14
LEARNER BELIEFS

Qunyan Maggie Zhong

Background

While beliefs have long been an important concept within psychology-based research (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Pajares, 1992), they have attracted attention in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) only since the mid-1980s. A significant body of research has been undertaken since then. This chapter focuses specifically on research studies into language learner beliefs (LLBs).

Research into LLBs builds on a discussion of what makes a good language learner. In the discussion, LLBs, along with other factors such as learning strategies, motivation, and aptitude, were identified to explain the possible reasons for differences in language learning outcomes (Abraham & Vann, 1987; Ellis, 2008; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2019; Mercer, 2011a). Early studies on LLBs sought to describe what beliefs learners held about language learning and quantify their strength in different populations of learners and/or compare them. These efforts resulted in the publication of a special issue on learner beliefs by System in 1999. In the last two decades, research into LLBs has gained momentum and this was evidenced by an edited collection, Beliefs about SLA: New Research Approaches (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003), and a second special issue on learner beliefs by System in 2011. In stark contrast to prior studies, a vast majority of these studies adopted qualitative approaches to investigate how LLBs emerged in different contexts and mediated the learning process. However, inadequate attention was given to the relationship between beliefs and other individual difference (ID) factors, such as learning strategies. Continuing the qualitative traditions, more recent research studies have examined wider aspects of LLBs including learners’ general beliefs about language learning as well as their specific beliefs about different aspects of language learning, such as corrective feedback and grammar, and their interactions with other individual learner factors, for instance emotions and willingness to communicate (WTC), resulting in a much more sophisticated and complex view of LLBs.

Research into LLBs is underpinned by three major theories: cognitive, sociocultural, and complexity theories. Much of the early investigations are guided by the cognitive theory. LLBs are defined as metacognitive knowledge and perceived as mental or cognitive representations residing in the minds of language learners; thus, LLBs are stable, static, and less susceptible to change. In this view, LLBs are related to other ID factors and the relationship between them is a causal and linear one. It is assumed that LLBs directly affect learning outcomes. In the last few decades, Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory has become influential in SLA. Central to the sociocultural theory is the emphasis of social and cultural factors on the development of cognition. Through the lens of sociocultural theory, LLBs are viewed as a socially constructed concept shaped by learners’
specific cultural, social, political, and educational contexts, thus, they are dynamic and constantly evolving with learners’ experiences. LLBs become a mediational means and help learners make sense of their learning experience and situation. According to sociocultural theory, the relationship between LLBs and other ID factors is not linear and far from causality, and the impact of LLBs on learning outcomes depends on whether it has become a mediational means (Kalaja et al., 2017). In more recent years, complexity theory has gained prominence in the field of SLA and offered a fresh viewpoint on LLBs. A defining feature of complexity theory is its holistic and dynamic way of thinking (Mercer, 2011b). Informed by complexity theory, LLBs are defined as a complex and less-structured system in which sets of interrelated beliefs are intertwined forming a multilayered, dynamic web (Barcelos, 2003). Within this theoretical framework, the interactions of LLBs with other ID factors may not necessarily be predictable or linear and causal, and thus the impact of LLBs on learning is much more complex and needs to be examined using a holistic approach.

**Research**

**Evidence**

**The Nature of Language Learner Beliefs**

Most of the early studies on LLBs treated them as a trait-like and stable construct relating to general personal attributes. LLBs were usually regarded as “naïve” and “defective” in comparison to “the current opinions of second language scholars” (Horwitz, 1987, p. 119). The purpose of early studies was to discern those “erroneous”, “counterproductive”, and “detrimental” ideas (Horwitz, 1987). Some common belief patterns were identified as a result. For instance, it was found that learners mostly endorsed the concept of language aptitude, the language difficulty hierarchy, and the importance of learning grammar and new words. These early studies perceived LLBs as cognitive entities; thus, the impact of social and contextual factors on the formation of learner beliefs was disregarded and neglected.

Sociocultural approaches to SLA challenge this static view of LLBs and bring a social turn to the construct. Conceptualizing it as dynamic, situational, and subject to change, Kalaja and Barcelos (2003) maintain that LLBs need to be recognized as part of students’ experiences and understood in relation to their particular social context. A considerable number of studies have been conducted adopting such a contextual approach. Amuzie and Winke (2009), for example, investigated changes in 70 international students’ beliefs as a result of a study-abroad program in the US. The results revealed that learners transformed their beliefs about learner autonomy and the role of teachers. The learners believed more strongly that they should find opportunities to use the L2 and that success in L2 learning depended on their own efforts outside class. Peng (2011) traced changes in one first-year college student’s beliefs over seven months in China. The findings revealed substantive changes in the student’s belief systems as mediated by classroom affordances. Similar results were also yielded by Zhong (2014) who revealed the emergence of new beliefs about experiential approaches, namely beliefs about using the language, due to a new language learning environment. These studies have provided empirical evidence that beliefs are dynamic, responsive to context, and susceptible to change.

Different from these dichotomous views (stability vs. dynamism), recent scholarship has revealed the dual and complex nature of learner beliefs. In her single case study of an Austrian learner’s self-concept—that is, a learner’s cognitive and affective belief about themselves—over three years, Mercer (2011b) found that while some dimensions of the learner’s self-concept changed to reflect contextual changes, other dimensions were more stable and appeared to be less immediately influenced by context. Mercer (2009) attributed the variations in dynamism to the centrality of the belief concerned in the learner’s belief system. In other words, the more stable beliefs, such as “I am good at Spanish”, tended to hold a central position in the learner’s belief system, whereas
the dynamic beliefs are more peripheral, mirroring and reflecting the learner’s ongoing learning experiences, for example “I’ve gotten back my English exam and was graded positively; I’m totally surprised and feel better than ever”. The results were corroborated by Zhong’s (2015b) later work. Focusing on the nature of learner beliefs over 18 weeks, the case study (N = 5) revealed the complexity of learners’ beliefs. She found the beliefs that the learners held were not always in harmony and some of them were conflicting and self-contradictory. For example, while a learner considered it important to use the language, she also gave primacy to accuracy, believing that she should not use the language until she knew it was correct. Additionally, while some beliefs evolved or changed over time and across situations, others remained relatively stable. Furthermore, the beliefs that learners held were not distinctive individual items, they were multilayered and intertwined. Drawing on these findings, she concluded that learner beliefs are best perceived as a subjective, interrelated, complex system that has dual features (both stable and dynamic) and sometimes can be paradoxical.

The Interactions of Learner Beliefs with Other Learner Factors

Another strand of research has focused on the relationship between learner beliefs and other ID factors. Dörnyei (2005) posits that conscious strategy use is logically influenced by learners’ beliefs. Ellis (2008) concurs, contending that learning strategies are influenced by learners’ explicit beliefs about how best to learn. It is not surprising that several empirical studies have attempted to examine the relationship between the beliefs that learners hold and the strategies they exploit. In her pioneering study, Yang (1999) investigated the relationship between 505 Taiwanese EFL college students’ beliefs about language learning and their use of learning strategies. The results revealed a cyclical relationship between the two variables. That is, beliefs influenced strategy use which in turn reinforced beliefs that learners held. Additionally, she found that learners’ self-efficacy beliefs—that is, beliefs about their ability to learn a second language—were strongly related to their use of all types of learning strategies, particularly their functional practice strategies. Similar findings were yielded by Magogwe and Oliver (2007). In their study of 480 students from primary schools, secondary schools, and a tertiary institution in Botswana, they found that there was a statistically significant but moderate relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and the use of language learning strategies across all proficiency levels. In other words, those learners who held positive beliefs about their ability to learn English well tended to use more learning strategies irrespective of their proficiency levels. The correlation between self-efficacy beliefs and learning strategy use was corroborated by Abedini, Rahimi, and Zare-ee’s (2011) study of 203 Iranian university EFL learners. The authors reported that language learners’ self-efficacy beliefs were strongly correlated with their use of all types of language learning strategies, except for metacognitive strategies which the majority of students did not attempt in their language learning. Ellis (2008) attributed the strong links between self-efficacy belief and learning strategy use to human nature. In other words, learners had to feel comfortable and competent enough to act on their beliefs.

However, in recent years, criticism has been leveled at these quantitative studies. One criticism is that the causal and linear relationship yielded from these studies is too simplistic and does not reflect the complexity of beliefs in reality (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003, 2019; Kalaja et al., 2017). Another criticism is that these quantitative studies only investigated reported strategy use, which may not represent students’ actual strategy use in their learning. The results yielded by Zhong’s (2012) study lent empirical support to these criticisms. In her qualitative study of five learners in New Zealand, Zhong gathered data on learner beliefs and both reported and actual strategy use. The results revealed that the relationships between learner beliefs and strategies were more complex than and not always as linear as previous quantitative studies had suggested. While the study confirmed the findings that self-efficacy beliefs were directly linked with strategy use, it revealed a discrepancy between the beliefs they held and the actions they took. That is, learners did not
Learner Beliefs

Learner beliefs always act upon the beliefs they held. She attributed the incongruity to situational constraints and personal reasons, such as a lack of opportunity to use the language and learners’ lower level of language proficiency.

Apart from learners’ strategy use, several studies have also looked into the interactions between learner beliefs and a few other learner factors, including WTC, learner autonomy, and emotions. Adopting an ecological perspective, Peng (2012) identified learners’ beliefs as one of a multitude of factors that affected learners’ WTC in the classroom. Similar results were yielded by Zhong (2013a) who reported a strong link between learner beliefs and WTC in the classroom. While a lack of self-efficacy beliefs along with a mixture of linguistic, affective, and sociocultural factors was found to account for learners’ reticence or unwillingness to participate in the teacher-fronted situation, learners’ beliefs about pair/group work were found to be the single factor that was associated with their WTC in collaborative learning contexts. Learner beliefs have also been reported to affect learners’ learner autonomy. Zhong (2013b) framed her study through the lens of Littlewood’s (1999) two levels of learner autonomy, reactive and proactive autonomy, to examine the effect of learner beliefs on their level of learner autonomy. The results revealed that one learner who held experiential beliefs (i.e., using the language) about language learning was more proactive and willing to take more responsibility for her learning, whereas the other learner who firmly believed that performing well in exams was paramount was more reactive to course requirements in his learning approach. The empirical evidence supported the argument that it is necessary to uncover learner beliefs and gauge their readiness for autonomy before promoting autonomous learning (Cotterall, 1995; Wenden, 1991; Zhong, 2010). Finally, learner beliefs were found to be related to emotions. The interplay between learner beliefs and emotions was evident in Aragão’s (2011) qualitative study of a foreign language classroom in Brazil, revealing that the emotions that learners experienced in the classroom were closely related to and influenced by their beliefs about themselves and significant others, such as teachers and peers, which may give rise to such feelings as intimidation and inhibition.

The Relationship between Learner Beliefs and Learning Outcomes

A handful of studies have examined the links between learner beliefs and learning achievements. In her study of 187 university students in the US, Mori (1999) found modest but statistically significant correlations between beliefs and learning achievements. Particularly, two beliefs (self-efficacy beliefs and beliefs about accepting multiple and ambiguous answers) were strongly correlated with high language performance. However, in his study of 56 Japanese students in New Zealand, Tanaka (2004) reported learners’ beliefs had a weak and insignificant impact on their learning outcomes. He attributed this finding to the short length of the observation period (12 weeks) and the monologic oral task he used in the research study. Similar results were yielded by Li and Liang (2012). In their study of 142 university students in China, a multiple regression analysis revealed that the self-efficacy factor was the only significant predictor for language proficiency, suggesting that the students with more positive images about themselves tended to have higher achievements.

The weakness in these quantitative studies is that they only investigate the relationship between beliefs and language attainments, and learners’ actual actions and strategy use are absent in the research designs. Zhong’s (2015a) case study (N = 2) is perhaps the only attempt to examine the three constructs: beliefs, learning strategies, and learning outcomes. The study reveals the complicated relationship among the three constructs. A cyclical relationship among the three constructs was present in one learner. That is, the learner’s beliefs were manifested in her learning actions which contributed to gains in every aspect of her learning such as grammar, vocabulary, and speaking, and these gains, in turn, confirmed her existing beliefs and also helped form a new belief about herself, whereas an incongruity between beliefs and learning strategy use along with limited strategy repertoire was identified in the other learner. Due to a lack of actions coupled with limited
strategy use, there were barely any noticeable gains in his learning. Based on findings in her study, Zhong proposed the following relationships among the three constructs. First, the effect of learner beliefs on learning gains is indirect via learning strategy use. When learners fail to act upon their beliefs, they are unlikely to achieve the learning outcomes they intended to. Second, learners’ ability to orchestrate a range of learning strategies in their strategy repertoire is essential to achieving desired learning gains. And third, self-efficacy beliefs are the precursor of a cyclical relationship among the three constructs where self-efficacy beliefs trigger learning actions which may lead to intended learning gains, and these, in turn, promote more orchestrated learning strategy use and reinforce their beliefs about themselves and their ability to learn.

**Learner Beliefs about Specific Domains of Language Learning**

A significant development in learner belief research in recent years is the focus on learners’ specific beliefs about a particular domain of language learning, such as grammar (Loewen et al., 2009), corrective feedback (Han, 2017; Li, 2017), peer feedback (Sato, 2013), and computer-assisted language learning (Sydorenko et al., 2017). Loewen et al. (2009), for instance, focused specifically on learner beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction by administering a questionnaire to 754 L2 learners who were learning 14 different target languages (TL). It was found that learners studying different TLs held varying beliefs about the value of grammar instruction and error correction. Some learners rejected the primacy of grammar learning more than other groups of L2 learners. The authors attributed the differences in learners’ responses to the social context and their previous language learning experiences. Li (2017) conducted a research synthesis of major empirical research examining learner and teacher beliefs about oral corrective feedback. The research synthesis integrated meta-analysis and narrative review, using the former approach to aggregate quantitative results and the latter approach to synthesize qualitative results and results on topics on which the number of studies was too small to meta-analyze. Li identified a number of themes and patterns regarding learners’ and teachers’ beliefs about the utility of feedback; the timing, source, and target of feedback; the congruence and incongruence between teachers’ stated beliefs about feedback and their feedback-providing practice; and the relationships between learner beliefs about feedback and the effectiveness of feedback. In a longitudinal multiple case study, Han (2017) examined learners’ specific beliefs about written corrective feedback (WCF). The data showed while learner beliefs interacted and mediated the students’ cognitive, behavioral, and affective engagement with WCF, they were also mediated by learners’ engagement. As the learners accumulated more experience in processing and using WCF, their beliefs about WCF became more sophisticated and balanced.

**Data Elicitation**

Different methods have been used to investigate LLBs. According to the modality of the instruments, they fall into five categories: 1) questionnaires, 2) verbal reports, 3) written accounts, 4) drawings, and 5) data triangulation.

**Questionnaires**

A vast majority of studies, especially early studies, have used questionnaires or surveys to elicit data on LLBs. To date, the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) questionnaire has been the most widely adopted instrument. There are two versions of the BALLI, English as a second language (ESL) and foreign language (FL), tapping into five dimensions of LLBs: 1) the difficulty of language learning, 2) aptitude for language learning, 3) the nature of language learning, 4) learning and communication strategies, and 5) motivations and expectations for language learning. Since its development, the BALLI questionnaire has been used with different learners, such as English as a foreign language (EFL) and ESL learners as well as learners of languages other than English.
Learner Beliefs

(LOTES), and in various contexts, such as the US (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Horwitz, 1987, 1988), Australia (Bernat, Carter, & Hall 2009), Taiwan (Yang, 1999), China (Li & Liang, 2012; Su, 1995), Korea (Park, 1995; Truitt, 1995), Turkey (Ariogul et al., 2009), Iran (Mohebi & Khodadady, 2011), and Lebanon (Diab, 2006).

Apart from the BALLI questionnaire, some researchers such as Cotterall (1999), Sakui and Gaies (1999), Tanaka (2004), and Wen and Johnson (1997) developed their own Likert-scale questionnaires to tap into different types of beliefs that learners hold about language learning. Tanaka (2004), for instance, developed 27 questions to detect learner beliefs in three areas: analytic learning, experiential learning, and self-confidence. Other researchers developed survey questions to assess learner beliefs about specific domains of language learning. The Likert-scale questionnaire used by Loewen et al. (2009), for example, consisted of 37 items that were designed specifically to investigate learner beliefs about the role of grammar and error correction. The questionnaire administered by Sydorenko et al. (2017) contained 36 Likert-scale items, tapping into learners’ domain-specific beliefs about computer-assisted language learning. However, these questionnaires hardly went through a validation process, which may explain why the BALLI questionnaire remains the most frequently used research tool in the area of LLBs. Table 14.1 summarizes selected studies using questionnaires.

Questionnaires offer several advantages. For a start, they are the most economical tool if the researcher has limited time and resources. It is especially useful for gathering cross-sectional data when the investigation aims to compare general trends across large populations and different contexts. In addition, they are less threatening and more flexible in the mode of data collection. Data can be collected via phones, face-to-face administration, mail, and web-based data collection tools. Despite their popularity, there are some limitations. Firstly, all the beliefs in a Likert-scale questionnaire are measured out of context whereby a set of discrete static belief sentences are presented to learners for them to agree or disagree with. This design does not reflect beliefs in real life where they are interrelated, less structured, and integrated into a larger dynamic model of thought and action (Woods, 2003). In addition, beliefs in questionnaires are formulated from an etic perspective, namely that beliefs are imposed upon learners who are requested to respond to ready-made questions. Dufva (2003) questions the validity of the belief information gathered from a Likert-scale questionnaire on the basis that it does not measure beliefs in learners’ own terms but rather their passive responses to the researcher’s formulation of beliefs. There are additional problems with the validity of learners’ responses. Tarone and Yule (1989) point out that they reflect an individual’s interpretation of the entailment of each statement and that learners do not always interpret items as the researchers intended, irrespective of the care that they took at the development stage. Cotterall (1999) confirmed such an issue when administering a belief questionnaire to a group of learners of English. Therefore, researchers should be wary of taking information elicited via questionnaire at face value, and the data should be submitted for further independent verification.

Verbal Reports

Over the last few decades, qualitative research methods have been used extensively in the research landscape of LLBs. Scholars have shown a growing interest in getting a rich and in-depth account of beliefs from an emic perspective, namely learners’ own accounts. The assumption is that learners can articulate their own thoughts about language learning. To this end, semi-structured and open-ended interviews are employed and data are typically subject to content analysis. LLBs are grounded in the data from the perspectives of the learner rather than the researcher. Wenden (1986, 1987) is considered to be the earliest researcher using semi-structured interviews to investigate LLBs. In her study of 25 advanced ESL students at Columbia University, Wenden (1986) employed a semi-structured interview to identify learners’ metacognitive knowledge about language learning. Content analysis revealed that learners were capable of talking about various aspects of the
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Studies</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Participants &amp; Contexts</th>
<th>Instrument(s)</th>
<th>Data Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Horwitz, 1987</td>
<td>To report on the responses of ESL students to the BALLI</td>
<td>32 intermediate-level students at an intensive English program at the University of Texas, Austin</td>
<td>BALLI (ESL version)</td>
<td>Descriptive statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanaka, 2004</td>
<td>To detect changes in beliefs as a result of the study-abroad program</td>
<td>56 Japanese international students in New Zealand</td>
<td>Self-designed belief questionnaire supplemented with interviews</td>
<td>Statistical analysis including a t-test and MANOVA Content analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernat, Carter, &amp; Hall, 2009</td>
<td>To investigate the relationship between learner beliefs and personality traits</td>
<td>262 ESL students at an Australian university</td>
<td>BALLI</td>
<td>Factor analysis and multivariate regression analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amuzie &amp; Winke, 2009</td>
<td>To detect changes in learner beliefs as a result of a study-abroad program</td>
<td>70 international English language learners in the US</td>
<td>NEO five-factor inventory</td>
<td>Statistical analysis including factor analysis, an independent t-test, and a paired-sample t-test Content analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loewen et al., 2009</td>
<td>To detect learners’ beliefs about the role of grammar and error correction, and to investigate differences in beliefs among learners studying different target languages</td>
<td>754 L2 learners at an American university</td>
<td>Self-designed domain-specific questionnaire with four open-ended prompts</td>
<td>Statistical analysis including factor analysis and a discriminant function analysis Content analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohebi &amp; Khodadady, 2011</td>
<td>To investigate beliefs that learners held about language learning</td>
<td>423 learners of English in Iran</td>
<td>The BALLI (EFL version)</td>
<td>Descriptive statistics A factor analysis A screen plot test A multiple regression analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li &amp; Liang, 2012</td>
<td>To investigate China EFL learner beliefs about language learning and the relationship between their beliefs and language proficiency</td>
<td>142 learners of English at a university of China</td>
<td>The BALLI China national proficiency test for English majors</td>
<td>A factor analysis A multiple regression analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydorenko et al., 2017</td>
<td>To investigate learner-specific beliefs about computer-assisted language learning and to detect differences among learners in target languages and degrees of exposure to technology</td>
<td>2,061 learners of different languages (N = 19) at a Midwestern university in the US</td>
<td>Self-designed domain-specific questionnaire</td>
<td>Descriptive statistics A principal component analysis (PCA) Two-way ANOVA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Learner Beliefs

language and language learning, including 1) the best way of learning languages, 2) their role in the learning process, 3) their proficiency in the language, and 4) the outcome of their learning efforts. Kalaja (2003) added oral diaries to verbal reports. In her study of six high-school graduates, she asked learners to keep oral diary entries of their thoughts, feelings, and experiences about a high-stakes English test and to participate in focus group discussions. The data were analyzed using a discursive approach, revealing the complexity and dynamism in the learners’ beliefs which were shaped by the group interactions they were part of. By focusing on the discourse, the discursive line of research offered an alternative approach to investigating what takes place in learners’ minds.

Verbal reports have some merits. A clear benefit is that data are gathered from an emic perspective whereby learners are invited to talk about their learning experience and their perceptions of learning. Another benefit is that interviewers can probe and encourage learners to elaborate on topics during interviews. Compared with other qualitative data collection tools, such as learning logs/diaries, interviews are less demanding on learners in terms of the time and workload required of them. However, one of the biggest drawbacks is that interviews can only tap into espoused beliefs (Argyris & Schön, 1974)—beliefs that learners are conscious of and can articulate—but not those tacit beliefs that learners hold unconsciously. In addition, interviews, retrospective ones in particular, rely heavily on learners’ memories which may bring into question the reliability of the data collected. Finally, like any other qualitative approach, findings are reflected by the researcher’s selectivity of data, a degree of interpretive subjectivity, and context specificity.

Written Accounts

Written accounts are another popular instrument to elicit data on LLBs. Written accounts can be in different forms and lengths, including diary entries/learning logs, where learners write journal entries recording their learning experiences, activities, and beliefs; and sentence frames, where learners are given a trigger to complete a sentence, e.g., “learning English is like …”. Data are subjected to a range of qualitative data analysis methods, depending on the theoretical framework the researcher adopts in the inquiry. Content analysis and grounded theory appear to be predominant with a few alternative methods such as narrative analysis, metaphor analysis, and discourse analysis. An example of this is Hosenfeld’s (2003) diary study of emergent beliefs of a second language learner. While learning Spanish, Hosenfeld kept journal entries for two months to record her learning activities as well as her thoughts, feelings, and reactions to these experiences. The self-directed journal entries were subjected to content analysis providing evidence of emergent beliefs. She concluded that the thick data from journal entries can offer a better and more in-depth understanding of learner beliefs. In her study of 953 undergraduate learners of 14 different languages at UC Berkeley in the US, Kramsch (2003) collected data on learner beliefs by using three metaphorical sentence triggers: 1) Learning a language is like …, 2) speaking this language is like …, and 3) writing in this language is like … . The purpose was to capture how learners metaphorically constructed their experiences. The content analysis yielded 17 categories of learner beliefs. Kramsch concluded that the metaphoric approach is a valid data elicitation method that can better capture learners’ subjective and dynamic representations or construction of their experience.

Written accounts are a useful tool to obtain rich, individualized, and detailed data about LLBs which may not have been accessible via interviews. The time available to learners to ponder over what they would like to write about could be a contributing factor. Bailey (1991) maintains that “diary studies are absolutely essential to advancing our understanding of classroom learning” (p. 87). An additional benefit of keeping a journal is that it can help learners improve their quality of writing and proficiency in the target language (Hosenfeld, 2003). However, written accounts have some disadvantages. Like verbal reports, data elicited from diaries are retrospective and subject to memory constraints and unconscious editing (Carson & Longhini, 2002). In addition, the quality of diary entries varies from rich, deep, and detailed accounts to sketchy, thin, and shallow descrip-
tions depending on the diarists’ metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness; thus, the consistency of quality in diaries cannot be ensured. Finally, like verbal reports, diary data are also subject to the problems of data reduction, the definition of categories, the open-ended nature of the data, and the reliability in coding and interpretation (Bailey, 1991).

**Drawings**

A few researchers have explored using drawings or visual representations as a means to elicit narrative data on the emotional experiences of learners linked to their LLBs. In her case study mentioned previously, Aragão (2011) asked the participants to reflect on language learning by making drawings as part of a collection of narrative documents. The visual representations displayed the emotions felt by the students about language learning and revealed a complex interplay between beliefs and emotions during their learning. Inspired by the notion of future self in the research of motivation (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014), Kalaja (2016, as cited in Kalaja et al., 2017) gave the topic, “My language x class in a year’s time from now” to a group of MA degree students and asked them to draw pictures about it and then write explanations of their visions on the reverse side of their drawings. A content analysis of the visual narratives and their writing commentaries revealed the students’ beliefs about the social nature of future language teaching and learning.

Visual representations can be an interesting alternative data elicitation tool. However, it can be limiting in the width and depth of the data collected, and demanding on the participants’ expressive and drawing abilities. Thus, their application to wider populations and potential to become the main research tool are questionable.

**Data Triangulation**

Recent years have seen a shift towards the use of triangulation in research into LLBs. More scholars have resorted to a variety of data elicitation instruments to capture a much broader picture of LLBs and understand them from an emic perspective and in the context which students interact with. For example, in her longitudinal multiple case study (N = 5) mentioned previously, Zhong (2012) combined several instruments to gather data on learner beliefs: 1) two semi-structured interviews, 2) three video-recorded classroom observations, 3) three stimulated recall interviews; 4) two open-ended interviews after two oral narrative tasks, tapping into task-specific beliefs, and 5) weekly learning logs over 18 weeks. All the data collected were subjected to content analysis. Five categories of learner beliefs surfaced from the data: 1) the learning situation, 2) external factors, 3) personal factors, 4) learning a second language, and 5) approaches to language learning. Some of them developed as the learners’ experience expanded while others remained stable. Data analysis also revealed the intricate relationships between learner beliefs and learning actions and their joint effects on learning outcomes.

Triangulation enables researchers to get a much richer and broader account of LLBs from learners’ own perspectives and gain sights into the complexity of learner beliefs. The results are arguably more useful and illuminating. However, the process of data collection can be lengthy and intense, and data analysis is undoubtedly time consuming and sometimes daunting.

To sum up, research methods for investigating LLBs in SLA began with an etic (outsider) perspective relying primarily on questionnaires where learners’ voices are rarely heard and then progressed to an emic (insider) perspective using learners’ own verbal or written accounts. Recent studies have explored more holistic approaches where learner beliefs are examined by resorting to a number of data collection tools.

**Practical Applications**

Research studies on LLBs have revealed that learners hold beliefs about different aspects of SLA and these beliefs help them interpret their learning experience and affect how they approach
Learner Beliefs

learning, particularly learning strategy use, which may determine the rate and level of their learning success. It is therefore critical to uncover these beliefs. To this end, several ways are available to teachers. Some of the suggestions include:

1. Asking learners to make reflections in writing. Most language learners are keen to write in the target language and would like their teachers to read and make comments. The writing can take different forms, such as learning journals/diaries/logs, letters to the teacher, compositions, or paragraphs. Learners can be asked to write about their perceptions of language learning or certain aspects of class learning activities/tasks. Some of the writing topics could be:
   - My views of the English language/collaborative learning/peer editing/corrective feedback
   - The best way to learn English
   - My favorite class activities
   - My perception of the good teacher
   - My view of XXX now and then
   - My perception of myself as a language learner
   - My advice to a future student of this class

2. Inviting learners to talk. Teachers could ask their learners to talk about their beliefs. This could be conducted individually or in groups. An inventory of class beliefs could be produced as an outcome of the discussion.

3. Administering a questionnaire to survey learners’ beliefs. This is particularly useful at the beginning of their learning.


By using these techniques, teachers can be informed of the beliefs that their learners hold about different aspects of language learning. Drawing on these beliefs, teachers can make informed decisions about their classroom practice. These could be 1) to continue the classroom practice when the beliefs that learners hold match the classroom practice, 2) to modify the classroom practice by adding or removing some learning activities when a mismatch is identified, or 3) to raise learners’ awareness and re-evaluate their beliefs and learning behaviors leading to a change when the beliefs that learner hold are deemed to impede their learning progress.

Future Directions

This chapter has shown that, despite research developments in recent years, research into LLBs in SLA is peripheral and marginal, compared to other ID research, such as motivation, aptitude, language learning strategies, and personality (Ellis, 2008). Many areas have yet to be investigated. First, while a handful of studies (e.g., Peng, 2012; Zhong, 2013a, 2013b) have investigated the interactions of learner beliefs with other variables, such as learner autonomy, learning strategies, and WTC, more studies are warranted that examine how learner beliefs interact with other IDs to shape their learning and affect the type and level of their learning outcomes. Findings of this kind may shed light on the nature of the interactions among different ID factors and contribute to theory-building in individual differences in SLA.

Additionally, the relationship between learner beliefs and learning action is worthy of further investigation. In particular, attention should be given to the types of beliefs that learners do not act upon and the contributing factors. More studies in this direction may further our understanding of constraints on, and barriers to, learning action. As concluded by Benson and Lor (1999) in their study, the true value of research into learner beliefs lies in an understanding of how learners put their beliefs to use.

229
Furthermore, notwithstanding a few studies (Mercer, 2011b; Zhong, 2015b) which have investigated the dual and complex nature of learner beliefs, further studies are warranted to investigate the types of learner beliefs that tend to change, the contributing factors for changes, the types of learner beliefs that are resistant to changes, and where they sit in learners’ belief systems. Findings of such research studies are particularly useful when an intervention or treatment programs or studies are designed.

Finally, previous studies are either predominantly quantitative or are qualitative involving one or a few cases. While case studies can provide richer and more in-depth understanding, extrapolations to other contexts are limited and results are subject to interpretation. As such, more mixed-methods studies are warranted to provide a holistic view of the construct and shed light on how it affects the learning process and learning outcomes.

References


