

Beliefs as conceptualizing activity: A dialectical approach for the second language classroom[☆]

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Abstract

The present article presents an understanding of beliefs as conceptualizing activity from a Vygotskian dialectical perspective. The proposals I develop here, emerging from a contextual understanding of development, aim to help us reconsider in pedagogical terms the specific relationships between beliefs and actions and the nature of beliefs as dialectical language-mediated consciousness. Understanding beliefs as dialectical conceptualizations calls for rethinking teaching and learning as a developmental activity. It also illuminates a specific research methodology, semiogenesis, which captures the orienting power of beliefs as conceptualizing activity in the classroom. To illustrate a conceptual approach to beliefs as sociocultural tools of the mind, three basic examples of a conceptual task for in-service teachers are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Studies on learners' and teachers' beliefs over the last two decades in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) illustrate their important role in shaping and orienting learning and classroom practices (Kalaja and Barcelos, 2003). A dialectical view of the mind (Vygotsky, 1978) applied to the field of SLA supports an understanding of beliefs as conceptualizing activity and their mediated dialectical connection to second language (L2) learning and teaching. To understand how students and teachers make sense of learning and teaching before, after, and while engaging in educational activities is to understand change through contradictions. Contradictions, the essence of our historical nature, are then transcended when synthesizing and evaluating new understandings and contradictions. Consequently, the connection between beliefs about L2 learning and teaching and actions can be understood through the logic of dialectics.

In this article, I build upon Vygotskian sociocultural theory (SCT) (Vygotsky, 1986) to illustrate how beliefs as conceptualizing activity emerge in sense-making tasks when promoting concept formation in the L2 classroom. I

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respond specifically to the following research question: How does a sociocultural and dialectical understanding of beliefs as conceptualizing activity allow us to understand their changing quality when promoting internalization of meanings in conceptualization tasks in classroom settings?

In formulating a response to this question, I depart from a SCT approach to L2 learning (Alanen, 2003; Dufva, 2003; Johnson, 2009; Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf and Poehner, 2008; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006) and a sociocultural and contextual view of human development with the intention of: (1) defining beliefs as conceptualizing activity in which contradictions and connections between theoretical ideas, personal understandings, and practical applications emerge in the L2 classroom; (2) reconsidering in dialectical terms the specific relationships between beliefs and actions; and (3) proposing a ‘semiogenetic’ research methodology that captures the dialectical quality of beliefs as sociocultural meaning-making tools of the mind in the L2 classroom.

To illustrate a conceptual approach to beliefs as sociocultural tools of the mind mediating activity, three examples of a conceptual task for in-service teachers are given. Samples of data from a novice instructor teaching in a university setting are provided as evidence of sense-making activity. In sum, I seek to illustrate that the development of L2 students and teachers’ expertise is a matter of transforming their beliefs into functional conceptualizing. This developmental process can be best understood and promoted through the adaptation of dialectical principles inspired by SCT to the field of L2 learning and teaching (cf. Negueruela, 2008a; Negueruela and Lantolf, 2006).

2. Theoretical framework: beliefs as conceptualizing activity

2.1. Defining beliefs as sense-making activity

According to Kalaja and Barcelos (2003: 1), beliefs “can be broadly defined as opinions and ideas that learners (and teachers) have about the task of learning a second/foreign language”. In her review of the different ways in which beliefs have been constructed in L2 research, Barcelos (2003) identifies three basic ways of understanding this phenomenon in studies to date: (1) in normative studies, beliefs as opinions or generally inaccurate myths regarding L2 learning and teaching; (2) in metacognitive studies, beliefs as metacognitive idiosyncratic knowledge or representations characterized by some personal commitment; and (3) in contextual studies, beliefs as ideas which are interrelated with contexts and experiences of participants.

This third view is related to the present dialectical perspective in that both regard beliefs as a social and dynamic phenomenon. SCT foregrounds the importance of meaning mediation but not as meta-cognition, like in cognitive studies (Riley, 1994), where concepts are representations about knowledge and in some cases even representations of representations (metacognitive). In a Vygotskian approach, beliefs are social in origin, but not merely social in a general sense. In other words, ‘thinking’ in SCT is not predicated upon the social per se, but rather is a theory about how the social/communicative realm is internalized into the private/conceptual realm, to then once again become social/communicative (ad infinitum). From this perspective, beliefs are socially historical, social in origin, but also dynamically and personally transformed in the process of internalization. Beliefs must be both socially relevant and personally meaningful to sustain significance for the self. This notion of the being and becoming of beliefs as social dialectical conceptualizations is critical to the process of internalization.

Alanen (2003: 65) claims that “beliefs are a very specific type of mediational means, or rather mediation-means-in-the-making”. In a sociocultural view of beliefs as mediational means, beliefs are both stable and changing. SCT allows us to propose how beliefs as psychological tools (Kozulin, 1998) are at the same time stable yet dynamic, social yet personally significant, situated yet generalizable. In this sense, beliefs as conceptual tools with psychological status are permeable, i.e. historically stable because of their social meaning but susceptible to change because of their contextual nature. Permeability allows for understanding beliefs as situated social ideas emergent in concrete activities. Two basic questions thus emerge from a permeable understanding of beliefs as activity. The first is pedagogical: Can we orient changes in beliefs if they are indeed permeable? The second is methodological: What sort of data is valid to capture beliefs as permeable tools of the mind mediating activity? From a pedagogical point of view, when beliefs are productively constructed as meaning-based categories articulated through language and transformed by participants when engaged in sense-making activity, we can indeed orient change in beliefs. Beliefs as personal and meaningful conceptualizations are teachable but not through direct explanations and basic transmission. They are dynamic in a dialectical sense: changing and contradictory, orienting the significance of activity when applied in concrete contexts but not determining outcomes in a causal fashion.

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