

## **13 Adolescent and adult EFL learners' vocabulary learning and teaching beliefs**

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### **1. Introduction**

In recent years, research within the fields of Cognitive Psychology and Applied Linguistics has focused considerable attention on the nature and effects of learner beliefs on language learning. According to White (2008), beliefs serve to guide the ways in which learners make sense of their experiences and behave. Although Barcelos (2003) contends that beliefs are rather elusive to explain, the researcher highlights the contextual nature of beliefs and defines them as a cognitive as well as social construct. The purpose of this paper is to report partial findings on a more comprehensive research study that investigated the perceptions, beliefs and learning strategies regarding the learning and teaching of vocabulary. In this work we focus on beliefs and perceptions of students of two different age groups (adolescents and adults) enrolled in different educational institutions. In the remainder of the paper, we present first the theoretical framework on which the study is grounded and review studies in the field. Secondly, we describe the broader research study and describe the methodology we employed to collect and analyze the data. Thirdly, we refer to the results by analyzing the similarities and differences found in the two age groups. To conclude, we mention some of the pedagogical implications of the findings and make suggestions for further research.

## **2. Literature review**

The last two decades have witnessed a steady growth in research on language learning beliefs and perceptions; however, scant attention has been given to learner beliefs regarding vocabulary teaching and/or learning. Research has tended to focus on analyzing vocabulary teaching and learning beliefs that both pre-service and in-service teachers hold and the ways in which those perceptions impact on their teaching practice (Gao & Ma, 2011; Hassankiadeh, Jahanda, & Khodabandehlou, 2012; Macalister, 2012).

As regards vocabulary learning beliefs from the learners' perspective, most studies concentrate on university level students. Simon and Taverniers (2011) explored advanced learners' beliefs on the learning and teaching of English grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary and compared the learners' views on these three aspects. They made use of a questionnaire as the main data collection strategy and found that students considered vocabulary to be different from grammar and pronunciation; they also observed that students deemed in-class grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary exercises to be of importance as well. Targońska (2013) investigated learners' preferences as regards vocabulary exercises. In her research, she studied 96 students of German as a foreign language and, based on the subjective evaluations of "attractiveness of particular lexical exercises" (p. 79), she distinguished 11 categories of factors that influence the learners' perception of that task as motivating or attractive. Along similar lines, De Florio-Hansen (2004) resorted to a questionnaire made up of questions on attitudes, beliefs and behavior to find out how German university students of English, French, Italian and Spanish learn vocabulary and improve their lexical competence. The data she collected revealed a differentiation of processes that students make use of that could be placed on a continuum from a structured to an unstructured approach to vocabulary study. Amiryousefi (2015) studied the beliefs about vocabulary learning and teaching of both students and educators in Iran. The researcher found that both groups believe that vocabulary knowledge and vocabulary use are important, and that vocabulary and grammar are of equal importance. A relevant aspect of this study is how heterogeneous the group of learners who took part in this study was, with ages ranging from 14 to 39 and with varied proficiency levels.

As this review suggests, some studies have explored and provided evidence of the vocabulary beliefs that teachers, student-teachers and learners hold. Nevertheless, it is

desirable to conduct further research in order to analyze the perceptions and beliefs about vocabulary teaching and learning that learners from different age groups have and compare and/or contrast them in different contexts, taking into different variables such as age.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

Learner beliefs is a central construct both in Cognitive Psychology and Applied Linguistics. In psychology, these beliefs started to be studied as an important element of learner differences. They are included in the broader term “learner cognition”. In the field of Applied Linguistics, they became a focus of study with the shift from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach to teaching.

The construct has been defined in various ways and different terms have been used (e.g. *learner representations* (Holec, 1987 in Barcelos, 2008); *metacognitive knowledge* (Wenden, 1986a in Barcelos, 2008); BAK (*beliefs, assumptions and knowledge*) (Woods, 1996), among others). Pajares (1992) calls it a “messy construct” (p. 307) in his seminal paper about teachers’ beliefs. At any rate, most definitions and characterizations of beliefs agree that they are relatively stable, are socially construed, and act as a filter of reality (Mendez, 2007). Most also acknowledge a relationship between beliefs and actions and consider that beliefs are evaluative and may be conscious or unconscious (Borg, 2001). Here, we use the term belief to include assumptions, perceptions, attitudes and representations (Borg, 2006). Following Victori and Lockhart (1995), we define learner beliefs as “general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning, and about the nature of language learning and teaching” (p. 224). In other words, they comprise conceptions not only about how languages are learned and should be taught but also perceptions about the students’ self-efficacy, attitudes and self-concept.

Language learner beliefs are considered to have a strong impact on students’ observable and non-observable behavior in mainly two aspects. They influence the students’ general approach to learning and their choice of strategies and because of this they may even have an impact on final success (Breen, 2001). Learners may develop facilitative beliefs, which will have a positive impact on learning, whereas other may hold inhibiting beliefs, which will lead to wrong decisions as regards learning (Bernat &

Gvozdenko, 2005). Beliefs and actions are dynamically interconnected but as Barcelos (2008) points out they must be studied in context since they are also socially determined. Because “they play a critical role in defining behavior and organizing knowledge and information” (Pajares, 1992, p. 325), it is necessary that educators take them into account in a systematic way.

#### **4. Research project**

This small-scale study reports partial findings on a more comprehensive research study that investigated the perceptions, beliefs and learning strategies regarding the learning and teaching of vocabulary. The research project was carried out by a group of researchers at the School of Languages, Córdoba National University during 2014 and 2015. In order to collect data, the broader project made use of different strategies such as a questionnaire, open-ended interviews and vocabulary tests administered on two different occasions.

#### **5. Methodology**

We resorted to two instruments to collect data: a structured close-ended questionnaire and open-ended interviews. Here, we only report on findings from the questionnaire. The questionnaire was drawn up by the research team. Prior to be administered to all the participants, it was piloted and a few changes were introduced afterwards in relation to the wording of the questions. The questionnaire consisted of sixteen questions with a likert-scale, which aimed to gather information about the learners’ vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) (6 questions), beliefs about vocabulary learning (7 questions) as well as the participants’ self-assessment of their own vocabulary learning (3 questions). To enrich the breath of some of the information we collected by means of the questionnaire, a subset of the participants were interviewed in order to elicit examples of the VLSs they made use of to inquire further into their beliefs in case some doubts had arisen out of the answers to the questionnaire.

The participants of the study can be divided into two different groups according to their age: adults and adolescents. The adult learners were students of English at a language school which belongs to the School of Languages, UNC, and they were enrolled in either an extensive or intensive course<sup>1</sup>. A total of 29 adult learners participated in the study. As

regards the adolescent learners, they were secondary school students from three different institutions: a private secondary school, a state-run secondary school and a pre-university school. Furthermore, a few adolescents enrolled in an English course at a private language school also took part. In all, 81 adolescents answered the questionnaire.

Data analysis involved examining the learners' beliefs about vocabulary teaching and learning in order to find similarities and/or differences between the two age groups. Although reference is sometimes made to quantitative data, the analysis is mainly qualitative.

## **6. Results and discussion**

The analysis involved comparing and/or contrasting the answers to seven questions in the questionnaire. The questions aimed to elicit the participants' beliefs as regards different dimensions of vocabulary teaching and learning. The questions are included in Appendix 1.

### **6.1. Similarities**

Regarding the learners' beliefs about the importance attested to vocabulary in the lessons they attended, most of the participants of both age groups think that vocabulary work is very important or quite important in their lessons. Therefore, it can be assumed a large part of the lessons is devoted to dealing with vocabulary.

When asked about whether the variable *aptitude* may have an impact on vocabulary learning, the largest number of participants states that they believe that the learners' capacity for learning does influence the learning of vocabulary. Answers range mainly from the options "totally agree" to "agree". In general, adult learners totally agree with the statement whereas adolescent learners mainly agree with it though not completely. Despite the fact that none of the questions elicited their beliefs as regards the role of external factors such as the teacher's intervention and/or the influence of teaching materials, the answers lend support to an innatist view of learning which places emphasis on the learner's inborn capacities.

The participants were also asked to rate how important it is to have a good mastery of vocabulary in order to communicate effectively. The largest percentage of answers range

from “very important” to “important” and the former option is the one that the participants chose the most. This tendency is evident both among adult and adolescent learners.

From different theoretical perspectives, different dimensions of the target language have been found to play a central role. Grammar and vocabulary are two of the dimensions that learners need to acquire and develop in order to be able to communicate in English. The participants were questioned whether they thought that grammar, vocabulary or both contributed to effective communication. By far, most of them indicate that both (grammar and vocabulary) are important. It has also been found among most of the learners of both age groups that lexis is the most important aspect to communicate in English. This was mainly the case for secondary school learners and those enrolled in the intensive course. However, the percentage was much lower when compared to the option “both”. These findings lend support to those reported by Amiryousefi (2015). The researcher also found that both learners and teachers in Iran believe that vocabulary knowledge and vocabulary use are important, and that vocabulary and grammar are of equal value. Grammar was the least frequent option in most cases since only a slight percentage of participants chose it. It follows from the answers to the last two questions that the participants conceive of communication as involving the mastery of grammar and vocabulary. It must also be noted that the questions did not make reference to other dimensions such as the development of skills, communicative and/or intercultural competence, for example. Thus, the participants cannot be said to restrict their view of language to just grammar and vocabulary.

The fifth question inquired whether the participants thought that vocabulary mistakes could hinder effective communication. Most of the learners agree with the statement but the second most frequent answer is “not sure”. The same tendency is found across all the contexts and the two age groups. These answers reinforce the importance given to vocabulary as an essential dimension of language and communication.

The belief that vocabulary practice is key to learning vocabulary is expressed by the largest percentage of participants of both groups. The most frequent answer in this case is “important” and, among some of the participants, especially members of the adult extensive course, the most frequently answered option is “very important”. These findings are in keeping with Simon and Taverniers’ (2011) who also concluded that the participants in

their study believed that in-class grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary exercises were an essential element in order to learn vocabulary.

The last question included in the analysis carried out here involved exploring the participants' beliefs about how difficult it is for them to learn new words in English. It seems that for most of the learners it is an easy task since the most frequent choices are "not very difficult" and "easy". Therefore, learning new vocabulary does not pose many difficulties for the learners and, as long as they are provided with opportunities for practice, they can acquire new vocabulary items and enlarge their vocabulary repertoire.

## **6.2. Differences**

As regards the differences found between the two age groups, when asked about the importance of vocabulary in their English classes, one noticeable difference is that a few students from the three high schools chose the options "little" or "no importance." However, in the case of the adult learners, none of the students selected these options. What is more, a considerable number of students from the private secondary school expressed that little attention is placed on vocabulary. It would be interesting to corroborate this perception with class observations or interviews to teachers.

Regarding the question about the impact of learners' inborn capacity for learning vocabulary, almost one fifth of the teen-age students from two of the secondary schools expressed disagreement with the statement. This may indicate that some adolescent learners believe that there are other factors that may have a more important influence on vocabulary learning.

Regarding the importance of having a good command of vocabulary for effective communication in English, even though most students agree on its importance, a minority of the high school students chose the options "not very important" and "of little importance" whereas none of the adult learners considered these options.

Another difference that can be observed is related to the importance of vocabulary exercises for language learning. A wider range of options is found in the case of the high school students, with more diversity in the private sector. A small, yet considerable number of students in the private high school indicated that vocabulary activities are not so important.

The last difference found in this analysis was related to the learners' perceived difficulty for learning new words. It is worth noting that only one of the adult learners considered learning vocabulary to be a very easy task, whereas six adolescents from both the public schools and the private language school expressed that learning vocabulary was very easy. Again, more variety of choices is observed in the case of the high school students, both in the private and the state institutions.

## **7. Conclusion and implications**

Our study has been an initial attempt at exploring the beliefs of two age groups of EFL learners about vocabulary learning and teaching. It is evident that learners come to class with opinions, conceptions and representations and although the concept of learner differences has been around for some time, the systematic analysis of learner beliefs is still uncommon.

Despite the age difference, we found that there were many similarities among the responses given by the two groups of learners. It may, therefore, be assumed that some of these beliefs might have been socially construed. For instance, the perception of the role of aptitude in vocabulary acquisition is a case in point. As teachers we need to consider the impact that, for example, a negative self-concept could have on students' approach to learning. It would be interesting to investigate whether these inhibiting beliefs can be restructured through the intervention of the teacher.

This study intended to raise awareness of the role that learner beliefs play since we firmly believe that

[i]dentification of these beliefs and reflection on 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 practice in the course (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005, p. nd).

In Barcelos' view (2008), discussions about second language acquisition could be integrated into teaching activities in the class so that students may be afforded an opportunity to not only reflect on their beliefs but also analyse any social restraints that may be inhibiting their potential for learning.

Future studies could explore the relationship between beliefs and other individual learner factors. A longitudinal study could also examine the stability or fluctuation of learner beliefs and more specifically whether these could be restructured by teachers' intervention.

## Notes

1. For an analysis of this external factor see Lopez Barrios, M. & E. Villanueva de Debat (in press). El desarrollo del léxico: Análisis de factores internos y externos que influyen en el aprendizaje. In XV Jornadas y II Congreso Latinoamericano de Enseñanza de Lenguas Extranjeras en el Nivel Superior "Lenguas y culturas: Desafíos actuales de la diversidad y de la integración" Universidad Nacional de Córdoba. November 12 -14, 2015.

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## Appendix 1

1. How important is vocabulary in the lesson you attend?

Very important – Quite important – Not very important – A little important – Not important at all

2. Do you think learning vocabulary depends on the learner's aptitude?

Totally agree – Agree – Partly agree – Disagree

3. How important is it to have a good mastery of vocabulary in order to communicate effectively?

Very important – Important – Not very important – A little important – Not important at all

4. In order to communicate in English, which is the most important aspect?

Vocabulary – Grammar – Both

5. Do you think that vocabulary mistakes hinder effective communication?

Yes – No – Not sure

6. How important is it to do vocabulary exercises in order to learn vocabulary?

Very important – Important – Not very important – A little important – Not important at all

7. How difficult is it for you to learn new words in English?

Very difficult – Difficult – Not very difficult – Easy – Very easy

## 14 The CLIL road from planning to assessment: Case studies in Patagonia

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### 1. Introduction

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is an approach which promotes content learning through another language (Ball, Kelly & Clegg, 2015). As such, it creates a collaborative space not only in practice between content and language teachers (Escobar Urmeneta, 2013) but also at a theoretical level since it integrates sociocultural, cognitivist, and critical theories of education and learning (Llinares, 2015).

Although European-conceived, a wide range of CLIL models have been implemented in different contexts outside Europe. In Argentina, CLIL is usually adopted as a language-driven approach in private formal education, and to a lesser extent in state education. Language learning is a priority and content is subsidiary to language. While the literature offers CLIL reports around issues such as motivation, language development, materials design and discourse analysis, we aim at exploring CLIL pedagogies through teachers' eyes by examining a longer process which takes us from lesson planning to lesson delivery and assessment.

The aim of this paper is to analyse as case studies, the practices of two secondary school teachers based in southern Argentina and to understand how language-driven CLIL is conceptualised and enacted from lesson planning to assessment. The teachers showed that they moved from a topic-based to a content-based approach through negotiation, collaboration, and reading CLIL literature. Assessment was focused on either language or content depending on the language skill they wished to develop.