

Do Teachers Understand What Their Students Believe About Learning English?

By Donal Crawford

Beliefs about language learning are thought to influence language learners' use of and preference for various language learning strategies. Similarly, teachers' beliefs about language learning will influence their pedagogical and classroom approaches. Yet beliefs are rarely externally manifested and, therefore, need to be ascertained directly. The beliefs about language learning of 163 Chinese high school students and 38 mixed nationality teachers were obtained via questionnaire. Additionally, teachers' perceptions of the students' beliefs were ascertained. Results indicated that students and teachers held a range of beliefs. Teachers often understood students' beliefs, but notably underestimated their students' support of communicative language learning. It is suggested that teachers should analyse their students' beliefs to prevent mismatches of expectations or conflicts over classroom practices.

Introduction

Students' beliefs about learning a second or foreign language are recognised as having an impact on their approaches, motivation and success in learning that language (Barcelos, 2000; Dörnyei, 2005; Horwitz, 1988, 1999). For example, students with 'positive' or enabling beliefs are more likely to maintain motivation and overcome obstacles. Similarly 'negative' or unrealistic beliefs may lead to frustration, anxiety, and consequent reduced success (Kern, 1995; Kuntz, 1996; Oh, 1995).

From a pedagogical perspective within the classroom, students' internally held beliefs about language learning are clearly of relevance to the effectiveness of teaching and learning, especially if they do not match with the teacher's beliefs, approaches, and/or methodologies (Bernat & Gvosdenko, 2005). Cortazzi and Jin (1996) note how differences in opinions, between learners and teachers from different cultural backgrounds, about the 'best' way to learn a language can result in mismatched expectations and hence dissatisfaction and unproductivity. Cotterall (1995) and Kern (1995) also found that mismatches between the beliefs and

approaches of learners and teachers reduced the effectiveness of learning in the classroom.

Most studies to date have analysed students' and/or teacher beliefs about language learning, and the recognition that teachers should pay attention to this is most welcome. However, little research has analysed the consequent question of the extent to which teachers accurately understand their students' beliefs, which is obviously important if they are to reflect on how they impact on their teaching approaches.

The aim of this study therefore is twofold. Firstly, it adds to the data on similarities and differences in beliefs about language learning (specifically learning English) between students and teachers. Secondly, it attempts to determine the extent of any mismatches between student beliefs and what their teachers *think* they believe.

Method

Students' and teachers' beliefs about language learning were elicited by a questionnaire, which was based on Horwitz's 'Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)', English as a Second Language (ESL) version (1987),

Crawford, D. (2013) Do teachers understand what their students believe about learning English?. *English Teaching in China*, 3, 11–16.

although only three groups of beliefs were addressed rather than Horwitz's original five. Twenty statements were presented in 'simplified' English, and respondents had to choose for each statement from one (strongly agree) to five (strongly disagree) on a Likert scale. Minor changes to wording were made to maintain appropriacy for these respondents. The statements are given in full in the results section.

The questionnaire was administered to a total of 163 Chinese national high school students, studying in the first year of a two-year IGCSE programme in Shanghai, China. It was also given to 38 teachers at the school

(approximately 50% Chinese-English bilingual Chinese nationals and 50% English-speakers from a number of countries). The students were given the questionnaire in their normal ESL classes, and their class teachers were available to assist with language queries. The survey was conducted early in the first semester, reducing the likelihood of teacher beliefs/teaching methods influencing students. The teachers were asked to complete the questionnaire with respect to their own beliefs and to indicate for each statement what they considered most of their students to believe (or to leave it blank if they did not know/had no opinion).

Table 1. Beliefs about the Difficulty of Language Learning

Items	Respondents	1	2	3	4	5
3 Some languages are easier to learn than others.	Teacher	30.0	70.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	Student	17.9	42.3	19.9	16.7	3.2
	T thinks S	33.3	60.0	6.7	0.0	0.0
4 English is: 1. a very difficult language 2. a difficult language 3. a language of medium difficulty 4. an easy language 5. a very easy language	Teacher	0.0	31.6	36.8	31.6	0.0
	Student	1.3	31.4	57.7	9.6	0.0
	T thinks S	30.8	23.1	46.2	0.0	0.0
15 If someone spent one hour a day learning English, how long would it take them to speak English very well: 1. less than a year 2. 1-2 years 3. 3-5 years 4. 5-10 years 5. You can't learn English in 1 hour/day	Teacher	9.5	42.9	28.6	14.3	4.8
	Student	7.7	28.4	40.0	12.3	11.6
	T thinks S	0.0	16.7	50.0	16.7	16.7
25 It is easier to speak than understand English.	Teacher	14.3	19.0	28.6	33.3	4.8
	Student	11.5	22.4	42.9	20.5	2.6
	T thinks S	14.3	21.4	28.6	14.3	21.4
34 It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.	Teacher	4.8	33.3	42.9	14.3	4.8
	Student	5.1	23.7	35.3	28.8	7.1
	T thinks S	18.8	62.5	12.5	6.3	0.0

Results and discussion

A total of 156 completed student responses were analysed, along with 21 teacher responses (not all teacher responses were complete, with some gaps in indicating teacher opinions on student beliefs). Results are calculated below as a percentage of actual responses, and are organised according to Horwitz's (1987) taxonomy (item numbers relate to Horwitz's original 35 statement questionnaire).

To aid the following discussion, the results may often be conflated (i.e. agree-neutral-disagree). Table 1 shows that many more teachers than students considered English to be an easy language (item 4), although teachers over-estimated the level of difficulty

students considered it to have. Comparing language difficulty (item 3), teachers unanimously agreed with this statement, whereas students showed a wider range of responses, a situation the teachers seem poorly aware of. Comparing beliefs about speaking and understanding English (item 25), interestingly, show similar ranges of beliefs between teachers and students, and teachers also appeared to understand this in regard to their students. In contrast, although teacher and student beliefs regarding passive and active English skills (item 34) are not dissimilar; a large majority of teachers believed that students would agree with the proposition that reading/writing is easier than speaking/listening, which is shown not to be the case. This may be linked with teachers over-estimating Chinese students' reticence in using

Table 2. Beliefs about the Nature of Language Learning

Items		Respondents	1	2	3	4	5
8	It is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures in order to speak English.	Teacher	10.0	25.0	20.0	30.0	15.0
		Student	29.0	42.6	18.1	9.0	1.3
		T thinks S	7.1	42.9	21.4	28.6	0.0
12	It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country.	Teacher	61.9	23.8	9.5	4.8	0.0
		Student	54.5	36.5	7.7	0.6	0.6
		T thinks S	28.6	50.0	14.3	7.1	0.0
17	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary words.	Teacher	9.5	42.9	28.6	14.3	4.8
		Student	7.7	28.4	40.0	12.3	11.6
		T thinks S	0.0	16.7	50.0	16.7	16.7
22	If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on.	Teacher	4.8	4.8	19.0	47.6	23.8
		Student	10.9	32.7	25.0	24.4	7.1
		T thinks S	0.0	42.9	42.9	7.1	7.1
23	The most important part of learning English is learning the grammar.	Teacher	0.0	28.6	23.8	38.1	9.5
		Student	5.8	20.5	35.3	32.1	6.4
		T thinks S	7.1	35.7	42.9	14.3	0.0
27	Learning English is different than learning other academic subjects.	Teacher	23.8	47.6	9.5	14.3	4.8
		Student	14.1	34.0	38.5	10.9	2.6
		T thinks S	13.3	40.0	40.0	6.7	0.0
28	The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from Chinese.	Teacher	0.0	0.0	28.6	57.1	14.3
		Student	3.9	10.3	31.0	37.4	17.4
		T thinks S	6.7	53.3	26.7	13.3	0.0
35	English learning involves a lot of memorisation.	Teacher	9.5	38.1	33.3	19.0	0.0
		Student	36.8	47.7	14.8	0.6	0.0
		T thinks S	31.3	62.5	6.3	0.0	0.0

communicative English, a point which will be explored further below. Finally, there were a wide range of opinions among both teachers and students regarding the length of time needed to master English.

Table 2 illustrates teachers' and students' beliefs about the nature of language learning. There was broad overall agreement in all three answer groups that it is best to learn English in an English-speaking country (item 12). However, there was a wide variation regarding the need for English-speaking cultural knowledge in learning the language. Results from item 8 show only 35% of teachers agreed that it is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures in order to speak English, with 45% disagreeing. This compares with figures of 71.6% and 10.3% respectively for students. Teachers also underestimated this level of agreement among students, which could lead to students receiving less teaching about culture than they would like.

Most of the other items in Table 2 examine the relative importance of different facets of language learning – vocabulary (item 17), error correction (item 22), grammar (item 23), translation from L1 (item 28), and memorisation (item 35). Regarding the primacy of vocabulary and grammar, both teachers and students show a spread of opinions, with teachers somewhat underestimating the importance of vocabulary to students and conversely overestimating the importance of grammar. There is a stark difference in opinions on the impact of early error correction (item 22). A large majority of teachers disagreed with the proposition that error correction is essential for future accuracy, whereas more students agreed with this (although there is a significant minority of 31.5% who also disagreed). Teachers appear to be aware of this difference. They also seemed to understand that students considered learning English to involve a lot of memorisation (item 35), an opinion teachers

Table 3. Beliefs about Learning & Communication Strategies

Items	Respondents	1	2	3	4	5
7 It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.	Teacher	25.0	20.0	25.0	25.0	5.0
	Student	57.1	32.7	5.8	3.8	0.6
	T thinks S	20.0	46.7	20.0	13.3	0.0
9 You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly.	Teacher	5.0	0.0	5.0	30.0	60.0
	Student	1.9	4.5	6.4	34.6	52.6
	T thinks S	6.3	62.5	12.5	18.8	0.0
13 I enjoy practicing a foreign language with the native speakers I meet.	Teacher	23.8	52.4	14.3	4.8	4.8
	Student	22.4	46.8	26.9	3.2	0.6
	T thinks S	13.3	26.7	26.7	33.3	0.0
14 It's OK to guess if you don't know a word in a foreign language.	Teacher	19.0	47.6	23.8	9.5	0.0
	Student	28.8	53.8	13.5	3.2	0.6
	T thinks S	0.0	26.7	6.7	53.3	13.3
18 It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	Teacher	57.1	33.3	9.5	0.0	0.0
	Student	40.4	46.8	10.3	2.6	0.0
	T thinks S	46.7	53.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
21 I feel timid or shy speaking a foreign language with other people.	Teacher	4.8	4.8	19.0	47.6	23.8
	Student	10.9	32.7	25.0	24.4	7.1
	T thinks S	0.0	42.9	42.9	7.1	7.1
26 It is important to practice with MP3s, cassettes or tapes.	Teacher	19.0	38.1	28.6	9.5	4.8
	Student	16.8	51.6	21.9	9.7	0.0
	T thinks S	13.3	53.3	13.3	20.0	0.0

broadly shared (although to a lesser extent). However, teachers were largely incorrect in their assessment of the importance to students of translation from Chinese. In fact both teachers and students generally disagreed (teachers more so) that the most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from Chinese. However, the majority of teachers believed that students agreed with this proposition.

Some of the most interesting results are found in relation to beliefs about learning and communication strategies, displayed in Table 3. Teachers and students generally agreed on two communication strategies. They both strongly disagreed with item 9 (you shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly) and agreed with item 14 (it's OK to guess if you don't know a word in a foreign language). Unfortunately, teachers seemed to believe that students are not in favour of taking risks in order to communicate, with 68.3% of teachers thinking students would agree with item 9, when only about 5% did so. 66.6% of teachers considered that students do not want to guess words, while the actual figure for students was 3.8%. Quite a significant percentage of teachers also held the belief that students dislike practicing communicating with native speakers (item 13) whereas only 3.8% of students reported not enjoying this activity. Generally the students appeared to be believers in communicative English strategies. Teachers were of the same opinion, yet they continued to hold perhaps stereotypical views of Chinese learners as less communicative and more L1 translation focused. This view is supported by the mismatches in items 34 and 28 discussed above.

In terms of two specific learning strategies explored here there seems to be close agreement in the value of repeating/practising (item 18) and using audio resources to practice (item 26). However, the importance of good pronunciation in speaking shows greater variance. Surprisingly, teachers varied widely in their belief that it is important to speak English with excellent pronunciation. Nearly 90% of students, on the other hand, were in favour of this proposition, a strength of belief that teachers somewhat underestimated.

Conclusions

As expected, and in agreement with previous research (Barcelos, 2000) there are a range of beliefs about learning English/a foreign language, both among students and teachers. Some of the beliefs expressed in the questionnaire show quite close overall agreement, while others do not, and notable differences between student and teacher beliefs are discussed above. It was not the aim of this research to examine the validity or invalidity of any of these beliefs. Rather, the results show that it is probably wise for teachers to consider not only their own beliefs but also those of their students, as there may be unexpected differences.

Teachers did, in fact, often show quite good understanding of the students' beliefs, indicating that, even when the teacher held beliefs that differed from those of students, they frequently had an insight into how students understand language learning. However, this understanding was not consistent, with some quite significant mismatches.

In past research there has been particular concern that teachers imposing communicative language teaching methodologies on students who culturally have learned in a different way may produce mismatches of expectations and practice (Cortazzi, 1990; Kumaravadivelu, 1991; Ellis, 1996). However, this study showed definite similarities in beliefs supporting communicative-style approaches and strategies among both teachers and students. On the other hand, teachers broadly maintained an opinion that Chinese students are not in favour of these approaches. It would seem important that teachers take advantage of students' willingness to communicate more in order to increase language use opportunities in and out of class.

Some caveats must be made in these interpretations of the results. Firstly, it is important to emphasise that this study is looking at aggregations of beliefs, when, in fact, all beliefs are individual. Within this study there were many cases of widely diverging views among both teachers and students. Any attempt to bring this research into the classroom should bear this in mind. Secondly,

response numbers from teachers were smaller than is to be desired. A greater number of responses, particularly regarding what teachers estimate students believe, would increase the confidence level in these results. Nevertheless, this research does show the value that could be obtained from teachers actively investigating and considering their own and their students' beliefs about language learning.

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