



Learning Paths

BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES: A KEY TO LEARNER AND TEACHER PROGRESSION

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1. Introduction

People hold deeply ingrained beliefs and attitudes about language and language learning. Statements like, “French grammar has more rules than English grammar”, “Americans talk too fast”, “Some languages are more beautiful than others”, “You need a special gift to learn a language properly”, express people’s thoughts and feelings about the experience of learning and using languages. Teachers and students are no exception – and their beliefs and attitudes are even more important since they are engaged in the task of teaching and learning one or more languages in a school setting, a context which requires their combined efforts for this demanding process to yield the expected results.

This paper reports on part of a survey which was carried out in Italian upper-secondary schools on the beliefs and attitudes held by students *and* their teachers towards the learning and teaching of foreign languages in a school context. I will first clarify the nature and functions of beliefs and attitudes in language learning and teaching. Then I will present the survey and discuss some of the most significant findings, highlighting a few important pedagogical implications for the classroom teacher.

2. The nature and role of beliefs

Teachers and students enter the classroom with a wide range of deeply held values, perceptions, assumptions and representations about the language(s) they are going to teach and learn, the ways language teaching and learning should be carried out, and their respective roles as language teachers and learners. As long ago as 1933, Dewey referred to beliefs as matters of which we have no sure knowledge, but feel confident to act upon, as well as matters that we accept as true, but which may be questioned in the future: he was thus pointing both to the highly subjective nature of beliefs, which may have a very loose link with reality and established “theories”, and to their changing character. More recently, Boscolo (1997) qualified the same concept as *epistemological beliefs*, of an essentially cognitive character, concerning what an individual knows (or *thinks* s/he knows) about the meaning of learning and studying. And writing more specifically about language teachers’ beliefs (but the definition could equally well apply to students’ beliefs) Richards (1994: 5) defined them as “the informational attitudes, values, theories and assumptions about teaching and learning which teachers build up over time and bring with them to the classroom”.

A person's overall previous knowledge and experience thus helps to shape her/his beliefs. However, people belong to groups and therefore share their beliefs with others – in other words, beliefs are an essential component of any cultural context as well as of any more specific domain: the classroom, for example, can be described in terms of the learning and teaching culture which is embedded in its everyday practices. When we say that each classroom is different, we are also, although perhaps implicitly, referring to the network of beliefs and attitudes which shape its distinctive character.

As we mentioned at the start, this network includes the mental representations that students (and teachers) acquire through the course of time about

- the *content* of learning, i.e., in our case, language, both as a system and as a tool for communication, and culture – or, to be more precise, languages and their cultures;
- the *processes* and *methods* of language learning and teaching, including the *roles* that students and teachers can and should play in this context;
- one's own personal cognitive and affective profile as a (language) learner and how such characteristics can affect learning (basically, one's *skill* and *will* to learn);
- the features of language learning *tasks*, including their purposes, demands, procedures, possible difficulties and, most importantly, the *learning strategies* which are (or could be) used to facilitate and optimize task management in specific contexts.

3. From beliefs to attitudes

When Dewey referred to beliefs as matters we feel confident *to act upon*, he was drawing attention to the active role that beliefs play in affecting intentions, decisions and actions. To fully appreciate the impact that beliefs have on observable behaviours, we must go beyond their merely *cognitive*

nature as mental representations and consider how they combine with an *affective* component and thus qualify as *attitudes*. Wenden (1991) refers to the many ways in which attitudes have been conceptualised in the literature: as learned motivations, as evaluations, as valued beliefs, as responses oriented towards either approaching or avoiding a situation, as “what one believes to be acceptable” – thus pointing to the fact that attitudes have

- a *cognitive* component, i.e. beliefs, perceptions or information about an object;
- an *evaluative* component, in the sense that the object of an attitude can evoke feelings of pleasure or displeasure, acceptance or refusal, agreement or disagreement;
- a *behavioural* component, i.e. they predispose or induce people to make decisions and then act in certain ways.

It is precisely this interplay between the cognitive and the affective areas of personality that explains how beliefs and attitudes have been proved to affect intentions, decisions and behaviour in the classroom. Beliefs and attitudes thus act as a powerful “hidden curriculum”, the *real* curriculum that is enacted and experienced by teachers and students beyond and underneath the “official” array of programmes, curricula and syllabuses.

The role of beliefs and attitudes becomes even more relevant to teaching and learning when we turn to a major change which has been investing school systems in the past few decades, i.e. the gradual shift towards *competences* as the basic objectives of a teaching/learning programme. The emphasis on competence development in school reforms constitutes a very ambitious perspective precisely because it goes well beyond the mere assimilation of knowledge (*savoir*) or the training of skills (*savoir-faire*), to include a third dimension which has to do with the specific ways in which individuals make sense of knowledge and skills and become prepared to use them in specific contexts beyond the school experience - what the Common European Framework (2001) calls

“existential competence” (or *savoir-être*), the individual differences which include beliefs and attitudes together with such crucial individual variables as motivations, values, cognitive styles and personality.

4. A key to teacher and learner progression

If beliefs and attitudes are a central component of *any* competence, dealing with this “third dimension” cannot be seen as an abstract exercise or a “luxury” which school systems can afford to ignore and which can be left as largely implicit, buried deep down inside teachers’ and students’ own thoughts and feelings, and very rarely, if ever, brought to consciousness (Mariani 1999, Mariani 2010). But there is a further, even more compelling reason why researching beliefs and attitudes can be seen as a real key to teacher and learner progression: the range of possible conflicts between their respective beliefs and attitudes. Research has clearly shown that conflicting beliefs and attitudes have a powerful impact on how objectives, methodologies and assessment procedures are perceived, accepted or refused (Horwitz 1988, Cotterall 1995, Nunan 1995, Peacock 1998). Moreover, the experience of confronting students who overtly refuse, or are more or less unwilling to accept, classroom procedures belongs to every teacher – and the more pervasive and subtle is this refusal, the more difficult is for teachers to build a positive relationship with their students and to create a classroom climate which is conducive to learning.

5. The survey

The survey¹ was carried out in upper secondary schools in small/medium-sized towns in Northern Italy. It included both academically-oriented schools (“licei classici, scientifici, linguistici”) and vocationally-oriented schools (“istituti tecnici, professionali”). It involved both the students at these schools (1163 participants) *and* their teachers, since one of the aims of the survey was to compare and contrast the opinions of both parties. As a matter of fact, the objectives of my survey were of two quite different kinds:

- on the one hand, to allow students and teachers in individual classes to reflect on and discuss the points of convergence and divergence, thus raising their level of awareness;
- to obtain statistical results on the beliefs and attitudes held by secondary school students and teachers, including a comparison between the two above-mentioned types of school.

As for the method, two different sets of tools were used, in the same form, by both students and their teachers. The first part was made up of descriptions and metaphors – students and teachers could choose whether to complete one or both:

- *“To know” a foreign language means ... / is like ...*
- *To learn a foreign language a student should ... / Learning a foreign language is like ...*
- *To help students learn a foreign language, teachers should ... / Teaching a foreign language is like ...*

The aim in this case was to obtain some *qualitative* data on the beliefs and attitudes about what it means to “know” a language, on the one hand, and about what it means to “learn and teach” a language, on the other.

¹ The survey was part of a larger research project on the beliefs and attitudes held by students and teachers of foreign languages in upper-secondary schools. A detailed description of the project, all the materials used and the complete sets of results can be found on the Author’s website www.learningpaths.org/convinzioni

The second part of the survey used a *quantitative* approach and was based on the use of a multiple-choice questionnaire on a few more specific aspects of foreign language learning and teaching:

- language aptitude;
- the roles of teachers and learners;
- the impact of plurilingualism, i.e. if students and teachers perceived advantages or disadvantages in learning more than one language at the same time;
- the perceived usefulness of whole class *vs* group *vs* individual learning;
- the interplay between accuracy and fluency, i.e. whether or not one should develop some kind of basic knowledge of the language *before* actually attempting to communicate;
- the role of mistakes and if, how and by whom they should be corrected;
- the process of self-assessment.

A. Students' metaphors

I will now present and comment on some of the results of the survey. I have chosen to concentrate mainly on metaphors because they are an extremely rich source of information, much more varied and creative than definitions. Indeed, I was faced with an overwhelming amount of metaphors. Processing this data consisted mainly in identifying some general categories which could be assumed to represent *qualitatively different sets* of beliefs and attitudes. Several distinctive categories emerged from the analysis of the students' data.

In processing the metaphors about “knowing” a language, the first, and perhaps most obvious, finding was that students tend to link the knowledge of a language to the aims and purposes to

which language is actually put: in other words, people develop different beliefs about language learning and use depending on their *motivations* to engage in language learning itself. Theories of language learning motivation usually identify an *instrumental* type of motivation, linked to the more or less direct benefits one can get from language learning. This is clearly the case in metaphors² like,

- *making an effort to pass my exams (II)*
- *doing something useful, because you can use a foreign language, you can speak it, not like, for instance, maths, which is of no use to me in my free time (III)*
- *making a long-term investment (II)*

However, motivations range from the purely instrumental to the more *integrative* type, reflecting the wish to become part of the culture mediated by the target language, like

- *feeling at home wherever you go ... feeling like a real Englishman, German, Frenchman, etc. (III)*
- *interpreting roles, becoming a little actor for a moment (III)*
- *becoming another person, almost changing your personality and way of being (III)*

This has clear implications for a more general sense of *self-esteem*:

- *having a master-key in a hotel, being able to go into any room with no effort at all, adjusting to the type of room I'm going to find (V)*

² The number in brackets after each quotation refers to the school grade (I to V or 1st to 5th, roughly corresponding to the age range 14 to 19). Metaphors have been translated into English from the original Italian versions. These translations are obviously approximate and do not reflect the highly imaginative language, the idiomatic expressions and the cultural references which were found in the students' materials.

- *having a six-speed gearbox on my moped (IV)*
- *having a great power, like Cristiano Doni who feels like Superman when he wears the Atalanta shirt (V)*
- *feeling intelligent (II)*

As can be seen, the implications of learning a language can be very far-reaching: these students express, not just the perception of developing a new flexible competence, but also a feeling of increasing personal autonomy and independence.

As for the ways in which *language learning* is perceived, there were some definitely different attitudes to the learning experience. The first is a generally positive one: learning a foreign language is seen like a demanding but productive experience:

- *climbing the Everest would be easier (II)*
- *surfing – you slip on the board at the start but then with some effort you manage to surf the wave (V)*
- *landing on the Moon (IV)*
- *reaching the top of a mountain. You proceed step by step (III)*

However, there was also another attitude, one which views language learning not just as very difficult, but sometimes even impossible:

- *learning something which is physically, mentally, ... and “chemically” impossible (II)*
- *learning to play chess with your eyes closed – nearly impossible (IV)*
- *running barefoot on stones (V)*

- *being under a terrible hail storm with 2 square centimetres hail stones which won't allow you to see where you are (II)*

Another set of responses seems to stress the idea that you learn from scratch, like going back to when you were a small child and had to learn how to stand up and walk:

- *when you learn Italian as a child and you wonder at the meaning, the sound of words and sentences (IV)*
- *going back to being a small child who has to learn everything to express herself and make herself understood (V)*
- *... growing up a second time (II)*

This seems to imply that you learn a foreign language just as you learned your mother tongue.

There are interesting implications here, because if you think that school learning is similar to natural acquisition, then you tend to forget that, as a teenager or young adult, you can and should rely on knowledge and skills that you have already acquired.

Sometimes the language learning process seems to imply the need for some sort of *explicit device*:

- *being a dictionary (I)*
- *being a good linguist (I)*
- *putting a small translating machine into my head (II)*

However, different forms and levels of awareness of the *process* involved in language learning emerged from the data:

- *playing football, or rather, understanding the rules, i.e. very difficult (II)*
- *singing, not everybody can do it ... (IV)*
- *knowing how to bake a cake, after learning the procedure and having all the ingredients (V);
cooking: the recipe is not enough (V)*
- *driving your car, knowing its reactions (IV)*

As can be seen, some students actually develop a rather complex, although informal, conception of what is involved in learning a language – these metaphors stress the similarity with complex skills such as sports, playing music or singing. Sometimes students seem to be aware of the fact that language learning implies not just acquiring knowledge (the *ingredients* of a cake), but also developing a skill (following a *recipe*, a procedure). They also mention the importance of being aware of one’s personal reactions, of one’s individual strengths and weaknesses (*driving your car, knowing its reactions*) – which takes us back to the existential competence, the “savoir être” mentioned by the Common European Framework.

B. Students’ and teachers’ questionnaire

One of the most interesting and intriguing parts of this research has been the chance to compare and contrast students’ beliefs and attitudes with their teachers’. Some of the results of the questionnaire³ for individual classes are illuminating in this respect, for instance the question about error correction - if, how and by whom mistakes should be corrected.

³ The original questionnaire was in Italian. The items in the following figures have been translated into English.

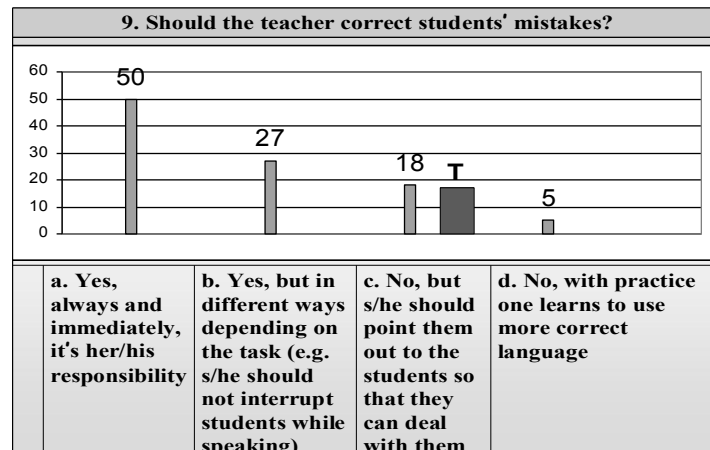


Fig. 1 – Example of students' and teachers' answers: Error correction

In this particular class, for example (Fig. 1), in response to the question, “Should the teacher correct students' mistakes?“, only 18% of the students agree with their teacher that “mistakes should simply be pointed out to the students so that they can deal with them”. Half of the class thinks that mistakes should be corrected “always and immediately” because “it's the teacher's responsibility”, and another 27% think that there should be different ways of correcting mistakes “depending on the task (e.g. the teacher should not interrupt students while they are speaking)”. In this particular class there is very clearly a gap between the students' and their teacher's beliefs – we can anticipate possible implications for what the teacher does in this area and how the students respond. And if we are interested in learner and teacher progression, this is certainly a message which can't be underestimated.

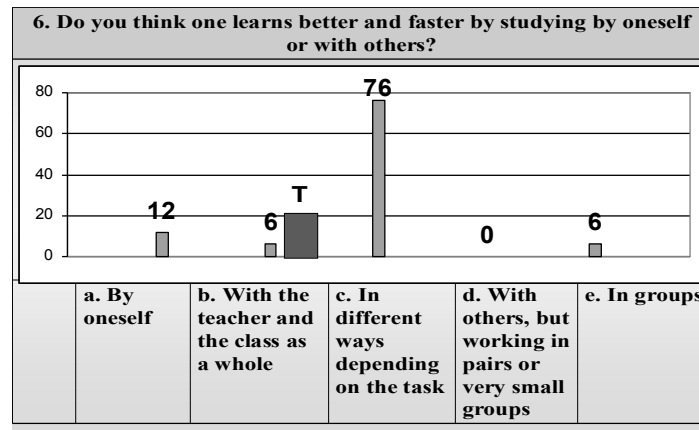


Fig. 2 - Example of students' and teachers' answers: Work modalities

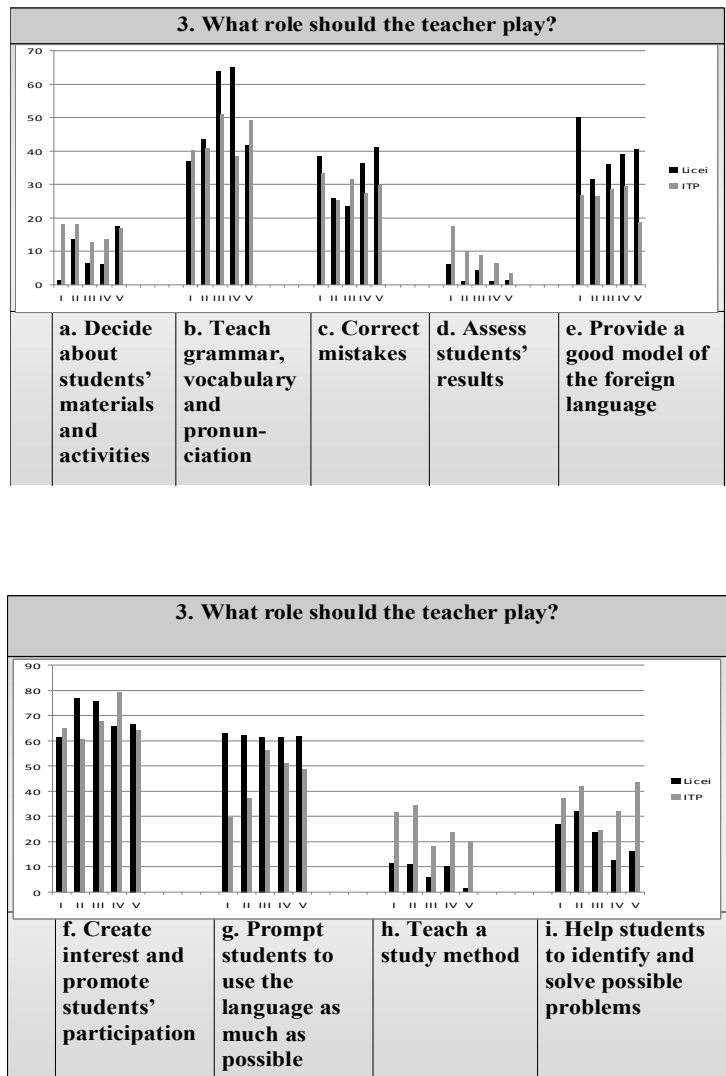
Another example (admittedly an extreme one) is shown in Fig. 2. Answering the question, “Do you think one learns better and faster by studying by oneself or with others?”, the vast majority of the students in this particular class think that one should learn “in different ways depending on the task”, but only a tiny minority (6%) agrees with the teacher that the best way to work is “with the teacher and the class as a whole”. Once again this shows how important it is that teachers and students become aware of a gap of this kind.

Of course, these are only examples, and there were many cases in which there was substantial agreement between students and teachers – indeed, the most useful part of the research was probably the action-research part. Teachers were provided with a list of suggestions on how to report the results to the class and how to continue the investigation starting with this feedback, through group discussions, interviews, focus groups and other initiatives.

C. A comparison between types of school

I will conclude by giving an example of the kind of statistical results that were yielded by this research, focussing on a comparison between academically-oriented schools (“licei”) and vocationally-oriented schools (“istituti tecnici, professionali”). In the following charts, results from academic schools are in black and results from vocational schools are in grey.

As answers to the question, “What role should the teacher play?”, students were given the chance to choose three out of ten possible teacher’s roles (Figg. 3-4).



Figg. 3-4 - A comparison between types of school: Teacher’s roles

As can be seen, there are significant differences between the two types of school. The roles most chosen in academic schools compared with vocational schools were:

- “teach grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation”;
- “correct mistakes”;
- “provide a good model of the foreign language”;
- “prompt students to use the language as much as possible”.

On the other hand, students in vocational schools chose quite different teacher’s roles:

- “decide about students’ materials and activities”;
- “assess students’ results”;
- “teach a study method”;
- “help students to identify and solve possible problems”.

It seems as though academic schools students are more concerned than vocational schools students with the actual content of learning and with opportunities to use the language. Vocational schools students, on the other hand, seem to value more than academic schools students the teacher’s role in teaching a study method and helping them generally with their problems.

However, in absolute terms, notice that the teacher’s role in “assessing students’ results” and in “teaching a study method” ranks very low in both types of school. Indeed, one interesting finding in *both students’ and teachers’* answers to the questionnaire was that the role which was chosen *the least* had to do with assessment and self-assessment: in other words, it is the whole process of assessment, and particularly formative assessment, that is not particularly stressed by either students

or teachers; also, and in more general terms, the concern with study methods generally ranks very low – which I think provides teachers with very good food for thought.

As a final example, Fig. 5 shows how students answered the question, “Do you think that studying more than one language helps or hinders language learning?”.

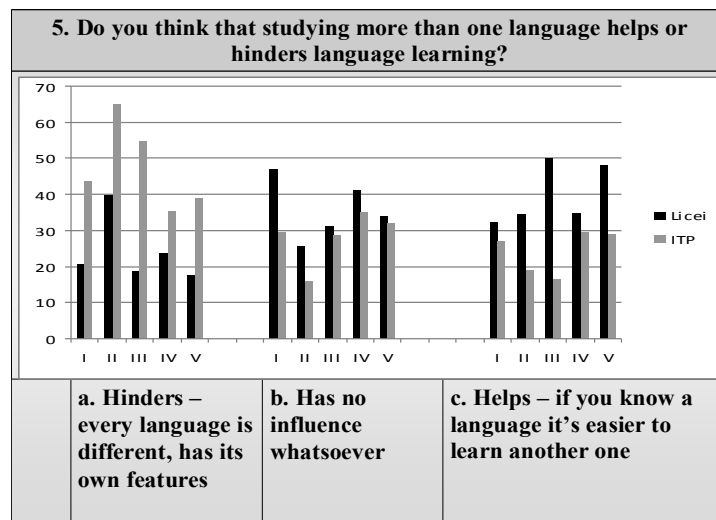


Fig. 5 - A comparison between types of school: Plurilingualism

Vocational schools students chose the “hinder” option much more than academic schools students, while the reverse is true for the “help” option. Even the “neutral” option was chosen more in academic schools than in vocational schools. However, the figures here are striking also in absolute terms: notice, for example, that in the second grade about 80 per cent of vocational schools students and 65 per cent of academic schools students think that studying a second language is either negative or neutral. Although, as we have already pointed out, beliefs change in the course of time, in the fifth grade still only 48 per cent of academic schools students and 38 per cent of vocational schools students think that “if you know a language it’s easier to learn another one”. These findings

seem to show that there is still a long way to go to make students appreciate the value of plurilingualism and to make plurilingual language learning a real opportunity in the classroom.

6. Conclusion

Apart from the statistical results, which are of course of limited value owing to the relatively small size of the sample and its restricted geographic and socioeconomic range, the most valuable part of this research has been the chance offered to both students *and* teachers to focus on an aspect of competence development which is hardly, if ever, taken into consideration – their beliefs and attitudes towards languages, language learning and language teaching. Beliefs and attitudes were made explicit, shared and compared, offering both parties an opportunity to unravel this complex network of assumptions and perceptions, to reflect on how these factors affect their day-to-day decisions and behaviour, and possibly to start a process of negotiation. Thus the most important result of the research was to improve the quality of student-teacher communication and to better qualify classroom decision-making as a more informed, shared and transparent process - a way to enhance students' and teachers' progression in their joint learning efforts.

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