Mediating and being mediated: Learner beliefs and learner engagement with written corrective feedback

Ye Han

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Harbin Institute of Technology (Shenzhen), Room G515, University Town of Shenzhen, Xili, Shenzhen, Guangdong Province, 518055, China

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ABSTRACT

Learner beliefs, as a complex learner characteristic, greatly impact the L2 learning process and its outcomes; however, little research has specifically explored the dynamic nature of learner beliefs in relation to learner engagement with written corrective feedback (WCF). To address this gap, data drawn from a qualitative multiple-case study were analyzed to investigate what learner beliefs mediated learner engagement with WCF, and how, as well as whether and to what extent learner beliefs were mediated by learners' experiences of processing and using WCF. The 16-week study involved six Chinese EFL university students, and collected data from interviews, retrospective verbal reports, and reflective accounts. The data showed a non-linear and reciprocal relationship between learner beliefs and learner engagement with WCF: (a) person-related beliefs, task-related beliefs, and strategy-related beliefs exerted direct and indirect influences on the students' cognitive, behavioral, and affective engagement with WCF; (b) multiple sets of beliefs often interacted and mediated engagement; and, (c) learner beliefs about WCF were mediated by learner engagement as they accumulated more experience processing and using WCF. The findings suggest teachers should consider students' beliefs when providing WCF, and foster the development of learner beliefs conducive to deep engagement with WCF.

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1. Introduction

Although previous studies have shown that written corrective feedback (WCF) is conducive to the development of some L2 structures (see the review in Bitchener & Ferris, 2012), differential success in learners' gaining from WCF has been observed, and has become a central concern in the field (e.g., Bitchener, 2012; Lee, 2008). These variations, R. Ellis (2010) argued, are related to learner engagement with WCF, which is further mediated by contextual factors, ranging from sociopolitical factors to classroom instructions (e.g., Goldstein, 2006), and such learner factors as proficiency (e.g., Lee, 2008), aptitude (e.g., Shintani & R. Ellis, 2015), motivation (e.g., Goldstein, 2006), and learner beliefs (e.g., Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010). Kormos (2012) also noted individual difference factors mediate how L2 learners exploit the language learning opportunities afforded by L2 writing processes. However, research on the role of specific learner characteristics in mediating learner engagement with WCF is still limited (Bitchener, 2012), and even less attention has been paid to learner beliefs (Rummel & Bitchener, 2015).

E-mail address: hanye@hit.edu.cn.

Research on learner engagement through the lens of learner beliefs is valuable for advancing our knowledge about WCF. Learner beliefs impact L2 learning processes and learning outcomes both, by shaping students' perceptions (e.g., Wenden, 1998), filtering the information to which one is exposed (e.g., Navarro & Thornton, 2011), and guiding students' actions (e.g., Yoshida, 2013). Recent research has suggested learner beliefs fluctuate, emerge, and change as individual students interact with the learning environment (e.g., Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Piniel & Csizér, 2015), and that changes in learners' beliefs can, in turn, mediate their actions, affect, thought patterns, and achievements (Manchón, 2009; Yoshida, 2013). By implication, learner beliefs may not only mediate learners' engagement with WCF, but also be mediated by their experiences of engaging with (or disengaging from) with WCF. Although a few studies have examined the impacts of beliefs on learners' gains from and attitudes toward WCF (e.g., Rummel & Bitchener, 2015; Waller & Papi, 2017), little research has investigated the relationship between learner beliefs and learner engagement, from both directions.

As an initial step in filling this void, the present study was conducted in two Chinese EFL tertiary-level classrooms to investigate what and how learner beliefs mediated the student participants' cognitive, behavioral, and affective engagement with teacher WCF, as well as whether and to what extent their beliefs were mediated by their experiences of receiving, processing, and using that WCF. The study contributes to research on individual characteristics in SLA and in L2 writing, and, more specifically, enriches the current understanding of WCF by highlighting the reciprocal and dynamic relationship between learner beliefs and learner engagement with feedback.

2. Literature review

2.1. Learner beliefs

The construct of learner belief is difficult to define and operationalize, because it is intertwined with such terminologies as perceptions, attitudes, opinions, and perspectives (Pajares, 1992). Adding to this complexity is the controversial boundary between beliefs and knowledge. While many regard beliefs as subjective and value-laden, but knowledge as objective and robust (e.g., Pajares, 1992; Wenden, 1998), others group the two together, arguing that knowledge is neither free from emotion, nor from subjective values and judgments (see the review in Southerland, Sinatra, & Matthews, 2001).

In the field of SLA, learner beliefs have been conceptualized through different theoretical lenses. The normative approach examines the deviations of learners' misconceptions from those held by SLA scholars (e.g., Horwitz, 1988). The metacognitive approach views learner beliefs as fixed, static, and well-entrenched mental representations that guide L2 learners' use of strategies (e.g., Wenden, 1998; Zhang, 2010). With the advent of the "complex turn" in the social sciences and in SLA (e.g., N. Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2006), learner beliefs, in addition to other individual characteristics, are conceptualized as having both a static, trait-like dimension, and a situated, changing dimension (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Mercer, 2011). In line with the complex dynamic systems perspective, the contextual approach views learner beliefs as learners' own perspectives, embedded in and dynamically mediated by the sociocultural, interactional, and experiential context (Barcelos, 2003; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Mercer, 2011). This approach not only recognizes the inconsistencies between an individual's beliefs and actions (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011), but also holds that: (a) beliefs can change as learners' motivation, attitudes, and emotions change (e.g., Aragão, 2011); and, (b) beliefs can be mediated by learners' experiences of learning and using L2 (e.g., Navarro & Thornton, 2011). That is, some beliefs may emerge or become strengthened, whereas others may be revised or weakened.

However, a change in beliefs does not necessarily occur. It is subject to the emotional attachment accompanying those beliefs, as well as contextual conditions. Research has shown that core beliefs related to a person's identity and emotions are resistant to changes (Aragão, 2011; Barcelos, 2015; Mercer, 2011). Additionally, changes can be facilitated when students have a sufficient exposure to an instructional or social environment (Amuzie & Winke, 2009), opportunities to accumulate mastery experience (Guskey, 1986, as in Navarro & Thornton, 2011), and constant reflections (e.g., Manchón, 2009).

Although a change in learner beliefs is often reported in research on study-abroad experiences (e.g., Amuzie & Winke, 2009), it is still rare in L2 writing research. An exception is Manchón's (2009) pioneering study, which conducted surveys at two points over a one-year EFL writing course. Her participants established stronger self-efficacy beliefs, gained a greater awareness of the audience, and shifted their perceptions of teacher responses from correction to feedback. Given the paucity of research in this regard, studies on the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between learner beliefs and L2 writing are warranted.

2.2. Learner engagement with WCF and learner beliefs

Exploring learner beliefs is also crucial to advancing the current knowledge of WCF, as learner beliefs can not only influence teachers' decision-making when providing WCF, but can also help explain variations among learners' engagement with WCF and learning outcomes (e.g., Bitchener, 2012; R. Ellis, 2010; Han & Hyland, 2015; Hyland, 2003).

Learner engagement with WCF is a multi-faceted construct consisting of cognitive, behavioral, and affective dimensions (R. Ellis, 2010). Briefly, cognitive engagement refers to how deeply learners process WCF, and what metacognitive and cognitive operations are devised to facilitate this processing. Behavioral engagement involves revisions triggered by WCF, as well as observable actions to generate revisions (e.g., consulting others and online resources) and to internalize target structures (e.g., keeping an error log). Affective engagement includes learners' attitudinal responses to WCF, and the emotions that emerge and evolve as they receive, process, and use WCF (Han & Hyland, 2015).