



The nature of language learners' beliefs: A half-told story

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ABSTRACT

Substantial amount of research regarding L2 learners' beliefs has been conducted in recent years. However, not enough attention has been paid to investigating the nature of learners' beliefs; hence our understanding of the construct is contradictory in the sense that early research studies report stability in beliefs, while more recent studies provide evidence of change in learners' beliefs. This paper reports on a case study aiming at contributing to a deeper understanding of the nature of language learners' beliefs. Data were gathered longitudinally over an 18-week period using a number of tools. The findings reveal the complexity of learners' beliefs. The beliefs that the learners held were not always in harmony and some of them can be self-contradictory. Furthermore, while some beliefs may evolve and change over time and across situation, others may remain relatively stable, suggesting the complex and dual nature of learners' beliefs. Drawing on these findings, the paper concludes that learner beliefs can best be perceived as an inter-related construct that has dual features and sometimes can be paradoxical.

KEYWORDS: Learners' beliefs, Chinese language learners, case study, changes in learners' beliefs.

RESUMEN

Una proporción significativa de la investigación existente sobre las creencias de los aprendices de L2 ha sido producida en años recientes. Sin embargo, la naturaleza de dichas creencias no ha recibido aún suficiente atención. Nuestra comprensión de este constructo presenta la paradoja de que los estudios iniciales indicaban una estabilidad en las creencias de los aprendices, mientras que los más recientes atestiguan cambios en las mismas. Para este estudio longitudinal se recogieron datos a lo largo de un período de 18 semanas mediante diversas herramientas. Los resultados dan fe de la complejidad de las creencias de los aprendices. Sus creencias sobre el aprendizaje de la L2 no siempre eran coherentes entre sí. Además, mientras que algunas creencias pueden evolucionar, otras se mantienen relativamente estables. El estudio concluye que las creencias de los aprendices de L2 pueden concebirse como un constructo complejo con rasgos duales y, en algunos aspectos, paradójico.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Disposición a comunicarse, contexto, ansiedad, personalidad, motivación, estudio de casos prácticos.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language learners' beliefs about language learning have received an increasing attention in SLA in recent years (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003; Mercer, 2011; Zhong, 2012a, 2014). This interest in learners' beliefs reflects the shift in focus in SLA to learners and their contributions to language learning along with other individual factors, e.g. learning strategies, motivation, aptitude, personality, etc. (see Ellis, 2008). The last few decades have witnessed substantial amount of research in this area. Some belief patterns have been identified among learners from different backgrounds (Bernat & Gvonzdenko, 2005; Horwitz, 1999). Learners mostly endorse the concept of language aptitude, the language difficulty hierarchy, and the importance of learning new words.

In more recent years, researchers have moved beyond identifying the strength of language learner beliefs to examining the relationship between learners' beliefs and other learner factors. It has been found that learner beliefs underlie learners' choice of learning strategies (Park, 1995; N. Yang, 1999; Zhong, 2008) and influence their levels of learning autonomy (Cotterall, 1995; Zhong, 2010; 2013a), their learning outcomes (Tanaka, 2004) and their oral participation in classrooms and language proficiency (Zhong, 2013b). These findings provide some useful information to researchers and to classroom teachers. However, studies on learners' beliefs are fairly marginal compared to studies of other individual learner factors, such as motivation, aptitude, learning strategies and personality (Ellis, 2008). Many issues have yet to be investigated. For example, the majority of early studies examine learner beliefs as a static trait (e.g. Horwitz, 1988, 1999; Wenden, 1998). Although recent studies (e.g. Mercer, 2011; Peng, 2011; Zhong, 2014) investigate the evolution of learner beliefs over a prolonged period of time, little is known about the factors contributing to changes in learner beliefs. A review of the literature also indicates that apart from a handful of studies (e.g. Mercer, 2011), empirical studies investigating the nature of learner beliefs are surprisingly fewer in SLA. Hence, understanding of the nature of learner beliefs is not balanced, either emphasizing its stability or dynamism.

The current study seeks to fill the gap, attempting to examine the nature of L2 learners' beliefs by observing the development of two language learners' beliefs over an 18-week period. Theoretically, the empirical evidence provided by this study will help deepen our understanding of the nature of learner beliefs, the role they play during an individual's learning process. More practically, findings from the study will help language teachers make better sense of beliefs that their students bring to the learning context and make informed decisions regarding their classroom practices and curricula development.

2. RESEARCH INTO LEARNERS' BELIEFS IN SLA

2.1. The BALLI-based studies

Studies on learner beliefs in SLA started in the mid-1980s when it was first introduced into the field by Elaine Horwitz (1985; 1987; 1988). Early studies defined learner beliefs as “the relatively stable information human thinkers have about their own cognitive processes and those of others” (Wenden, 1998: 516). This conception of learner beliefs as static, mental representations has seen researchers use quantitative methods to measure the strength of learners' beliefs in different populations of learners and compare beliefs among them. A typical research instrument employed is Horwitz's Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) questionnaire (Horwitz, 1987; 1988) which is designed to examine learners' beliefs in five major areas: (1) difficulty of language learning; (2) foreign language aptitude; (3) the nature of language learning; (4) learning and communication strategies, and (5) motivations and expectations. Since its development, the BALLI has been used with learners in various parts of the world, including Australia (Bernat 2006), Korea (Park, 1995; Truitt, 1995), Lebanon (Diab, 2006), China (Su, 1995), Taiwan (N. Yang, 1999), the United States (Horwitz, 1987, 1988; Kuntz, 1996; Oh, 1996) and Turkey (Kunt, 1997; Ariogul & Onursal, 2009). Some common belief patterns have been reported across these studies. It has been found, for instance, that learners mostly endorse the concept of language aptitude, the language difficulty hierarchy, and the importance of learning new words. However, most of these studies limit their scope of investigation to merely listing learner beliefs and/or identifying the strength of the beliefs that learners hold; hence their connections with other factors, particularly their influence on ultimate learning outcomes are not clear. Secondly, all these studies examine learners' beliefs from an etic perspective. In other words, beliefs are imposed upon learners who are requested to respond to ready-made questions. Dufva (2003) questioned the validity of the belief information gathered from a Likert-scale questionnaire as it does not measure beliefs but rather responses to the researcher's formulation of beliefs. Finally, the quantitative studies, the BALLI-based studies in particular, are conducted on the assumption that beliefs are static and trait-like; therefore, some questions remain unanswered. For example, what is the impact of other factors, e.g. contextual factors, on the formation of learner beliefs? Do learners' beliefs remain stable over time?

2.2. The situated and dynamic nature of language learners' beliefs

Recent studies have argued that beliefs are dynamic, situational and subject to change over time and across contexts, and that beliefs need to be understood in relation to their contexts. (Barcelos, 2003; Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011). Tanaka (2004) employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the development of fifty-six Japanese students' beliefs about language learning over twelve weeks during their study abroad in New Zealand. The

quantitative results showed no statistically significant differences in the learners' responses; however, the qualitative data he gathered from five learners' diaries and an interview with twenty-nine participants indicated two notable changes in the Japanese students' beliefs. They began by rejecting grammar study but eventually came to recognize the need for more instructions on formal grammatical features of the language. They became more balanced in terms of their learning approach. Another change was that the learners became more realistic in the sense that they realized the lengthy process of language learning. Likewise, Amuzie and Winke (2009) combined quantitative and qualitative measures to explore changes in seventy international students' beliefs as a result of a study abroad program in the United States. The participants came from diverse language backgrounds, including Arabic, Chinese, French, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese. The results revealed statistically significant belief changes in both groups relating to learner autonomy and the role of teachers. They came to believe more strongly that they should find opportunities to use their L2 and that success in L2 learning depended more on their own efforts outside the classroom. They came to believe less strongly in the importance of the teacher's role in learning. In her multi-case study, Zhong (2014) investigated changes in migrant learners' beliefs as a result of a new learning environment and factors accounting for the changes. The results revealed a few noticeable changes. The most noteworthy change was that some learners changed their beliefs about approaches to language learning from an initial analytical approach to a later experiential one. They started the course by focusing on formal, grammatical features of the language. As the course progressed, they became more conscious of the importance of language use, exposing themselves to English in real life and nurturing the feel for English.

Another line of the research investigation is the recognition of the sociocultural dimension of learners' beliefs and the adoption of the case study method to investigate the dynamic nature of learner beliefs. In his study of the changes in one Chinese first-year college student's beliefs in an EFL context, Peng (2011) used an ecological approach to collect data over a seven month period. The findings revealed substantive changes in the student's belief systems as mediated by classroom affordances. In the same vein, J. Yang and Kim (2011), framing their study in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, investigated dynamism in two Korean learners' beliefs in two different study-abroad (SA) contexts, one in the U.S. and another in Philippines. They found that one learner's beliefs were continuously evolving with her SA experiences and successfully scaffolded her SA learning. The SA learning environment, on the other hand, appeared to have little impact on the other learner's belief and learning, suggesting that individual differences in the learners' responses to their learning environment.

Different from these studies assuming the dynamism of learners' beliefs in their research design, Mercer (2011), in her single case study, aimed to examine the extent to which an Austrian learner's self-beliefs evolved over a three-year period. Focusing her study on one specific belief domain, learners' self-beliefs, she found that some dimensions of the

learners' self-beliefs changed to reflect contextual changes, whereas other dimensions were more stable and appeared to be less immediately influenced by context, indicating the dual features of learner beliefs, i.e. some learner beliefs are susceptible to change while others remain relatively stable over time and across contexts. Mercer (2009, 2011) argues that the changes in the beliefs depended on their centrality, with central, core self-beliefs remaining more stable and peripheral beliefs more dynamic.

The review indicates studies on language learner beliefs in current literature seem to be unbalanced, mostly focusing on the dynamism of learners' beliefs. To further our understanding, there is a clear need of more empirical studies examining the dual nature of learners' beliefs in different contexts involving different populations. This study was designed to fill this gap in scholarship. It intends to provide answers to the following questions:

1. To what extent do learners' beliefs change, if any, over the observed period?
2. What is the nature of learners' beliefs?

3. THE STUDY

3.1 Methodology

As previously discussed, a major drawback of quantitative approaches to the study of complex constructs like beliefs is their lack of emic perspectives. Data are gathered out of context and depersonalized. Recent years have seen an increasing emphasis from scholars on using more situated, holistic, qualitatively-orientated approaches (Barcelos, 2003). In SLA, case study research is the typical method used in this respect (e.g. Mercer, 2011; Peng, 2011; Zhong, 2014). The purpose of this inquiry is to provide an in-depth understanding of the complex construct of learners' beliefs rather than extrapolating findings to other populations and contexts. Therefore, it is legitimate and promising to employ the case study research method. It is hoped that the richness and depth of data this study generated will shed some light on our understanding of the phenomena and lead to "a full and thorough knowledge of the particular" (Stake, 2000: 2).

3.2 Data collection

3.2.1. Context and participants

This inquiry is part of a wider investigation into the beliefs and learning strategy use of Chinese migrant learners and their impact on learning English in a New Zealand context (see Zhong, 2012a). The research study consisted of three stages spreading over one and a half year. This report draws on data gathered from the third stage of the broader study.

The study was conducted at a language school of a tertiary institution in New Zealand. The research site was chosen because it represented a typical learning environment where migrants went to learn English in New Zealand. Chinese learners were identified as the participants for this study because they constituted the majority of the student population at the language school. Understanding this learner group was significant for the school and the findings could be also useful for other contexts which have similar learners. Another reason was that due to the low language proficiency of the participants, it was necessary to conduct all the interviews in their L1 in order to get meaningful data. The study was carried out within an interpretative paradigm using a qualitative approach to collect data on Chinese learners over an 18-week period.

A purposeful sampling was employed (Patton, 1990) to identify potential participants. The criterion used was that they had to be recent Chinese migrants who studied in a New Zealand context for no more than six months. Standard ethics procedures were followed rigorously. First, all the eligible students were approached by the school administrators. After they had agreed to participate in the study, the researcher gave them detailed information about the study, reassuring them that they could withdraw from the study at any time and their confidentiality would be protected. A total of 15 participants voluntarily got involved in the study. Two participants quit the study at week 8, and 13 of them continued until the research was complete. The 13 participants were studying different courses in the programme. Four were from the Intermediate level, six from the Pre-intermediate and three from the Elementary Two level. Due to the scope and space limitations, in this report I chose two learners, focusing on the nature of the beliefs they held about language learning. This narrow focus will enable me to conduct an in-depth and meaningful analysis of the nature of learner beliefs and shed further light on the phenomenon under investigation.

The two learners selected were Ding and Shan (pseudonyms used for confidentiality) and they were both female learners from the Pre-intermediate level. They were chosen as they represented typical learners at their levels and the data collected from them were illuminating to the focus of this report.

Case one: Ding

Ding started learning English at primary school. She had been a high achiever until she lost her balance in the subjects she learned. She commented that she was a top student in Chinese language but failed maths miserably every time. Due to the imbalance in her learning, she did not pass the highly competitive, rigorous national matriculation exams and stayed at home after high school. When she turned 20, her parents sent her to New Zealand to learn English for six months. She did not take learning seriously at that time and often played truant. She confessed 'I only went to school when there were exams. So I hardly learned anything' (Interview I). She returned to China after the six-month stint in New Zealand.

When this study was conducted, it was her second visit to New Zealand and she had turned 25. She came to join her husband who started as an international student and was later granted permanent residency in New Zealand. As an only child from a wealthy family, Ding did not have any financial pressure, so she visited China regularly. Having travelled frequently between the two countries for eighteen months, she decided to stay put in New Zealand for a while and enrolled into the language school.

Having sat the placement test, she was placed at the Pre-intermediate level. Ding's class was dominated by Chinese. Among the 16 students, 10 were from China, 2 from Korea, 2 from Iran and 4 from Africa.

Case two: Shan

Shan was a 41-year-old student. She was a lecturer teaching interior design at a university in China. She came to New Zealand to join her husband and son. When this study started, she had been in New Zealand for one and a half years. Her husband had been working in New Zealand for 5 years as a deputy-principal at an institute owned by a local Chinese. After Shan came to New Zealand, she secured a job as an administrative manager at the same institute as her husband. Her job did not require her to use English because nearly all the students at the school were Chinese and most of the tutors were bilingual Chinese teachers. Outside her work, she relied on her husband and son to communicate, so she did not have a sense of urgency to learn English. However, the language school she worked for experienced a downturn in enrolments. As a result, she was made redundant. Her husband persuaded her to take an English course.

Shan started learning English at high school in 1980s when the traditional grammar translation teaching methods dominated English teaching in China. Shan had not used English in China since she graduated from university 20 years ago. She felt 'I can barely remember what I learned' (Interview I).

Shan was enrolled into a different pre-intermediate class from Ding. There were 20 students on the course: 3 Koreans, 6 Chinese, 8 Africans, 2 from the Middle East, 1 Tibetan Indian.

3.2.2 Data collection tools

To ensure the dependability and trustworthiness of the study, data were generated using a number of different data collection instruments which are described in Table 1.

| Instrument | Frequency & Length | Purpose |
|--------------------------------|---|--|
| Semi-structured open interview | Twice: week 1 & week 18 60 minutes each | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To tap into the learners' beliefs about language learning To trace the developments of the learners' beliefs |
| Learning log | One journal entry every week | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To gain an in-depth understanding of learners' beliefs relating to their language learning To examine the developments of learner beliefs |
| Class observation | Twice: week 6 & week 10 120 minutes each | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To observe learners' overt learning behaviours To examine learners' tacit beliefs about language learning |
| Stimulated recall interview | Twice: week 4 & week 10 30 minutes each | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To get the learners' interpretations of their class learning behaviours. To elicit the learners' explicit views about their learning in the classroom setting |

Table 1. Overview of data collection methods

3.3. Data analysis

Data analysis was based on the principles of qualitative research methods (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Any statements in the following forms were identified as learners' beliefs and were used for analysis (Wenden, 1987):

- General statements relating to language learning that expressed opinions: for example, 'I believe/think...', 'in my opinion...', 'to my view...', 'it's important to...'
- Statements that contained modal verbs: for example, "you/I need...", "you/I must/have to...", "students should..."
- Definitions about language learning and teaching: for example, 'learning English is mainly about ...'
- Hypothetical statement: for example, 'if I were younger, I would learn English faster.'
- Statements that included superlatives or comparatives: for example, 'The best way to learn is...'

I first transcribed and translated verbatim all the data I gathered from each interview. Then I read repeatedly all the interview transcripts, diary entries and classroom observation field notes while jotting down notes in the margins. After several readings, I started open coding the set of data for Ding. During the line-by-line scrutiny of the data, codes were affixed to the units of analysis which could be single words, short phrases, complete

sentences, utterances or extended discourse. These expressed her beliefs about language learning. Data reduction followed afterwards. Similar themes were grouped into tentative categories. Propositional statements were made for each of these categories. For example, I subsumed all her comments about learning grammar, speaking, reading, writing and the priority in learning English under one category and the proposition I created was 'beliefs about learning a second language.' All the categories were then tested against the second set of data for case two, Shan, to see if the tentative categories existed and continued to hold. If new tentative categories were identified, I would re-examine the previous case and add the new provisional categories to the subsequent data analysis. It was a process of recursive analysis where data were read repeatedly; new codes were added until saturation was reached, i.e., no new themes were found, and salient themes, categories or recurring patterns began to emerge. During this process, I stayed close to the data and themes surfaced from the data without imposing any preconceived framework on them.

In order to examine changes in the learners' beliefs, I compared data at the first point of data collection (hereafter referred to as *Time 1*) with subsequent data gathered at different timescales of the study (hereafter referred to as *Time 2*).

Drawing on Lincoln and Guba (1985), I used a number of measures to ensure credibility, transferability, and dependability of the qualitative analysis. These included (1) prolonged engagement and persistent observation; (2) triangulation of data and analysis; (3) rich and thick description; (4) member checking where each interview transcript was returned to the participants to check its accuracy, and their comments were incorporated in the data analysis.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Development of the learners' beliefs

Following afore-mentioned inductive data analysis procedures, I established five exhaustive (i.e., all instances could be assigned to a category) and exclusive (i.e., all instances should be assigned to only one category) categories of learners' beliefs about language learning for this study. Table 2 provides a summary of these five categories.

| Category | Definition |
|--|--|
| 1. Beliefs about the learning situation | Referring to learners' overall views about learning and teaching in New Zealand and in China. |
| 2. Beliefs about external factors | Referring to a range of external factors, particularly classroom-related factors that have an impact on learners' language learning. They consist of such sub-beliefs as error correction, the role of teachers, exams, and collaborative learning. |
| 3. Beliefs about personal factors | Consisting of two sub-beliefs: (1) beliefs about individual learner factors relating to age, language aptitude, memory and self-efficacy; (2) beliefs about learners' own language proficiency, e.g. their own strengths and weaknesses in English. |
| 4. Beliefs about learning a second language | Relating to those beliefs concerning English grammar, vocabulary and the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), as well as their beliefs about the importance of accuracy and fluency. |
| 5. Beliefs about approaches to language learning | Referring to those beliefs about general approaches to language learning, e.g. "Learning English is about using it in real life," and also the participants' epistemological beliefs about learning, e.g., "Learning is a cumulative process where I have to accumulate my English knowledge gradually." |

Table 2. Classification of Learners' Beliefs about Language Learning

4.1.1. Changes in Ding's beliefs

Table 3 compares Ding's beliefs at Time 1 and Time 2. The table shows two developments in Ding's beliefs. The first noticeable change was the emergence of a belief about external factors, collaborative learning. At time 1, she did not express her views about working in pairs/groups. This was because she had never experienced collaborative learning in China. As Ding pointed out that 'in China teaching and learning are both exam-oriented. Teaching was crammed with contents. There were no peer learning at all. All we did was to copy notes on the blackboard' (Ding, Interview I). On the other hand, the school programme document in New Zealand revealed that teachers in the New Zealand context endorsed the communicative teaching approach. Teaching claimed to be responsive to learner needs and involved meaningful communication. To enhance learners' communicative competence, one of the key techniques was to allocate enough time for learners to work in pairs and groups. As the learners experienced more collaborative learning in the new learning environment, a new belief emerged about collaborative learning in classrooms. However, Ding held a conflicting view. While acknowledging the opportunity to practice speaking and listening and consolidate what she had learned in pairs/groups, Ding also expressed her concerns about their fellow students' ability to correct her. She commented, 'When we interacted, most people spoke wrong English. They used wrong tenses and wrong sentence structures. There were no verbs in sentences. There was no point speaking because what we said was wrong anyway' (Stimulated recall II). In Ding's view, the product of learning (i.e. what she learned and her accuracy) mattered more than its process (i.e. how she learned):

| Belief category | Time 1 | Time 2 |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| 1. Learning situation | In China <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inflexible • Confusing • Teaching for exams | In China <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools and teachers ignored & even prejudiced against low-achievers • Teaching and learning for exams |
| | In New Zealand <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faster but easier to understand • Teaching was practical and useful | In New Zealand <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning was relaxing |
| 2. External factors | Error correction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keeping the wrong forms meant she didn't learn anything | Error correction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Error correction ensured that she would not make the same mistakes again. |
| | Role of teachers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching • Clarifying confusions | Role of teachers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching well <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Explaining the errors ➢ Clarifying confusion ➢ Teaching some language points • Giving tests & homework • Motivating learners to learn |
| | Kiwis <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not willing to accept migrants • Arrogant • Unkind | |
| | Exams <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She did not like sitting exams as they were scary • Important part of learning | Kiwis Same as Time 1 Exams Same as Time 1 Collaborative learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consolidating what she had learned • Helpful for speaking but did not help accuracy |
| | | |
| 3. Personal factors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low in capability • Lazy • Think ambitiously but could not implement her plans • Ok aptitude but did not make enough effort | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not a balanced learner • knowing better about herself & more confident about her learning |
| 4. Learning a second language | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning was about grammar and vocabulary • Accuracy was her primary focus | Same as Time 1 |
| 5. Nature of language learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning was a cumulative process • Successful learning was contingent on her effort | Same as Time 1 |

Table 3. Ding's beliefs about language learning at Times 1 & 2

‘I came here to learn. Whether it [learning] is interesting or not depends on what is going on in the classroom and whether it helps me learn ... I’d rather teachers asked us to use new words to make sentences than work in pairs...there is no point speaking because what we said was wrong anyway and we couldn’t spot and correct each other’s mistakes’ (Ding, Diary entry 5)

Shaped by these beliefs, she questioned the effectiveness of collaborative learning, particularly group work because no one took responsibility and turn distributions were not even. Similar learner concerns about uneven turn distributions and group affiliation have also been reported in other studies (e.g. Cao, 2011; Léger & Storch, 2009).

Another noticeable change was the increase in her self-efficacy belief, i.e. her beliefs about herself and her ability to learn English well. One of the questions that I asked the learners in the two open-ended interviews was “how confident are you to learn English? Please rate your confidence on a scale ranging from 1 to 10. 10 is the maximum.” At Time 1, Ding rated herself at 3. She regarded herself as a poor, lazy language learner with “low capability.” This was not due to her aptitude but to the fact that she did not work as hard as she should have. Her problem was that she thought ambitiously but could not execute her plans. However, at time 2, she rated herself at 6. According to Ding,

‘In the past I never believed what I said was correct as I really didn’t know. Now I have learned a lot of grammar and I know the reason why it is correct. I don’t ask him [her tenant] for help anymore. I feel he is not as good as I am. Why should I believe in him?’ (Ding, S.R.II)

‘Now I’m completely different. I know better about myself. I know which skills I am good at and which I am not. Although I am still not very clear [about grammar], I have my own opinions now’ (Ding, Interview II)

It would appear that the progress in her language and the fact that she knew more about English were linked to the growth of her self-efficacy. Furthermore, the encouragement from teachers seemed to help increase her self-efficacy significantly: ‘When teachers said ‘you are doing well,’ I would become more confident about my learning, thinking “it turned out that I could do it’ (Ding, Diary entry 14).

4.1.2. Changes in Shan’s beliefs

Table 4 reveals a few changes in Shan’s beliefs about language learning. Emergent at Time 2 was her belief about collaborative learning. Different from Ding, Shan held a positive view on working in pairs/groups. She was of the opinion that open discussions were the most beneficial ‘because it can give me the freedom to consolidate and apply what I have learned’ (Stimulated recall I) and also ‘in the discussion you can talk things beyond the textbook.

Your thoughts and topics are not limited by the textbook' (Simulated recall II). She valued the opportunity to use the language when working with others.

| Belief Category | Time 1 | Time 2 |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| 1. Learning Situation | In China <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching was traditional Learning was passive Grammar and reading were better but little listening and speaking In New Zealand <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching was more interactive Learning was enjoyable and motivating | In China <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Same as time 1 In New Zealand <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focusing on communication More flexible |
| 2. External Factors | Setting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning at school was better than by herself Error correction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Important to be corrected in class to avoid making the same mistakes She wanted to be corrected all the time in class Helping improve her English Role of teachers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching Providing learners with learning strategies Creating opportunities to use the language Exams <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Crucial and they enhanced learning | Setting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Same as Time 1 Error correction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Same as Time 1 Role of teachers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Detecting the gaps in her learning and working on them Motivating and inspiring her to learn Exams <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pushing her to learn Giving her feedback on her progress They were effective Class activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Open discussion was better Working with fellow students helped her use the language |
| 3. Personal Factors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Her memory was not good She had good comprehension ability She was not fluent | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> She did not have good memory She was not self-regulated She had good comprehension She had become more confident about her ability to learn English well |
| 4. Learning a Second Language | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grammar was the most important Vocabulary size affected reading Accuracy was paramount, so speaking had to wait until her English was accurate | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grammar was like a foundation of a building In speaking, she should focus more on fluency while monitoring accuracy |

| | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| 5. Nature of Language Learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language was a skill that had to be used and practised but she had to wait until she learned it well • Language was for communication but her speaking had to wait until she was ready • Learning was a cumulative process • Effort was the key to successful learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language was for communication, so she should use and apply what she learned in communication • Learning was a cumulative process • Successful learning was contingent on effort |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|

Table 4. Shan's beliefs about language learning at Times 1 & 2

The biggest change in Shan concerned was related to self-efficacy beliefs. Her confidence about learning English changed from 4 at time 1 to 8 at time 2 on a self-rating scale where 10 was the highest. She attributed the change to the school and the teachers. According to Shan,

'I believe this [self-efficacy] has a lot of to do with teachers and school management in this school. This is the first time that I have studied in New Zealand and learned it formally. If I came across a teacher who didn't take teaching seriously and who didn't care about students' attendance, I would've given up half way through... In the past, I didn't have the confidence and I was not interested in learning English. I denied it. Now I know as long as I don't stop learning, I'm confident that I can learn the language well.'

(Shan, Interview II)

Finally, Shan's beliefs about speaking and using English went through a remarkable change. At Time 1, she held a conflicting view about learning a second language. On the one hand, she regarded language as a skill: 'You have to use it and practice it' (Interview I); on the other hand, she was of the view that speaking could wait until she had mastered grammar and achieved accuracy: 'People are different. For me, I won't use the language until I have learned it well. I think if I haven't learned it well, I won't use it [in communication]' (Interview I). Despite the paradoxical belief she held, she really admired people who could speak English effortlessly. She became concerned about the fact that she could not speak fluently. She started questioning her own beliefs. She wrote in her diary:

'Previously, I always believed [my English] must be accurate when I speak. If it was wrong, I'd rather not speak. However, [I] can't start communicating in life if I am too concerned [about accuracy]. How can I survive in this country without the ability to communicate with people?' (Shan, Diary entry 5)

When the last interview was conducted, she changed her views about the importance of accuracy in speaking. She commented:

'In the past, I considered accuracy to be of the primary importance. I didn't want people to think that my utterances came from an uneducated person. But now I have changed. After I discussed with my teachers, I have changed my mind... I believe I should try talking. When I am able to speak fluently, I can correct myself.' (Interview II)

In summary, by the end of the observed period, both Ding and Shan had become more self-efficacious. They both were more confident about their ability to learn the language well. Their self beliefs grew as their language had improved. A new belief about collaborative learning evolved as they were exposed to new approaches to language teaching in the new learning context. However, they held opposing views on learning in pairs/groups. Whilst Shan welcomed the interactive, learning opportunities that collaborative learning offered, Ding was more dubious about its role in her learning. Particularly she was concerned about the impact of incorrect inputs she received from her fellow students on her learning. Additionally, at Time 2, Shan paid more attention to communicative aspect of English and was more conscious of using the language.

Apart from these changes in their beliefs, the majority of their beliefs remained similar between Times 1 and 2. At both times, they held favourable opinions about their learning experiences in New Zealand whereas they were both very critical of their learning in China. They considered the teaching in China to be 'obsolete,' 'traditional' and 'inflexible.' There were limited class activities. They found learning in China was 'dry,' 'passive,' 'not motivating and boring.' In comparison, they felt that 'learning is completely different [in New Zealand], like in two different worlds' (Ding, Interview I) and 'teaching is easy to understand and the course contents are very practical and useful in real life' (Ding, Interview II). In terms of their beliefs about external factors, at both times the two learners were of the view that error correction was a 'crucial' and 'important' aspect of learning. They regarded speaking and writing with an error as a loss of face and welcomed corrective feedback at all times. They equated learning with error correction. According to Ding, 'if I make a mistake and am not corrected, it means I haven't learned anything... only after they [mistakes] have been corrected can I learn' (Interview I). Not surprisingly, both of them firmly believed at both times that grammar should stay the core focus of their language learning. Shan compared grammar to the foundation of an edifice. In Ding's view, only when she had learned grammar well could she 'express ideas clearly,' 'understand reading better and more clearly... comprehend the text' (Ding, Interview II). She perceived language learning as accumulation of discrete grammatical knowledge and the addition of words rather than as a communication tool. Therefore, they both expected teachers to pass that knowledge to them and to motivate them to learn. They believed the primary responsibility of teachers is to deliver 'clear, comprehensible and attention grabbing lessons' (Ding, Diary entry 7) and 'explain grammar rules well, assign homework and give good corrective feedback' (Shan, Diary entry 9). Furthermore, at both times, they regarded exams as crucial in their learning as exams pushed them to learn although sitting exams could be nerve-wrecking. While they

emphasized the vital role that teachers and exams played in their learning, they both held a firm belief at both times that diligence was pivotal and that successful learning was contingent on the effort they put into their learning.

These stable beliefs would appear to be either related to their direct personal learning experiences (e.g. their beliefs about the learning situation) or deeply rooted in their cultural values (e.g. their beliefs about the role of teachers, exams and effort). According to Zhong (2012b), central to Chinese culture of learning is respectful learning where teachers are held in high regard and considered to be authority figures. Learners' responsibility is to work hard and make every effort to be high achievers. Although these learners were learning in a new context, their cultural beliefs about learning were still in play. This finding lends further support to previous studies that when a belief is formed through direct observations and linked to self/culture identity, it is normally held with maximal certainty and strength and are more resistant to change (Mercer, 2009, 2011; Pajares, 1992; Woods, 2003).

4.2 The nature of learners' beliefs

This study aims to deepen our understanding of learner beliefs. Findings are consistent with previous studies, confirming that learner beliefs about language learning are inter-related and varied in intensity. They can be paradoxical and contradictory at times; and they are both stable and dynamic (Barcelos, 2011; Mercer, 2011; Zhong, 2012a; 2014).

Firstly, learner beliefs constitute a system consisting of a set of interrelated beliefs. The learners' beliefs about language learning emerging from the data of this study comprises five sub-beliefs: (1) beliefs about learning situation (e.g. 'Learning in China was not applicable to real life'), (2) beliefs about external factors (e.g. 'Exams can push me to learn'), (3) beliefs about personal factors (e.g. 'My memory is deteriorating'), (4) beliefs about learning a second language (e.g. 'Vocabulary is fundamental in my learning'), and (5) beliefs about the nature of language learning (e.g. 'Learning is a cumulative process'). These five categories of beliefs are distinctive and yet related. For example, the learners' beliefs about the significance of error correction and role of teachers (an external factor) were related to their belief about accuracy (learning a second language). Because they deemed it paramount to learn grammatical rules, they expected teachers to do more error correction in the classroom.

Furthermore, not all the beliefs in a learner belief system were in harmony with each other. Sometimes beliefs were contradictory. For example, Shan emphasized the significance of fluency, wishing to improve her communicative competence. In the meantime, she also believed that she should not say anything until she was sure that she was accurate. Likewise, Ding believed that she needed English to survive in New Zealand. On the other hand, she held a negative view about Kiwis and did not want to communicate with them.

Finally, consistent with Mercer's (2009, 2011) findings, this study provided further evidence that learner beliefs could be both static and dynamic. Apart from a few changes as

reported previously, the majority of the learners' beliefs remained unchanged over the observed period. For example, both participants believed at both Times 1 and 2 that grammar learning was fundamental to their learning; their own efforts were central to successful learning and that learning was a cumulative process. The review of literature on learners' beliefs in the proceeding section noted that most of previous studies in SLA have failed to provide a complete account of the nature of learners' beliefs. They treated learner beliefs either as stable and unchanging internalized knowledge stored in the minds of language learners (e.g. Horwitz, 1987; Wenden, 1986, 1998) or as "embedded in experiences continually changing and dynamic" (Hosenfeld, 2003: 38). This study corroborates Mercer's (2011) findings that learner beliefs have dual nature. Some learners' beliefs are relatively stable and resistant to change. These beliefs are usually based on learners' direct experiences and deeply rooted in learners' cultural values and identity. Therefore, they were held with greater intensity. It takes longer time to change beliefs of this kind, sometimes even a whole lifetime. In comparison, other beliefs were more dynamic, contextual and susceptible to change. Furthermore, new beliefs may also evolve as learners receive new information and experience learning in different or new learning contexts.

5. CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

This study employed the case study method to investigate the nature of learners' beliefs. Consistent with previous findings, this study reveal that learners' beliefs were born out of their previous learning experiences. Learners' beliefs were context and situation specific; however, they were not immutable. The qualitative analysis identified three major changes in their beliefs over the observed period. First, a new belief about collaborative learning emerged after the learners had been exposed to new approaches and techniques of language teaching in New Zealand. Another change was related to their self-efficacy beliefs. Both learners became more confident in their ability to learn English as the course progressed. Finally, Shan was more responsive to the new learning environment she found herself in. At Time 2, she became more conscious of the importance of language use, emphasizing the importance of exposing herself to English in real life and nurturing a feel for English. Despite these few changes, the majority of their beliefs remained similar at both Times 1 and 2. This study provides significant evidence on the complex and dual nature of learners' beliefs, confirming that language learner beliefs are best understood as a construct that is inter-related and variable in intensity. They may be paradoxical and contradictory at times and they have dual features: both stable and dynamic (Kramsch, 2003; Mercer, 2009, 2011).

This study intends to shed light on the nature of learners' beliefs. However, due to the qualitative nature of this study, the sample size was small and the participants were all low-proficiency learners from the same cultural background. More studies are needed to examine

the dual nature of learner beliefs in different contexts and with larger samples. Due to scope and space limitations, the impact of other individual learner factors on changes in learner beliefs was not included in this inquiry. Future studies could investigate if beliefs change is related to other individual learner factors, particularly personality and learning styles and explore the relationship between different variables and beliefs fluctuations.

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