

Using language ideology and positioning to broaden the SLA learner beliefs landscape: The case of an ESL learner from China

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Abstract

Departing from the view that learner beliefs are mental traits and in keeping with the discursive turn in SLA (Kalaja, 1995, 2003; Young, 2009), I argue that SLA learner beliefs research can be advanced through the use of two constructs — language ideology and positioning — that originate from linguistic anthropology and discursive psychology, respectively. Applying these two constructs to a year-long ethnographic case study based in a Singapore secondary school, I investigate how the language ideologies and positioning of a 16-year old immigrant ESL learner from China ultimately impacted her language learning outcomes. To illustrate this, I draw on audio-taped interview and video-taped interaction data involving her. This study supports the view that a contextual approach to examining learner beliefs affords a refined understanding of beliefs through an emic perspective.

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1. Introduction

Unlike other individual difference variables, Ellis (2008) notes that learners' beliefs are different in that they are neither an ability nor a trait-like propensity for language learning. Acknowledging the complexity of this construct, this paper explores the three approaches — normative, metacognitive, and contextual — mapped out by Barcelos (2003), with a view to extend the third approach by analyzing the beliefs of an English as a Second Language (ESL) immigrant learner from China. To do this, I turn to two constructs — language ideology and positioning. I first review the literature on learner beliefs. Next, I describe the two constructs before applying them to examine the trajectory of my focal ESL learner. Following a brief description of my study, I discuss my research findings and reflect on how they can be used to inform future SLA research on learner beliefs.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Normative approach

In this approach, beliefs are primarily viewed as preconceived notions, myths or misconceptions. Barcelos (2003) adds that learners are judged according to an autonomous learner ideal, while beliefs are seen as impediments to realizing autonomy. To their credit, normative-driven researchers (Amuzie and Winke, 2009; Diab, 2006) have started to recognize the situated and dynamic nature of learner beliefs. For example, Amuzie and Winke (2009) discovered that their study abroad participants experienced changes in their beliefs about learner autonomy and the role of the teacher. Generally, beliefs within this approach are measured from an etic perspective through the use of Likert-style questionnaires such as the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (Diab, 2006; Horwitz, 1987, 1999; Kern 1995), while other researchers (Amuzie and Wenke, 2009; Cotterall, 1999) have developed their own questionnaires to examine learner beliefs. However, the use of questionnaires has come under criticism: Kalaja (1995, p. 197) has argued that “questionnaires only measure beliefs in theory and not on actual occasions of talk or writing”, while Benson and Lor (1999, p. 460) find questionnaires inadequate in capturing “the complexity of learners’ thinking about language learning.” Significantly, these criticisms are in accordance with recent calls for an emic perspective in learner beliefs in SLA research (Barcelos, 2003; Benson and Lor, 1999).

2.2. Metacognitive approach

Like the normative approach, beliefs in this approach are seen as a mental trait. A key underlying assumption is that learners think about their language learning process and are able to articulate some of the beliefs. While earlier research (Wenden, 1986, 1987) focused on types of learner beliefs, later research attempted to classify belief types and link them to metacognitive knowledge (Benson and Lor, 1999; Wenden, 1999). There have not been as many metacognitive-based empirical studies (Benson and Lor, 1999; Victori and Lockhart, 1995; Wenden, 1986, 1987) as compared to the normative approach, but the metacognitive approach is hardly in danger of fading into oblivion. Wang et al. (2009), for example, revealed that metacognitive beliefs were positively associated with and influenced students’ Chinese as a Foreign Language achievement results. Beliefs within this approach have generally been examined through the content analysis of learner self-reports in semi-structured interviews. While the use of interview data represents a promising development in that it allows for a better understanding of learner beliefs, one weakness of this approach is that it infers beliefs only from intentions and statements, not from actions (Barcelos, 2003).

2.3. Contextual approach

The first two approaches share the notion of beliefs as cognitive entities to be found inside the minds of language learners (Kalaja, 1995). By contrast, the contextual approach focuses on the dynamic and social aspect of beliefs. Arguing for a contextual interpretation of beliefs, Benson and Lor (1999, p. 464), for example, view beliefs as “relational and responsive to context”. Notably, there has also been a shift in beliefs within this approach towards an adoption of related ideas such as conceptions (Benson and Lor, 1999), representations (Riley, 1994; Rubinfeld et al., 2006), and folklinguistic theories (Miller and Ginsberg, 1995; Niedzielski and Preston, 2009). Collectively, these three conceptual developments represent a crucial shift towards acknowledging the relational and social aspect of beliefs as they take into consideration how macro factors influence the development of beliefs. However, two shortcomings of the research within this approach thus far have been (1) the lack of focus on the political and interactional aspects of language learning, and (2) the failure to fully explore how macro- and micro-level dimensions of learner beliefs work interactively to impact language learning over extended periods of time. These considerations need to be accounted for, given the discursive turn in SLA (Kalaja, 1995, 2003; Young, 2009). Such a discursive agenda can be advanced by the use of two constructs — language ideology and positioning — which originate from linguistic anthropology and discursive psychology, respectively.

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