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Learner Beliefs: How My Beliefs Have Metamorphosed and Influenced My Teaching

Nasrin Pervin, M.A.

Abstract

The paper begins with a definition of “*learner beliefs*” – an unknown pedagogical term in Bangladeshi language teaching classrooms and then explains how the Eurocentric/Western concept of learner autonomy influences foreign trained teachers’ teaching strategies. It then tries to justify that beliefs are at the core of any learning process. Reviewing expert opinions it tries to prove if teacher/student beliefs fail to converge frustration and dissatisfaction can result and the learners can show clear reluctance in learning a language. The paper also briefly discusses certain cross-cultural issues and *visa-a-vi* explores how foreign language learning can be challenging. Finally the writer explains how her own traditional beliefs about teacher’s roles and responsibilities too have been metamorphosed after receiving higher education in a European university.

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Key Words: Pedagogical, Learner autonomy, Cross-cultural, Traditional belief, Teachers' roles

Defining Learner Belief

Looking at it from a general point of view belief denotes the feeling of certainty in a human being that something is true. Belief involves stories, or myths, whose interpretation can give people insight into how they should feel, think, and/or behave. Beliefs are a central construct in every discipline that deals with human behavior and learning (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; cited Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005). Various researchers are concerned with the importance of learners' beliefs. It is said that beliefs deal with human behaviour and learning in every field of education. Cotterall (1995) has said all human behaviour is governed by beliefs and experience.

When we say a learner has a belief about language learning we mean:

(a) S/he has identified different attributes about language learning and their ability to learn languages – for example: the language they are learning, how best to learn a language, the importance of learning about the culture of the second language and whether they expect to be successful.

(b) S/he has evaluated these attributes as positive or negative (Ellis, electronic, n.d.).

In the classroom context, the perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and meta-cognitive knowledge that students bring with them to the learning situation have been recognized as a significant contributory factor in the learning process and ultimate success (Breen, 2001, cited Bernat and Gvozdenko).

For example, second or foreign language students may hold strong beliefs about the nature of the language under study, its difficulty, the process of its acquisition, the success of certain learning strategies, the existence of aptitude, their own expectations about achievement and teaching methodologies. Identification of these beliefs and reflection on

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their potential impact on language learning and teaching in general, as well as in more specific areas such as the learners' expectations and strategies used, can inform future syllabus design and teacher's classroom practice during teaching the course. Pedagogy has the capacity to provide the opportunities and conditions within which these learner contributions are found to have a positive effect upon learning and may be more fully engaged (Breen, 2001, cited Bernat and Gvozdenko).

It is true that beliefs cannot be defined or evaluated, but there are a number of things that we should know about them. Beliefs are not only culturally bound but also integrated with a country's geography, community and religions it practices as well as the language it speaks and, since they are formed early in life, they tend to be resistant to change. By virtue of the fact that they are difficult to measure, we almost always have to infer people's beliefs from the ways in which they act rather than from what they say they believe.

Difference in Beliefs: How the East differs from the West

As I have mentioned in my introduction beliefs are products of cultural heritage, geographical location, community practices, religious faiths and language spoken, they do differ from place to place. Thus children grow up in cultures that have different learning beliefs. These beliefs influence children's own beliefs in spite of their individual idiosyncrasies in thinking. These beliefs in turn guide their own learning and ultimately affect their achievement. What determines whether a person succeeds as a learner is his/her own beliefs about learning. Thus beliefs must be studied in their own right. Without understanding what the belief system of a learner is, how it emerges, and how it functions in learning, our knowledge of human learning will be deficient. (Chan, 2010)

From this perspective the past few decades have witnessed increasing interest in cross-cultural research that compares Western and Asian learners' learning process and achievements. Asian learners are often documented to have higher achievements than their

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Western peers (Stevenson and Stigler, 1992), although Asian learners don't always perform better than Western learners (Cai and Cifarelli, 2004, cited Chan). Stevenson and Stigler (1992) coined the term "learning gap" to capture these persistent differences. One of the important factors which are observed by the researchers' is Asians believe in effort whereas Westerners believe in ability (Stevenson and Stigler, 1992).

A case study made by H. S. Kim (2002, cited Chan), who investigated the widely noted phenomenon of the quietness of Asian students in the classroom. Asian learners are generally observed to be quiet in classrooms and are reluctant to speak in any public forum (Kim and Markus, 2002). Kim found that whereas European- American students were more likely to believe in the causal effect of speaking on thinking and task performance, their Asian-American peers were much less likely to do so.

This study says how some long-held western assumptions about processes, efficacy, and effectiveness of learning cannot be readily applied to the study of learners from non-western cultures. The reason is quite simple: these concepts and theories were developed by western researchers to study western people based on western cultural norms and values. Given what we know about significant differences in many aspects of human psychology across cultures, it is perplexing why western concepts are still dominant in much of the cross-cultural research on learning. Our understanding will be enriched if we look into learners' own thoughts, feelings, and behavior as they are developed in their respective cultural contexts. From this perspective, beliefs about language learning are viewed as a component of meta-cognitive knowledge (Flavell, 1987), which include all that individuals understand about themselves as learners and thinkers, including their goals and needs.

Abdullah (1996) has claimed, the culture of a society is the "glue that holds its members together through a common language, dressing, food, religion, beliefs, aspirations and challenges". She has further stated, "it is a set of learned behaviour patterns so deeply ingrained that they are acted out in unconscious and involuntary ways" While in the West, Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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self-reliance, personal achievement and autonomy are valued at any particular stage of life, collective and interdependent behaviour is obvious and considered as a norm in the Eastern context (p.3).

Role of Learner Beliefs in Learning Strategies

Flavell (1987), Cotterall (1995), Horwitz (1999), Castelloti and Moor (2002), cited Bernet and Gvozdenko (2005), and Gabilion (2005), all of them in many of their research works on learner beliefs and how they affect learner's learning strategies have opined the actions and experiences of language learners are both positively and negatively influenced by learners' beliefs. Of course, the ultimate purpose of their study was applied in nature, practicing teachers, I being one of them, hope to determine through empirical and pragmatic experiments which strategies are most effective and helpful for students in the productive learning procedures.

It is said that beliefs which are shaped by means of learners' experiences guide them in their perception of language learning and influence the methodologies and approaches they assume to be right for their foreign/second language learning. If a learner holds that languages are learnt by memorizing and reproducing they will fall all over themselves to learn by rote words and phrases and grammar rules to reproduce them at the time and situation required.

Cotterall (1995) has said students' attitudes to learning and the insight and beliefs that control them can have intense influence on the learning behaviour. But researchers also found out that beliefs of teachers and students need converge or frustration and dissatisfaction regarding course can result and the learners can show clear reluctance in participating in interactive tasks. This can generate lack of confidence in the teacher affecting teaching/learning outcomes.

Cultural Beliefs about Teachers/ Teachers' Beliefs about themselves: My Experience

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Jin and Cortazzi (1998, cited Chan) discovered that a good teacher was described by British students as one who is able to arouse the interest of students, explain concepts clearly, use effective instructions, and organize activities. However, a good teacher was described by me when I was a learner as one who had deep knowledge, was able to answer any questions I asked, and was a good role model of morality. When I was a school/college student, I used to believe teachers should control the class for strict discipline, s/he should be serious and reserved and talk as less as possible with her/his students, be it inside or outside the classroom; s/he must be authoritative. But my beliefs have changed later specially from cross border educational institution.

One very important finding on cultural beliefs about the learning strategy was rote learning and memorization—about which I have mentioned above—commonly practiced in Bangladeshi style of learning that is widely criticized in the Western and with the Western influence it is now being reviewed in Asian societies too.

Pedagogically it is widely believed for humanistic teachers, teaching is essentially a personal expression of the self, which has particular implications with regard to teachers' views of themselves, since a teacher who lacks self-esteem will not be able to build the self-esteem of others. I believe the teacher who does not accept his learners for who they are, makes it difficult for them to accept themselves. By the same token, the language teacher needs to impart a sense of self-confidence in using the language, while at the same time respecting learners' attempts to communicate in the foreign language.

Teaching is not inseparable from learning. I believe we can be good teachers only if we know what we mean by learning because only then can we know what we expect our learners to achieve. If our goal is to prepare our students to pass exams, then this will affect the way in which we teach. Most Asian (Bangladeshi) parents believe that by learning a student will have different dimensions of life such as social, personal and moral. In this regard Li(2003)has cited Gardner, (1989), 'If learning is seen mainly as a process of Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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developing and using the mind and exploring the world, Western parents may adopt different socialization strategies such as giving their children more independence and freedom and encouraging creativity (pg 265).’ Likewise, if learning is regarded primarily as a process of developing personal virtues and cultivating oneself socially and morally through mastering academic subjects, Bangladeshi parents’ expectations and level of involvement are also understandable.

‘Culture has been cited as an important variable in learning strategy use because the culture of a student is, in part, made up of prior formal and informal educational experiences’ (Oxford 1996, pg 79). Oxford has cited Eccles (1989) saying ‘social forces such as parental attitude and gender related cultural beliefs influence students’ expectations for success, and consequently their motivation, in various subject matter courses.’ (pg,80). So if a course is seen as a stereotypically feminine subject, the male students may get demotivated to pursue it. I got to know a male student who left the idea of studying literature for he believed studying literature is a girlish thing. So he decided to study business.

From my experience of both as a learner and a teacher I have estimated five main purposes of learning : (a) perfect oneself socially/morally, (b) acquire knowledge, (c) establish oneself economically, (d) achieve social mobility, status/honour, (e) contribute to the society. (Chan, 2010)

I must confess that my beliefs and strategies have undergone a process of long metamorphosis because of the exposure that I have had both the Eastern and the Western beliefs as a learner and a teacher. In contrast, from my own observation and experience in the UK, I have found out that for the British and European students the purpose of learning was to develop their mind and understanding of the world.

Bangladesh Context and How My Beliefs as a Learner Metamorphosed

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I have mentioned in the construct of my paper several times, in passing though, how my beliefs as a learner and a teacher has been metamorphosed. Now I will try to concentrate on the matter in a constructive way.

First of all I will try to explain how as a learner my beliefs contextually affected and influenced my foreign language learning. I find Flavell's (1987) comment on how individual understanding about themselves as learners and thinkers, including their goals and needs play a crucial role in learning process quite relevant. It is true that learner beliefs are contextually shaped in which, location, community, culture, vernacular language, nature and sometimes even religion play vital roles.

In Bangladesh, most people are extremely sentimentally attached to their mother tongue as it has played a decisive role in its Liberation War, learning a foreign language was restricted to merely developing reading and writing skills for a long time. Moreover, traditionally it was believed in Bangladesh—which bears the legacy of learning English right from the British colonial period—that literary English that has the influence of Shakespeare, Byron, Keats, et al., should be learnt to appreciate English literature and appropriately for them writing is the prime skill to be developed.

Because of the above mentioned learning situation my parents, community, and most of all my teachers made me believe that deductive method of learning grammar and grammar-translation practice are the core to the learning of a foreign language. Thus attaining accuracy in writing, that too by using highly flowery and obsolete words, phrases and idioms, was the main focus right from the initial stage of language learning. This in turn actually induced me in rote learning and I came to know more about English language, especially intricate rules of grammar, than being skilled in the language.

When I look back at the way I have learned English language and try to review my beliefs particularly in the above context I have to say that I have experienced two diverse learning

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situations, which actually has made me a very avid learner during the later situation. Obviously my first experience of learning was Bangladesh and second in England.

In Bangladesh I was given to believe that it was easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it. This was because I followed the tradition of developing reading and writing skills and thus felt uncomfortable speaking in English with other people. I also believed it was important to speak English in native speaker pronunciation, which further enhanced my inhibitions in speaking in English.

When I went to England to study I became familiar with the concept that pronunciation and intonation matter but not the way I estimated it in Bangladesh, in fact, what matters the most is to communicate effectively. I also came to realize that listening and speaking are the essential components of language skill and they are easier and quicker to develop than reading and writing.

It also revealed to me during my stay in England, language is dynamic in true sense of the term, for the words, phrases and idioms we were exposed to during our school/college and university days were archaic in nature and in many occasions found to be inappropriate and obsolete. This also has got to do with culture, for the expressions and ideas found to be exact and appropriate in Bangladesh context were not at all so in England and I had to unlearn and relearn many of them contextually.

My idea that teacher is supreme in the classroom also underwent a rigorous change as I found all teachers to be extremely friendly both inside and outside the class and even a grossly mistaken concept expressed in the discussion meetings were not met with criticism by any teacher. During my entire student life in Bangladesh I was humiliated many a times by my teachers for giving wrong answers to any question they asked, and I found very few teachers talking informally with their students outside the class. But of course I must admit things have changed a lot now.

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One more thing that I would like to link with how my belief influenced my language learning as per Riley's (1997, cited in Gabilion 2005) statement regarding learners who believe that language learning requires a special ability. Like many learners of our country I too had this kind of belief that impeded my learning process. I fully agree with Riley's (1997) concept that such beliefs have a direct consequence on the way learners learn.

How My Beliefs about My Roles and Responsibilities as a Teacher have Metamorphosed

After finishing my masters in ELT from England, I joined teaching profession only in 2010 at a leading private university of Bangladesh. Though my experience of teaching is not significantly long enough, what I have learnt so far is not insignificant at all.

I have mentioned before that when I was young because of my cultural background I conceptualized the role of the teacher as an authority figure that is “someone who acts as authority on the target language learning, as well as directing and controlling all learning in the classroom” (Cotterall, 1995: 197). But my exposure at a European university as well as my short experience of teaching has made me believe that self-directed and autonomous learners are always better learners. I notice, when I am friendly and do not dictate and express my authority in the classroom, my students function comfortably and are highly motivated. They express themselves freely and participate and ask questions, and real learning takes place proving that teacher in a language class plays the role of a facilitator.

The Eurocentric education has also made me aware that learners' need for learning foreign language had never been assessed in Bangladesh in its proper sense of the term and the entire agenda for teaching/learning was set by the teachers making it entirely teacher-centered in Bangladesh. We had colossal differences of opinion after our independence in 1971 deciding what skills to be emphasized in the learning of English, though for last two decades we have finally switched to Communicative Language Teaching giving more stress on listening and speaking catering the need of the global job market. This has—as a Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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language teacher though I personally do not face the problem, for my teaching environment is different, I am still quite aware—created a lot of misconceptions among the practicing teachers at the school and college levels of our country.

Culturally we are accustomed to teacher-centered teaching method not student-centered approach. Even after proper training most language teachers now have either failed to understand or have misunderstood the very concept of learner-centered teaching strategy. But then again my belief about language teaching, especially regarding learners' autonomy, has metamorphosed after doing two ELT postgraduate courses (one that I did in Bangladesh and the other I did in the UK).

Theoretically we can prove on more than one count—as I have done in this paper too—that in a language classroom learners are supposed to have a great deal of freedom to negotiate language curriculum, syllabus, choice of materials as well as language teaching, in practical environment this Western or to be more specific Eurocentric methodology/approach does not take account of the culture that the majority learners come from in the third world countries like Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka where teachers are till now expected even by the community to behave like teachers.

While fully endorsing Larsen-Freeman's (1986) view, "Students learn best when they have a choice in what they practice. ... If students feel in control, they can take more responsibility for their own learning", I also maintain that the issue of the student-teacher relationship is vital in negotiating and setting the agenda for language teaching and it is of utmost consideration in the Asian countries where we are trying so hard to introduce an effective and appropriate teaching methodology/approach which will be culturally acceptable to our learners and community.

I also feel that all language teaching courses need to be reviewed and redesigned in such a way that they can equip teachers with the knowledge and expertise to be flexible enough to adapt to their specific cultures.

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Conclusion

This paper has made think a lot about how my own beliefs influenced my language learning and is now affecting my teaching at a private university in Bangladesh.

Comprehending the cognitive representations of the learning process linked with cross-cultural aspects involved with it has helped me better prepare myself as a teacher. In this regard I must admit my education at a European university has given me a better and clearer insight into the whole scenario of language teaching. I now can handle skillfully when a student comes to the classroom with mistaken beliefs like ‘some people are born with a special ability to learn a foreign language’ or ‘teacher is supreme in the classroom’ or ‘learning grammar and practicing translation are the two core skills that need to be developed when learning a language’ or ‘speaking is the most difficult and time consuming skill to acquire’.

In fact, I have realized, it does not matter what cultural, geographical, community, language and religious background we come from; success of learning depends as much on individual efforts as it does on the teacher (Scharle & Szabo, 2000, cited Kehrwald, 2006). Thus I now positively feel that my beliefs as a learner and as a practicing teacher have metamorphosed in a way that will have a long way to go to groom myself as a successful language teacher.

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