

# Learners' Beliefs About Self-Direction in Language Learning<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

From SLA research we have learned that there are universal *cognitive* processes that play important roles in the process of learning second or foreign languages. Concepts such as "noticing", "attention", "restructuring", "proceduralisation" have become essential for us to understand second language learning. Parallel, and sometimes connected to this approach, we have also learned about other processes, called *metacognitive*, that directly, or indirectly, have a great influence upon the cognitive processes of language learning. Some of the most important elements of a metacognitive process are *beliefs systems*.

The importance of beliefs systems in language learning in general and self-direction in particular has become evident in different ways. Classroom research has made clear the connection between attitudes and beliefs and language learning competence. We know now that they certainly have proven to play an essential role in making the learners ready to learn.

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From a socio/anthropological point of view, learners' beliefs systems are considered to be the core of any learning culture. In fact, a learning culture can be defined as an interactive arena in which two sets (the learner's and the educator's of belief systems) confront each other in order for learning to take place (Clemente, 1998, p. 251).

From a psychological perspective, learners' beliefs systems are defined as all those elements of our world knowledge that affect learning and that cluster together forming what is known as metacognitive knowledge. The operationalisation of metacognitive knowledge leads to metacognitive strategies that, in turn, have the function of regulating cognitive strategies that are present in actual learning behaviour.

Beliefs, as Ridley states, are assumed "to underlie attitudes, especially core, or salient beliefs" (1997, p.9). Adapting Freeman's definition on attitude (who uses it to refer to teacher's attitudes, 1989, p.32) to this study, *attitude is simply understood as the stance the learners adopt towards self-directed learning*. With regard to beliefs, Riley defines them (based on Jodelet and Durkheim) as: "part of a group's commonsense world of social reality, its shared or intersubjective meaning, established in and maintained through our daily life and conversation (1996, p.2)" and adds that we use our representations "both to interpret and to organise and manage the world around us" (ibid). Although different authors use several terms to refer to this type of phenomenon (representations, attributions, values, etc), for purposes of clarity I will use the generic term learners' beliefs systems, and define it as a "set of representations, beliefs, and values" (Riley, 1997, p.122) about learning.

For the purposes of this article we will be dealing with beliefs about learning a language. Thus, these beliefs are anything in our belief system that can, in a given moment, affect, either positively or negatively, consciously or unconsciously, the process of learning a language. Being defined as part of our metacognitive knowledge, beliefs underlie the use (or lack of use) of metacognitive strategies which, then, regulate the use (or misuse) of cognitive strategies that are responsible for any type of cognitive behaviour.

Having defined beliefs, belief systems and their place within the human metacognitive system, let me now get into the specific discussion of learners' beliefs about self-directed learning.

### **ATTITUDE IN SELF-DIRECTION**

The concepts of autonomy and self-direction have several times been defined as an *ability* to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1980) and an *attitude* to be willing to do it (Little, 1991). This "active, independent attitude to learning" (Dickinson, 1995, p.165) is mostly the result of learners' beliefs (Cotterall, 1995, 195). Therefore, as was stated above when defining metacognitive knowledge, a learner's behaviour (Cotterall, 1995, p.202), such as the use of learning strategies (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990, p.161), and his/her

motivation (Riley, 1996, p. 8) are the result of her attitude towards learning, which, in turn, is the result of her beliefs towards learning (Wenden, 1991, p.52).

Due to this strong link between beliefs, attitudes and behaviour, there have been many authors who have focused their attention on the study of beliefs and their relationship to self-directed learning (Little et al, 1984; Wenden, 1987, 1991; Horwitz, 1987; Riley, 1989; Cotterall, 1995; Broady; 1996; Press, 1996 and Fernandez-Toro and Jones, 1996). I have been referring to attitudes and beliefs towards learning, but these expressions are not accurate since learning is not the only factor that plays an important role in this issue. There are many other related factors. Unfortunately, as Riley (1996, p. 8) has pointed out, there does not yet exist a complete taxonomy of beliefs (or representations) about self-directed learning, which undoubtedly would be very useful for learning-to-learn frameworks.

However, the combination of the different elements that a number of studies have mentioned help us to have a comprehensive idea of the beliefs that play a role in the attitude towards self-directed learning. Fig. 1 summarises the findings of 6 different studies (Wenden;1987, Horwitz;1987, Riley;1989, Piper; 1994, Cotterall; 1995 and Broady;1996).

AUTHOR	CONCEPT	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLES
Wenden (1987)	beliefs	1w) learning using the language 2w) learning about the language 3w) social/affective aspects of FL	-learn the natural way -take a formal course -you have to be stimulated learning to learn
Horwitz (1987)	belief areas	1h) foreign language aptitude 2h) difficulty of language learning 3h) nature of language learning 4h) motivations 5h) strategies	-everyone can learn to speak a FL -you can't learn a language in one hour a day -it is best to learn English in an English-speaking country -I would like to have American friends -it is important to repeat and practice a lot
Riley (1989)	belief categories	1r) general beliefs 2r) about self 3r) norms and rules 4r) goals	-you have to start at the beginning -I sound childish when I speak French -The French get easily offended when you make mistakes -I just want to be able to make myself understood
Piper (1993)	beliefs and assumptions	1p) what you need to do to learn 2p) nature of language 3p) learning is product-oriented 4p) group-work is valuable 5p) motivation 6p) language learning is stressful	-you need to practice -vocabulary -summative assessment -provided opportunities for practice -desire to do well in formal assessment -being 'forced to speak'

AUTHOR	CONCEPT	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLES
Cotterall (1995)	factors	1c) the role of the teacher	-I like the teacher to offer help to me
		2c) feedback	-I find it helpful for the teacher to give me regular tests
		3c) learner independence	-I like trying new things out by myself
		4c) learner confidence in study	-I know how to study languages well
		5c) experience on language learning	-I have been successful in language learning in the past
		6c) approach to studying	-I study English in the same way I study other subjects
Broady (1996)	attitudes	1b) readiness for self-directed	-I learn a lot working by myself learning
		2b) independent work	-language learning involves a lot of language learning self-study
		3b) importance of class/teacher	-a teacher is necessary for learning a language
		4b) teacher explanation	-I like the teacher to explain everything to us
		5b) language learning activities	-language classes should be used mainly for speaking practice
		6b) selection of content	-I would like to be able to use my own material for language classes
		7b) objectives and evaluation	-I feel I have a good idea of my language proficiency
		8b) external assessment	-all exercises should be marked by the teacher

## DISCUSSION

The six studies referred to in Fig.1 differ in many ways, such as the number of subjects or the method used to gather the data. Some of the researchers opted for quantitative instruments like questionnaires of the Likert scale type. Others chose a qualitative approach of the ethnographic type (interviews, self-reports and learner diaries). Their approach also determined the categories analysed. In some of the studies, the categories were predetermined before the collection of data; in others, the categories emerged from the analysis of the data. Another point in which they are dissimilar is the fact that the authors refer to different levels and label their categories in different ways. For instance, Riley uses the term "belief categories" while Cotterall uses "factors".

However, as I see it, these studies are not incompatible. A closer look at them allows the reader to establish some links and highlight the constants that underlie all the categories mentioned in Fig. 1. To begin with, there are some categories that several of the studies have in common. For instance, both Horwitz and Piper mention "motivation" as one of the areas of beliefs. In the same way, Cotterall's "role of the teacher" and Broady's "teacher explanation and supervision" are very similar. Of course, there are other categories that are not so obvious. Riley's headings, as he says, have the advantage of being simple, and hence, easy to use although they are very general. Nevertheless, the examples that he provides clarify his four different concepts very well. To my mind, all the different

categories of the six studies can be synthesised as follows: there are three different major underlying concepts which are:

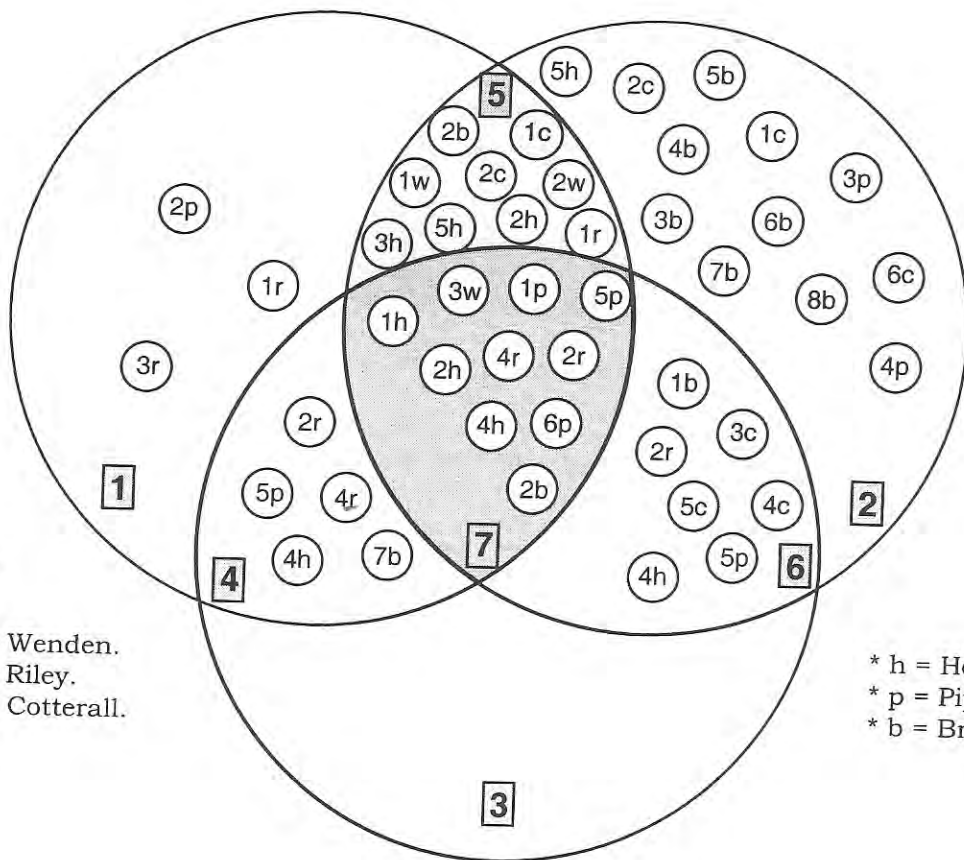
- 1) target language and culture,
- 2) learning
- 3) and self

The points where these three concepts intersect constitute specific fields that are also causes of beliefs. Thus, there are seven fields, four of them being the result of intersections between two of the main concepts:

- 4) language and self
- 5) language and learning and
- 6) learning and self

The intersection of the three, that is, the relationship between language, learning and self, results in

- 7) language, learning and self (see Fig. 2 below).



\* w = Wenden.  
 \* r = Riley.  
 \* c = Cotterall.

\* h = Horwitz.  
 \* p = Piper.  
 \* b = Broady.

In order to define the seven different fields and their boundaries, it was necessary to take into account the explanations and examples provided by the authors. Fig. 2 shows very clearly which fields have received the most attention, either by researchers or by learners (Field # 2, 12 categories, field # 7, 11 categories, and field # 5 with 9 categories). The field that follows is # 6. This means that the four fields with more categories in them belong to the concept of learning. The reason for this may be that the main interest (or concern) in self-directed learning research is the belief system of learners towards learning, since this is self-directed. This appears to be quite logical. However, some of the readers will have noticed that the categories in the six studies are not mutually exclusive. In other words, some of the categories were placed in two or three different fields, for example, Broady's "objectives and evaluation" has been classified into two categories, learning (field # 2) and language and self (field # 4). Not being mutually exclusive was my reason for repeating some of them in different fields. Let me illustrate this with another example, 2r (see Fig. 2), that is, Riley's belief category "about self" was repeated three times. His example ("I sound childish when I speak French"), can be related to three different fields:

- a) *language and self* (field 4) because the student is saying something about the way he/she feels when relating to the target language,
- b) *learning and self* (field 6) because he/she may be referring to a specific aspect of her learning process and
- c) *language, learning and self* (field 7) because he/she may be referring specifically to his/her feelings towards her/his interlanguage and the way it appears to him/her.

Actually, I am quite aware that my way of classifying the categories was very subjective. Another person might have ended up with a different classification. This is exactly the point I wish to make. How can we be sure, not just about the field but, much more importantly, about the source and rationale for the beliefs that learners express in relation to their learning? Let me exemplify this in order to make myself understood.

When a student expresses her beliefs in relation to her goals she may say something like: "I just want to be able to make myself understood" (as in Riley's example, see Figure 1). This is a relatively clear statement, and for some teachers, very realistic, and even attainable, compared to others. However, wouldn't it be important to know *why* she wants to achieve that? That is to say, what is *behind* her statement? What is the *cause* of this belief? Off the top of my head, I can come up with three different reasons. First, she may think that she needs just a certain level of competence in English to cope with the short but necessary interactions she envisions for her next vacation in the United States. Second, she also may think that "making herself understood" is the only possible level of English she can achieve, taking into consideration all the courses that she has been through. She does not believe she is good enough for more than that. Third, she may also think that she wants to "make herself understood" because this fact, the mere fact of being understood, provides her with a feeling of satisfaction and achievement. It is obvious that the three possible sources (and I am sure that there are more) that may motivate

this learner place her belief about goals in different fields (as Fig. 2 shows). Furthermore, and even more significantly, these three possible interpretations of her belief define her as a learner in very different ways.

## CONCLUSION

What I am saying here is that there is still a need to delve deeper in regard to learners' beliefs. In other words, the research in this area, such as the six studies presented here, has provided enough evidence to make a description of a belief system. In other words, we have been provided with a good description of the beliefs that the learners have about this specific aspect of their world, that is, their beliefs about learning a language in a self-directed way. It is evident that these six studies provided good information about this topic. However we still do not know *the reasons* that make learners think in a certain way about this topic. To investigate this and uncover these reasons would mean to carry out more research in order to delve deeper into this area.

In sum, my proposal is to adopt an approach to learner's thinking to uncover the reasons that underlie their beliefs, that is the beliefs behind beliefs (see an example of this kind of research in Clemente, 2000). I strongly believe that researchers on self-directed learning, but above all, teachers/counsellors *and* learners, need to know more about learners' order beliefs. In other words, teachers/counsellors and learners need to analyse the reasons that underlie the beliefs and attitudes that rule their language and learning behaviour in self-directed learning.

In short, it is essential for learners to delve into their own metacognitive knowledge and analyse their own selves in order to change, modify or reaffirm their attitude towards self-direction and towards language learning.

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