Connecting Experience to Beliefs:

Case Studies of Two Successful Foreign Language Learners

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Abstract

This proposal describes a case-study exploration into connections between the personal language learning experiences and the beliefs about language learning and teaching of two successful foreign language learners at a state university in the U.S. The researcher hopes to provide rich descriptions of the complex interactions between these learners’ past learning experiences and their belief systems. Qualitative data will be collected via an online questionnaire and a face-to-face interview, and content analysis will be applied to the data in order to provide a narrative report of the findings. It is hoped that these findings will contribute to a growing body of research describing variability in the beliefs about language learning and teaching that correlate with successful language acquisition, as well as those personal and experiential factors that contribute to the formation and development of those beliefs.

*Keywords*: beliefs about language learning, non-native speakers of English, personal language learning experience
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Introduction

These days, there is little argument against the fact that language learners and teachers hold a variety of beliefs about the nature, processes and best learning and teaching practices of a second or foreign language (Borg, 2003; Mercer, 2011; Pasquale, 2011; Wenden, 1999), nor that there exists a connection between learners’ beliefs and how they approach the task of learning a language (Mercer, 2011; Wenden, 1999; White, 2008). Despite criticism for the designation of specific beliefs about language learning as either “right” or “wrong” (Pasquale, 2012), some researchers have not hesitated to identify certain beliefs as impediments to successful language acquisition (Busch, 2010; Mercer, 2011; Peacock, 2001).

Mercer, however, has highlighted the potential variation—and even contradictions—between learner beliefs that have led to successful language learning. She points out the potential role played by a learner’s personal language learning experience, which might include any of an individual’s “learning and social experiences, language encounters, critical experiences, family support, relationships with significant others, etc” (2011, p. 58). In the conclusion to their 2003 anthology on language learning beliefs, Barcelos and Kalaja (2003) highlighted the “emergent, contextual, and dynamic nature of beliefs” (p. 236) and made a call for subsequent research into the construct to consider the “social nature of beliefs.” They suggested that case study methodology, such as that proposed here, may be especially suited for revealing facets of learner beliefs that have been overlooked by previous research.

Through the proposed study, the researcher hopes to explore connections between the language learning and teaching beliefs and past language learning experiences of two successful
foreign language learners. Qualitative data will be collected in order to provide rich and situated descriptions of the complex interactions between experience and belief systems. The specific questions the researcher is interested in exploring are:

1. What are the beliefs about language learning and teaching of these successful language learners?
2. What personal language learning experiences have contributed to the development of those language learning beliefs system?

Key Terms

Examining the literature on beliefs within education reveals that for a long time the term was what Pajares considered a “messy construct” (1992, p. 307). Some have felt the need to distinguish beliefs from such similar constructs as knowledge (Graham, 2006; Pajares, 1992;), metacognitive knowledge (Wenden, 1999), and attitudes and perceptions (Wesely, 2012). According to Graham (2006), beliefs differ from knowledge in that beliefs refer to what learners or teachers “perceive to be true about language learning, rather than what they know as a fact” (p. 298). Pajares (1992) notes that, “Knowledge and beliefs are inextricably intertwined, but the potent affective, evaluative, and episodic nature of beliefs makes them a filter through which new phenomena are interpreted” (p. 325).

Beliefs about language learning include not only what learners believe about the nature of and best practices within language learning, but also the self-beliefs that learners hold about themselves in relation to their language learning. These self-beliefs include those such as self-concept, which Mercer defines as “an individual’s affective and cognitive self-related beliefs in a specific domain” (2011, p. 67). For example, within the domain of language learning, it is possible for a learner to believe that they have a strong grasp of the L2 grammar system, while
feeling less confident about her breadth of vocabulary knowledge. Also included under the umbrella of self-beliefs is mindset, which refers to “the basic beliefs an individual has about the nature of human attributes, ability or intelligence in a certain domain” (Mercer, 2011, p. 64). In relation to language learning, a potentially detrimental mindset might be one in which a learner believes that aptitude or natural talent is crucial to successful language learning, and that they themselves do not possess that innate aptitude (Mercer & Ryan, 2010).

It is important to note the problematic nature of empirically measuring the belief construct. As Pajares points out, “beliefs cannot be directly observed or measured but must be inferred from what people say, intend, and do” (1992, p. 314). Therefore, in this study, beliefs about language learning and teaching will refer to participants’ self-reported opinions or perceptions concerning any aspect of the nature of second language acquisition—including self-beliefs learners hold about their personal capacity to acquire the L2—as well as the best practices in second or foreign language learning and teaching.

**Literature Review**

Ideas and opinions concerning language, the nature of language acquisition, and the best approaches to language learning and teaching are woven into the belief systems of individuals and, sometimes, entire communities (Busch, 2008; Horwitz, 1987; Johnson, 2008; Mercer, 2011; Pasquale, 2011). Pasquale (2011) points out that these beliefs, or folk theories, “may be held very strongly despite a lack of expert knowledge or…in conflict with the current professional position” (p. 97). The origination of empirical inquiry in the area of language learning beliefs is often attributed to the seminal research and instrument development of Horwitz (i.e., 1985, 1987, 1988), as well as investigations by Wenden (1986a, 1986b) into how beliefs affect learner strategy use (Pasquale, 2011; White, 2008).
Since those early decades of inquiry, research on beliefs has experienced several paradigm shifts, including the transition away from attempts at “identifying and quantifying beliefs” toward the “increasing recognition of the complexity of beliefs and the way they may work in particular circumstances” (White, 2008, p. 127). Beliefs are now viewed as “socially constructed in specific social, cultural, educational and political contexts” (White, 2008, p. 124). A situated examination of beliefs that takes into account such factors as a learner’s past experiences with language learning, learning context, cultural and political surroundings, and relationships with family and significant others allows us to “recognize the considerable potential for inter- and intra-learner variation in learners’ beliefs and underline their complex and dynamic nature” (Mercer, 2011, p. 58).

These days, the influence of learners’ language learning beliefs on learners’ language learning behavior is widely recognized among researchers and teachers (Mercer, 2011). Some beliefs about learning in general have been upheld within educational psychology research as more apt to result in positive learning outcomes, while others have been deemed detrimental to the learning process (Mercer, 2011). Within second language acquisition research, beginning in the late 1970s with work by Rubin (1975) and the Naiman, et al. “Good Language Learner” study (1978, as cited in White, 2008), a plethora of studies have been conducted with the goal of describing the individual differences and practices of successful language learners (Graham, 2006; Mercer, 2011). The rationale behind this line of research was that if the beliefs and learning behaviors of successful language learners could be determined, it would be possible to counsel less successful learners in ways that might improve their strategy use, motivation, and learning outcomes (Riley, 1996; White, 2008). These studies have included those that focus on the beliefs that language learners hold about language learning and teaching (i.e., White, 2008).
as well as those that highlight beliefs that learners hold about themselves and their personal ability to learn a language (i.e., Mercer, 2011).

Lately, the danger in deterministically deigning any particular belief about language learning and teaching as “wrong” has been noted (Barcelos, 2011; Mercer, 2011; Pasquale, 2011). Mercer (2011) stated that instead of labeling learners’ belief systems as “good” or “bad”, beliefs should be considered “in terms of appropriacy for an individual’s personal history, affordances, contexts and purpose” (p. 70). She used a case-study design to explore individual variation within the complex belief systems of two successful language learners, highlighting the important role of each learner’s past learning experiences and specifically language learning experiences in shaping those beliefs. Her rich qualitative data suggested the context- and domain-specific nature of beliefs. For example, one learner held the belief that while grammar and vocabulary acquisition necessitates explicit attention and memorization, speaking and pronunciation are language skills one learns more naturally and through intuition. Mercer concluded from her in-depth inquiry that her subjects’ unique belief systems “reflect the different opportunities their personal histories have engendered” (p. 70), and she reminds us that both of these unique and sometimes contradictory belief systems have led to language learning success.

Furthermore, while beliefs were previously viewed as relatively stable (Wenden, 1999), they have lately been recognized as fluid and emergent (Barcelos, 2003). Amuzie and Winke (2009) investigated the effects of a study abroad experience on the beliefs of English language learners studying in the United States. Responses from interviews indicated changes in beliefs as a result of the experience, for example, one participant realized that without her own effort to actively seek out opportunities to improve her language skills, the study abroad context had little effect on L2 acquisition in and of itself. Amuzie and Winke’s results indicated that students’
sense of learner independence and autonomy was boosted by their study abroad experiences, and that the differences in instructional practices between their native country and those experienced in the U.S. context affected their beliefs about the role of the language teacher and the best language teaching practices.

Mismatches between learner and teacher beliefs can have potentially negative consequences. For example, discrepancies between student and teacher expectations for a course may result in the decline of “students’ satisfaction with the language class and can potentially lead to the discontinuation of L2 study” (Brown, 2009, p. 46). Results from Brown’s (2009) survey of 49 foreign language teachers and their approximately 1,600 students into effective teaching behaviors revealed that teachers largely favored the communicative approach to foreign language teaching, while students largely believed that formal grammar instruction was the best route to foreign language proficiency.

Loewen et al. (2009) recognized the potential impact of discrepancies between learner expectations and teacher actions, and connected learners’ expectations to their past language learning experiences. They investigated the beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction held by learners of a variety of languages. They found learners held varying beliefs in regards to the importance of grammar instruction, and suggested that this variation might be attributable to their prior language learning experiences and contexts.

Methodology

Procedures

Sampling and Population

In order to facilitate the gathering and reporting of the desired in-depth descriptions of successful language learner’s personal language learning experiences and beliefs about language
learning and teaching, a case study research design will be utilized. Two participants are sought for this in-depth study, and because a specific population is desired, purposive sampling will be used to recruit participants who are—to reiterate—successful learners of a foreign language. These participants will be recruited from upper division foreign language courses at Colorado State University, and are deemed successful, or “Good Language Learners” (Rubin, 1975), based upon their enrollment in these upper-division foreign language courses.

**Procedural Details**

Potential participants will be recruited by the researcher based on recommendations made by instructors in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures. These instructors will be asked to recommend participants based on their perceptions of students’ exceptional foreign language proficiency. Potential participants will then be contacted via email and asked to participate in the study.

Once participants have been recruited, they will be asked to respond to an asynchronous online questionnaire. The use of this questionnaire as the initial interview technique is validated as a means of allowing participants sufficient time to contemplate their metacognitions concerning language learning and teaching, as well as conjure memories of their past language learning experiences. Participants will be instructed to input responses to questionnaire items via Microsoft Word (or, if that software is unavailable to them, directly into the researcher’s email). Participants will be asked to return the completed questionnaire to the researcher via email within two weeks.

Based on the analysis of participants’ responses to this questionnaire, the researcher will develop a list of interview questions with the intent of clarifying and/or expanding the details and connections between participants’ beliefs and personal language learning experiences. Face-to-
face interviews will be arranged and conducted based upon these newly generated interview questions. These interviews will last between one and two hours, and will be audio recorded and transcribed. It is hoped by the researcher that between the first and second interview, participants will have “time to reflect upon content and themes from the first” (Mercer, 2011), which can result in more rich descriptions.

**Instrumentation**

*Asynchronous Online Questionnaire*

The initial online asynchronous questionnaire includes questions adapted from Zeng (2006) and Zhong (2012) and is included in Appendix A. These questions are meant to elicit participants’ demographic information, personal language learning experiences, and beliefs about language learning and teaching. Statements that elicit participants’ beliefs about language learning and teaching include space for participants to elaborate upon each belief statement and connect that belief to their language learning experiences.

*Face-to-Face Interview*

According to Patton (1990), “Interviews are a particularly suitable method for finding out those things we cannot directly observe” (p. 278, as cited in Mercer, 2011) and are “an ideal way of capturing the complexities of an individual’s perceptions and experiences, given the potential they offer for the researcher to probe and explore responses” (p. 290, as cited in Mercer, 2011). Therefore, interview questions for the subsequent face-to-face interview will be formulated based upon responses to the initial asynchronous interview. However, the format of the face-to-face interview will be “kept flexible, in order to allow the conversation to develop naturally and permit participants to guide the format and content” (Mercer, 2011, p. 60).
Data Analysis

According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2006), content analysis is “extremely useful in analyzing observation and interview data” (p. 479) and from data analyzed in this way, “researchers can make comparisons about the attitudes and beliefs of various groups of people separated by time, geographic locale, culture, or country” (p. 479). Therefore, content analysis will be applied to the qualitative data, and in alignment with typical case study methodology, the reporting of data will be largely narrative.

As outlined in the procedures section, the data to be analyzed and reported will consist of participants’ demographic information, qualitative responses to the asynchronous online questionnaire, and interview question responses. Fraenkel and Wallen (2006) state that some researchers “prefer to use codes and themes as aids in organizing content and arriving at a narrative description of data” (p. 485). The establishment of categories to be used in coding data may be done prior to the beginning of analysis, or categories may emerge from data as “the researcher becomes very familiar with the descriptive information collected” (p. 480). The researcher feels that the best procedure for categorizing the qualitative data will be to follow the categorical framework presented by Pasquale (2011) in attempting to make connections between participants’ beliefs and their personal language learning experiences. Participants will be permitted to review the narrative report in order to ascertain whether their beliefs or connections between beliefs and experiences have been misinterpreted or misreported in any way.

Human Subject Protection

The researcher will obtain approval from the Institutional Review Board before beginning the data collections process. This approval guarantees the ethical enactment of
research, which includes maintaining at all times confidentiality of the personal information of the participants.

Limitations

One of the primary and most widely-recognized limitations of case-study research is the lack of generalizability of results. However, it has been acknowledged that it is not the purpose of case studies to make generalizations about populations (Tsui, 2003). Rather, one application of case study methodology is to contribute to rich descriptions of social phenomenon (Yin, 2003), and it is this task that is undertaken through the current research.

Also of concern are potential threats to the validity of the results. Obtaining valid answers to the proposed research questions will depend largely upon the honesty and accuracy of responses that are provided by participants for the duration of the research project. Certainly, it must be acknowledged that because participants’ responses on questionnaire and interview items may be influenced or even compromised by factors such as the participants’ concern with the privacy of their responses, or attempts to answer in a manner deemed desirable to the researcher or course instructors, the validity of the results could be threatened. However, as this is a risk inherent in both case study research designs as well as research methods that elicit participant beliefs, perceptions or opinions, the researcher does not deem this risk a valid reason for not conducting the study.

Conclusion

The beliefs about language learning and teaching held by successful learners of a second or foreign language should be of interest to learners, teachers, and researchers alike. Through results obtained from the proposed study, the researcher hopes to contribute to existing literature about beliefs by connecting the language learning and teaching beliefs of two successful foreign
language learners to their past experiences with language learning. It is assumed that the detailed
descriptive information resulting from this study will not only further illuminate the complex
interactions between learners’ personal language learning experiences, their beliefs about
language learning and teaching, and their language learning success, but that it will also highlight
the inter-learner variability of beliefs that lead to language learning success.


Horwitz, E. K. (1985). Surveying student beliefs about language learning and teaching in the


Appendix A

Asynchronous Questionnaire

Thank you for participating in this study! Please respond to the following items within this document using Microsoft Word. You may provide as much or as little information for each item as you wish. The estimated time it will take to complete this questionnaire is 1-2 hours. You do not need to complete all items on the questionnaire at one time. After you have responded to the items, please return the document to the researcher via email.

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<tr>
<th>Personal Information</th>
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<td>• Name:</td>
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<th>Language Learning Experiences</th>
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<td>• Which languages do you speak with a high level of proficiency?</td>
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<td>• For how many years have you studied those languages?</td>
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<td>• What have been the contexts of your language learning experiences? For example, did you learn in formal classroom situations or through a language immersion experience outside your native country?</td>
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<td>• Describe your experiences studying and learning a second/foreign language in a classroom setting. Would you characterize these experiences as mostly positive or negative? Why?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Do you attribute any of your language learning success to a particular teacher or to the methods/activities used by your past teachers?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Describe your experiences studying and learning a second/foreign language in an informal setting. Would you characterize these experiences as mostly positive or negative? Why?</td>
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• Describe any experiences of language immersion in an English-speaking country. How do/did these experiences help/not help your language learning?

• Have any individuals other than a teacher (e.g., mother, father) been important to your language learning success?

• Do/did you have any favorite methods and strategies for learning another language that you believe are personal to you? Can you describe what you do/did every day to help you learn a second/foreign language?

• What personal characteristics do you possess that you believe have contributed to your language learning success?

• Are there any languages that you have attempted to learn, and have either not been successful, or have not reached the level of proficiency that you desired? If yes, to what do you contribute your lack of success?

• In your opinion and experience, what is the easiest part of learning another language? The most difficult?

• Have you had any other language learning experiences that you feel were important to your language learning success that have not been addressed through the previous questions?
### Beliefs about Language Learning and Teaching

Please respond to the following statements by first (1) indicating whether you agree or disagree with the statement, and then (2) explaining your agree/disagree response in the space provided below each question. You may refer to your personal language learning history and language learning success to provide validation for your agree/disagree response. (None of the following statements express beliefs or ideas about language learning that are “right” or “wrong”. Rather, each represents ideas for which there is no definitive agreement within the field of language learning and teaching.)

1. Native-like pronunciation is important when learning or speaking a second/foreign language. *(Agree / Disagree)*

2. As soon as students know the basic grammatical rules of a second/foreign language, they can typically create many new sentences. *(Agree / Disagree)*

3. Students should focus more on what they are attempting to communicate, rather than how to speak perfectly. *(Agree / Disagree)*

4. Learning a second/foreign language is primarily concerned with memorizing lots of vocabulary. *(Agree / Disagree)*

5. Learning a second/foreign language is primarily concerned with memorizing lots of grammar rules. *(Agree / Disagree)*

6. It is easier to learn how to write a second/foreign language than it is to speak a second/foreign language. *(Agree / Disagree)*

7. It is easier to read and understand a second/foreign language than it is to listen to and comprehend a second/foreign language. *(Agree / Disagree)*

8. Some people have a natural talent for learning second/foreign languages. *(Agree / Disagree)*

9. The younger a person is when they begin to learn a second/foreign language, the easier it will be for them to acquire the language. *(Agree / Disagree)*

10. It is easier to learn a second/foreign language while living or studying in a country where that language is spoken. *(Agree / Disagree)*
11. It is best to learn a second/foreign language subconsciously in a non-academic or social setting. (Agree / Disagree)

12. Second/foreign language teachers should follow a prescribed curriculum or syllabus. (Agree / Disagree)

13. Language students best learn a second/foreign language when they work individually. (Agree / Disagree)

14. When students make oral errors, a teacher should ignore them as long as communication is still effective. (Agree / Disagree)

15. Cultural instruction in a second/foreign language classroom should be secondary to vocabulary and grammar instruction. (Agree / Disagree)

16. Authentic, real-world materials should be used as much as possible in the second/foreign language classroom. (Agree / Disagree)

17. A second/foreign language teacher’s instructional goals should match learners’ goals. (Agree / Disagree)

18. Classroom and homework activities should focus more on communication than on grammar. (Agree / Disagree)

19. Classroom and homework activities should be primarily devoted to studying aspects of the language system, like pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and spelling. (Agree / Disagree)

20. Formal testing is the best way to measure a learner’s success in second/foreign language learning. (Agree / Disagree)

21. A teacher should correct students’ oral errors immediately, otherwise they may become a habit. (Agree / Disagree)

22. Group work is important in the second/foreign language classroom, because it encourages teamwork and collaborative skills. (Agree / Disagree)