about language learning. This study, situated in the broad Chinese EFL context and following a sociocultural perspective, aims to examine the potential changes in beliefs among a cohort of Chinese EAP learners during their transition from high school to an EMI university in Mainland China.

## 2. Literature review

As a multifaceted construct, language learner beliefs have been explored from a wide range of theoretical perspectives, among which the cognitive theory has been most influential over the past decades (Barcelos, 2015; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2013).

### 2.1. Cognitive perspective on beliefs of Chinese EFL learners

The cognitive perspective considers beliefs as relatively stable mental representations. Characterised by using normative approaches, cognitive studies mainly concern beliefs about the nature of language learning (Mohebi & Khodadady, 2011) as well as their relationships with other learner variables, such as gender and learning strategies (Tang & Tian, 2015), and language proficiency (Li & Liang, 2012). With regard to Chinese EFL learners, their beliefs about language learning have been extensively researched in EFL contexts (Pan & Block, 2011). Chinese EFL learners are found to attach much importance to the learning of vocabulary, hold an optimistic view about the difficulty of English learning, and appreciate highly an English-speaking environment for learning English (Zhang & Cui, 2010). Chinese learners' beliefs in EMI contexts outside Mainland China are also documented in the literature, with inconsistent results reported in comparison with the findings gained in EFL settings. For instance, Wu (2012) discovered 56.8% of his participants in Hong Kong agreed with the critical role of grammar, whereas Zhang and Cui (2010) found only 26.6% of their participants surveyed in Mainland China acknowledged the importance of grammar. In addition, Chinese learners of English seem to display an ambivalent belief about autonomous learning. Though strongly believing in the value of their own efforts in achieving success in learning English, Chinese ESL learners, as reported in a study conducted in New Zealand, still held a traditional view of the role of teachers in transmitting knowledge (Zhong, 2010).

### 2.2. A socio-cultural perspective to beliefs about language learning

Although cognitive research has presented a holistic picture of beliefs, it has been criticised for overemphasising the individuality of mental knowledge, and for neglecting the dynamic nature of learner beliefs (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Yang & Kim, 2011). Researchers have recently moved beyond the identification of patterns of learner beliefs to examining their dynamic nature (e.g., Kaypak & Ortaçtepe, 2014; Peng, 2011; Zhong, 2014), and have reported different findings. For example, Kaypak and Ortaçtepe (2014) found no significant changes in beliefs of a group of Turkish exchange students before and after study abroad. By contrast, Amuzie and Winke (2009), in their examination of the effects of study abroad on the beliefs of 70 ESL learners in the United States, uncovered their participants' changes in beliefs about autonomous learning and the role of teachers. Substantial changes in beliefs were also identified in research into Chinese learners' transition to tertiary study in EFL contexts (Peng, 2011) and in ESL contexts (Zhong, 2014). The findings reported in these studies have, to certain extent, provided research evidence for the dynamic nature of learner beliefs. However, the factors that influence the changes of learner beliefs are still unknown and need to be further explored.

In light of this research gap, a socio-cultural perspective has been increasingly called for as an alternative approach to research in learner beliefs (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2013; Yang & Kim, 2011). The socio-cultural perspective holds that human forms of activity are realised through an individual's application of cultural, physical, and symbolic tools to mediate and regulate his relationships with others and with himself. During the interactions between the individual and the social world, the social, cultural and contextual factors play a pivotal role in the individual's language learning (Lantolf, 2000). The socio-cultural perspective conceptualises beliefs as a socially situated construct, arguing for understanding beliefs in particular social contexts with a focus on the mediation of socio-cultural factors (Negueruela-Azarola, 2011). Adopting a socio-cultural perspective, Yang and Kim (2011) explored the changes in two second language learners' beliefs in study abroad contexts. They found that the learners' beliefs were constantly changing in alignment with their learning goals and study abroad experiences. Based on her study on the features of successful language learners' beliefs, Mercer (2011) suggested considering learner beliefs in terms of appropriacy "for an individual's personal history, affordances, contexts and purpose" (p.70). These previous studies indicate that learner beliefs are socially mediated by a variety of factors, including learning discourse (values and attitudes towards learning a foreign language), cultural artefacts (assessment methods) and material conditions, and

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