

Exploring student's beliefs about learning english in two public Institutions*

*Exploración de la creencias acerca del aprendizaje
del Inglés en dos instituciones públicas*

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Recepción: 23 de julio de 2010
Aprobación: 27 de agosto de 2010

* Este artículo se adscribe al Grupo de Investigación Episteme, en la Línea de Investigación Pedagogía de las Ciencias del Lenguaje, Uptc.

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Abstract

This article aims at raising awareness about student's beliefs about English learning in two public institutions at the high school and university levels. The main objectives are, first, to establish the similarities and differences among these groups of students exploring their ideas and thoughts about what learning a foreign language, like English means in their lives; and second, to find some relations between the students' experiences and their beliefs about English learning. It is worth mentioning that this issue has not been explored in our Colombian educative context; there are some studies about beliefs focusing their interest on teachers, but this small scale project explores this issue with students.

Key words: Motivation, beliefs, learning, attitudes, behaviors, ideas, thoughts, students' experiences.

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es mostrar las creencias acerca del aprendizaje del inglés que los estudiantes tienen acerca del aprendizaje del inglés en dos instituciones públicas en los niveles de educación media y universitaria. Los principales objetivos son, primero, establecer los puntos en común y las diferencias entre estos grupos de estudiantes y explorar sus ideas acerca de lo que significa para ellos el aprender una lengua extranjera, como el inglés; segundo, encontrar relaciones entre las experiencias de los estudiantes y sus creencias acerca del aprendizaje del inglés. Es importante mencionar que este tema no ha sido explorado en nuestro contexto educativo colombiano; hay algunos estudios acerca de las creencias que enfocan su atención en las creencias de los docentes, pero este proyecto explora el tema con estudiantes.

Palabras clave: motivación, creencias, aprendizaje, actitudes, comportamientos, ideas, pensamientos, experiencias de los estudiantes.

Introduction

Due to motivation is a key factor in foreign language learning the purpose of this paper is to explore the way learners' beliefs affect the vision they have about the foreign language in the classroom activities and their learning process.

This small scale project aims at exploring students' beliefs about English learning. The participants selected are from a public school located in a small town, and from a public university located in Tunja; beliefs engage a very relevant role in motivation and students' behaviours. Thoughts about what the English learning process is, and the way it takes place in students, can determine students desire to learn English.

The way in which the topic was selected is full of reflections through the study of some principles about Sociolinguistics. The reading of some articles about this issue allow the two researchers to realize that there are many reasons by wich our students evidence some attitudes and the outcomes during English classes, but more particularly, our students' answers towards English learning come from a series of previous experiences they have had. In one change we had to explore a field concerning some sociolinguistic aspects, both teachers in their role of researchers coincided in this interesting topic related to students' English learning beliefs; another common point was that our students belong to public institutions. This factor represents a key variable during the data analysis.

Beliefs are part of a very large framework called motivation. Some authors have explored motivation and attitudes towards English learning; this field is too broad in order to be analyzed in a small scale project; however, one key subtopic that can be explored is the one about students' beliefs. Beliefs could be the ground of the whole process in language learning; in some cases, beliefs may allow some kind of success, under some other circumstances, those beliefs may affect negatively students' achievements in their language performance. The theoretical framework that supports this project is composed by some ideas and theories about motivation and beliefs.

Data were analyzed taking into account where those beliefs come from; for instance, it is necessary to describe some self-concept beliefs students have, these kinds of beliefs have to do with the way they react in some language tasks such as speaking in front of a group in the foreign language class, getting good pronunciation and understanding a native speaker. Some other beliefs are constructed from students' English learning background during their academic life. And other beliefs are related to the way students perceive the nature of learning a foreign language.

The small scale project allowed us to find some interesting characteristics students share about English learning, for instance the fear to be mocked by other classmates, students' perception about English learning as a difficult subject, the lack of time devoted to practice English outside the classroom, among many others.

Theoretical framework

This paper is supported by a theory review regarding two relevant aspects. The first one is related to language learning motivation; and the second one is about language learning beliefs. This theoretical framework briefly describes these two subtopics, and includes some authors' concepts and theories about them.

Motivation

Gardner supports more studies regarding motivation in language learning. There are many other investigations which have an important place in the area of language learning studies, however. The term motivation has been constructed from various perspectives, for instance, Gardner (1985) refers to motivation as "the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity (p. 10)". Through our experience we have had different types of students in our classrooms and we have noticed that their motivation and performance defer depending on students' interests. Many of them feel more interest in learning than the others.

Dörnyei and Otto (1998) define motivation as "the dynamically changing cumulative arousal in a person that initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates and evaluates the cognitive and motor processes whereby initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritized, operationalised and (successfully or unsuccessfully) acted out". This definition includes many possibilities to be analyzed; our students' reactions about the English learning process is a fact that includes all those variables mentioned by Dörnyei and Otto; if students want to get language achievements or to improve the use of that language it is necessary that they

feel encouraged and to take the initiative, the direction, and coordination of their actions regarding the language learning process; nevertheless, in many cases we observe that students do not develop almost any action in order to get good results in their English learning. We observed this type of attitudes in our students and this situation helped us to understand that the lack of motivation towards English learning is a very important issue to be studied.

Other ideas that enrich this study are the ones by Oxford & Shearin (1996), they argue that motivation “determines the extent of active, personal involvement in foreign or second language learning”. They also suggest that because unmotivated students are insufficiently involved, they are unable to develop their language skills to potential. This is something very evident in our classrooms, those students who, due to several reasons, do not feel motivated and do not get involved in activities and tasks, at the end show to have the lowest proficiency in relation to their classmates.

In the following paragraphs the importance of beliefs in students learning process will be addressed.

Beliefs

As Breen (2001) states, beliefs and attitudes that students bring with them to the learning situation work as key factors in the learning process and ultimate success. In this sense, foreign language students may work under some strong beliefs about the nature of language learning, they may believe language learning process is difficult, or that they are not able to develop strategies to learn a foreign language. Thus, we need to consider the level of impact that those beliefs have during the teaching and learning practices. Breen, (2001) and Arnold, (1999) point that Pedagogy has the capacity to provide the opportunities and conditions within which these learner characteristics are found to have a positive effect upon learning and may be more fully engaged.

The literature review provides a variety of definitions regarding beliefs. For instance, Abelson (1979, p. 356) defines beliefs in terms of people manipulating knowledge for a particular purpose or under a necessary circumstance. In addition, Eisenhart, Shrum, Harding and Cuthbert (1988, p. 53) stated that “a belief is a way to describe a relationship between a task, an action, an event or another person and an attitude of a person towards it”. Richardson (1996, p. 102) conceptualized belief as “psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true”.

Based on the concepts previously mentioned, teachers are called to analyze the kind of socio-cultural background students have. This is something that must be well known because

it determines their performance as learners. Methods, activities, strategies are usually well designed, but, they have no interconnection with student's beliefs and ways to read the world.

Increasing learners' self confidence is important during the course of action to learn and teach a foreign language; self efficacy is generally seen as a key factor in determining the amount of effort exerted and the persistence students devote to the learning process.

Self-concept beliefs

This theory is regarding to a new approach to conceptualize second language (L2) learning motivation within a 'self' framework states by Dörnyei, Z. (2005), calling the new theory the 'L2 Motivational Self System'. This new approach has developed a focus on the human been involved in the language learning process; this approach is enriched from the psychological perspective.

An interdisciplinary research by Epstein (1990) suggests that learner's beliefs about learning are intertwined with factors such as self-concept and identity, self-efficacy, personality, and other individual differences.

Learners' self-efficacy beliefs have also been a focus of recent research. Breen (2001) for example, investigated how learners' attributes such as beliefs, aptitude, personality, or the concept of identity affect their conceptions of themselves and the learning environment. The author asserts that learners work selectively within their learning environment, and upon the linguistic and communicative data that is available for them in that environment.

A considerable amount of research about Beliefs on Language Learning has, so far, been conducted in the language acquisition area. Wenden (2001) argues that foreign and second language learners' beliefs have been a neglected variable. Language educators have long recognized that learners bring to the language classroom a complex web of attitudes, experiences, expectations, beliefs, and learning strategies (Benson, 2001; Nyikos & Oxford, 1993; Oxford, 1992). As a result, research reveals that attitudes toward learning, and the perceptions and beliefs that determine them may have a profound influence on learning behavior (Bandura & Schunk, 1981).

Another authors that states relevant findings about beliefs are Norman and Aron (2003) when they argue that perceived control is the degree to which individuals believe their

behaviours can influence the attainment, or avoidance, of a possible self. 'If individuals believe they have control over attaining or avoiding a possible self, they will be more inclined to take the necessary steps to do so.

Finally, as Dörnyei (2001) states: "self-concept beliefs establish the level of self-confidence, self-efficacy, self-competence and self-worth in different domains. . . . Learners with relatively high self-perceptions handle occasional failures much better than learners with low self-worth beliefs", although they tend to heighten and sustain a considerable effort in the face of failure, while mobilizing new strategies to tackle the task.

Research methodology

Type of Research

Bell (1999) states that a qualitative study intends to develop insight analysis about a situation where the subject of study is always a human being. According to this definition, this study becomes a qualitative one as it aims to identify the beliefs that two groups of learners have related to learning English and to see to what extent those beliefs may affect students' learning process in their classes and the activities proposed by the teachers.

Setting

This study was carried out at two public institutions; the first one is Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia in Tunja, Boyacá. In this university there are students from rural and urban areas from different parts of Boyacá and Colombia. These students go to the university to be trained in specific disciplines, some of the programs that they study are: medicine, Civil engineering, Agronomy, undergraduate programs, distance courses, business management, and evening classes.

The second Institution in which this project was developed is Institución Educativa Departamental Juan José Neira in Machtetá, Cundinamarca. In this institution there are students from rural and urban areas and these students are in tenth grade of high school, they follow a Vocational High School through an agreement with SENA institution.

Participants

Group 1

A group of level III students from the UPTC was selected in order to explore their beliefs about learning English. This group was selected because they have experienced some difficulties in their English classes, therefore, the teacher-researcher decided to explore what this group's perceptions and beliefs about English are.

In this class there are 30 students. They were told about the project and invited to participate voluntarily. Only thirteen students agreed to do so and they allowed us to collect information to develop this study.

Group 2

This second group is composed by fifteen tenth graders from a public school located in a small town. The participants in this project are eight female students and seven male students between fifteen and sixteen years old. They come from rural and urban areas.

DATA GATHERING

Questionnaire

According to Macintyre (2000) questionnaires are surveys that can be used in classrooms or schools with a large number of students. The questionnaire is "a quick and effective way of gathering information from a number of people". In this project, the intention of the questionnaire or survey was to gather a good amount of information related to the students' beliefs about learning English.

Classroom observation

According to Bell (1999), this technique reveals specific characteristics of groups and individuals. In this case it helped us identify that our students had certain limitations in their performance when developing activities in English. Sometimes, we noticed that they did not feel comfortable doing what they were doing in class.

Research process

Observation

The first part of this project was devoted to observation. We observed our students' attitudes in the classroom, for instance: their participation, their performance in activities and homework they were meant to do, their interest in developing activities in and outside the classroom. After having observed this, we thought there was something inside our students that did not allow them to have a good performance. Thus, we decided to go on to the second stage of this project: applying a survey in order to identify the students' beliefs.

Surveying our students

Before submitting the real survey to our target population, the survey was applied to some students that belonged to another group. The idea of this piloting was to see if the questions were clearly and appropriately stated. After this piloting we modified those questions that were not clear or that were similar in order to have the last version of the survey.

Before applying the survey to the students, they were informed about the project and the purpose of collecting data, and what data will be used for. The students that agreed on being part of the study signed a consent form and were surveyed. The survey consisted of thirteen statements that students had to tick as false or true and give a brief description of the answer.

Analysis of data

In order to analyze data, we decided to look for common patterns in our students' perceptions and beliefs about learning English. Based on students' answers to the questions some aspects related to participation in class, the development of skills among others were identified. As students provided similar information in some questions, we chose 6 statements that gathered the most relevant information for this study. It is worth mentioning that most of answers were similar in both groups of students, consequently, we categorized the findings in three groups; six statements from the survey were mainly considered and which established some common points that are explained in a broader way in the coming section called: findings.

Research Constrains

At the beginning of the project we had planned to use three instruments: a survey, an interview, and students' diaries. However, there were some situations that did not allow us

to complete this study as we expected. Among those constrains we found we can mention as follow:

- **Students Availability.** It was difficult to count on students' time due to their academic activities in other classes and places. The time they were available did not coincide with the researchers' time.
- **Strike in the university.** The university was closed during some days in which there was no contact with students.
- **Additional activities at school.** The researcher from the school was asked to develop additional activities in the school; this situation shortened the time to participate in this project.
- **Closing of academic term.** A common situation in both institutions was that an academic period was about to finish, it implied spending time applying exams, getting grades for students and passing them to a system of the institutions.

Findings

In this description of the results of this study, it is important to remember that the research question aims to explore high school and university students' beliefs about learning English, hence, the results described in this section are based on students' answers to the survey that was applied during this research process. The statements that were considered to develop this analysis are 1, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 11. The findings of this study will be presented in three main categories: Students' beliefs about the language, students' self–concept, students' Background; each category will be illustrated using students' comments on the survey they answered.

Students' Beliefs About The Language

The first finding is related to the beliefs that our students have related to the language. In the first statement that read: **I like to learn English**. A common answer in this statement was **YES**, however, it is important to mention that when students tried to justified their answers in this point, they referred more to the importance of the language in their professional lives and in the future, rather than explaining why they liked or not to learn English. Their answers gave us the idea that they understand the importance of mastering a foreign language and they mentioned those fields in which a foreign language would help them be more competitive. Some good examples of their answers are as follow:

Student 1

“El aprender inglés es parte para formar un buen profesional”

Student 2

“Es necesario y lo considero importante para el desarrollo y termino de mi carrera, puesto que me permite buscar nuevo conocimiento más actualizado”.

Student 4

“Me gusta el inglés. Además es importante para mi vida profesional o desempeño laboral”.

Students from the school

“Porque es muy importante de pronto para un trabajo o un viaje o una oportunidad que se presente”

“Si me gusta aprender inglés porque sé que es esencial para mi vida”

“Porque el inglés es muy importante en la vida cotidiana, pues es un idioma que abre muchas puertas en lo laboral y el aprendizaje”

“Porque pienso que es indispensable para poder tener un trabajo seguro y estable”

The previous comments by the students show clearly that learners consider the language as an important tool to acquire new knowledge and improve their academic and professional opportunities. When we see these answers we may think that they like learning English as they express the necessity to learn it, and they consider it important for their personal development; however, there are many limitations and difficulties in their learning process that do not have to do with their ideas about English, but they may be related to other situations.

In the fifth statement, students were to express their thinking regarding learning English. This statement was stated as follow: **I think that it is important to learn English.** Students' ideas were related to academic and professional issues like: professional performance, getting a scholarship, or going abroad.

Student 4

“Hoy en día es necesario para nuestra vida laboral y si se quiere salir al exterior se necesita saber hablar la lengua de allá”.

Student 7

“Porque estamos en un mundo globalizado donde el inglés abre las puertas al mundo laboral, económico y social”.

Student 8

“Es necesario hoy en día, en la parte laboral tiene más auge un profesional bilingüe también en lo personal es clave para el desarrollo integral de la persona”.

Students from the school

“Nos abre muchos caminos y oportunidades para la vida”

“Porque nos puede generar fuentes de empleo en el país y el extranjero”

“Es un paso hacia el éxito de mi futuro y lo importante de todo es que si uno viaja al extranjero uno no se va a sentir mal”

The ideas expressed by these three students rehearse what we have said about their comprehension of the importance of the foreign language in their academic and professional lives. It is very evident that their ideas about the target language are not the factor impeding their performance. In the following sections, we will see that there are issues of self-confidence, lack of knowledge about pronunciation and vocabulary which are related to the students' self-concept and background, and that may affect their classroom participation, and language learning process.

Students' Self-concept

In the theoretical framework we discussed that the conceptions that learners have about themselves and learning environment may be affected by their attributes such as beliefs, aptitude, personality, or their concept of identity (Breen, 2001). It was very interesting to find similar attitudes and fears in the two groups of students when answering statement number six. This question read: **I feel embarrassed when I speak English with other people.** The most relevant answers are as follow:

University students

Student 3

“porq' no lo se hablar correctamente y me da miedo de q' se rían y me juzguen”.

Student 5

“Se me dificulta la pronunciación y esto hace que me de pena tratar de hablar”.

Student 7

“Por que no he desarrollado un buen nivel de conversación y pienso que me vería demasiado ridículo intentando hacerlo sin un nivel más avanzado”.

Student 1

“Me falta dominar muchas cosas y confundo palabras y no le doy sentido a lo que digo y se burlan por eso”.

Students from the school

“Porque puedo pensar que se me pueden burlar o quedar en ridículo frente a ellos”

“Porque me falta mucho por aprender y conocer y no puedo expresarme bien”

“Porque creo que si me equivoco se podrían burlar”

“Porque si no se hablar perfecto me da pena”

These answers provided by students enlighten a serious problem of self-confidence and lack of respect in the classroom. On the one hand, some students feel afraid or embarrassed to speak because they do not want to be mocked by their classmates. One of them thinks that he/she would look ridiculous speaking English with a low level of proficiency. In our teaching experience we know that practicing, no matter if making mistakes, is a very important condition for learning; none can learn, if there is no practice. On the other hand, it would not be wrong to conclude that some outbreaks of power in the relations of students may be appearing in the classroom. Despite these students do not mention the authors of such disrespectful practice of mocking their classmates, or the conditions in which this mockery takes place, the situation seems to be so serious that they decide to keep silent in the classroom and miss the opportunity to learn.

Another situation that can be seen in these answers is the lack of knowledge about certain aspects of language. Having little knowledge about some language components such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, etc. makes students feel they are not able to communicate or to learn English.

Students' Background

Students' previous experiences in their learning process definitely play an important role in their motivation and even their attitude toward the subject. Statement number four asked students if **they considered they have the ability to learn English**. Although this statement was not directly related to their previous experiences in English courses, students' answers reflected these situations. Some examples are as follow:

Student 5

"No. porque tanto en el colegio que no me gustaba como ahora en la U. se me dificulta mucho".

Student 6

"No. Como dije anteriormente no tengo buenas bases y siempre se me ha dificultado".

Student 3

"Aunq' quisiera aprender muy bien el inglés, creo q' la habilidad como tal no la tengo, por q' se me ha dificultado aprender este idioma".

In these three cases, it is evident that their previous experiences may impede those students to success in the target language. It would be a good idea to explore in a deeper way their feelings and thoughts regarding their experiences and the beliefs they have built through their learning experiences.

We could dare to say that there is a combination of problems in this two groups; first, they have had bad experiences in English classes that they have grown the idea that they are not good at English; second, the uncomfortable situation of mockery that takes place in the classroom is an insane practice that do not allow many learners to interact appropriately in activities. It would be very useful and interesting to continue exploring students' ideas and feelings as it could be possible to find more issues that can enrich this study and help teachers take an action to change.

Conclusions

- The first conclusion we can say about this study is that students consider very important to study English. Another issue that can be concluded is that the students think that the foreign language is an important tool to acquire new knowledge and improve their academic and professional opportunities. They express that speaking this language can help them have more opportunities to get a job or to study abroad.
- One of the things that impede students to participate in English classes is the fear to be mocked by other classmates. This is a belief that both university and school students share. Another factor that creates fear in students to participate in class is the lack of knowledge about pronunciation or they just may feel embarrassed when mispronouncing words or expressing ideas that may not have meaning.
- We can also conclude that learners' previous experiences with the language play an important role in their motivation, and thus, in their performance in the target language. Some university students expressed that they did not success in the language when they were in high school and that they are still experiencing difficulties. Some students recognize they do not devote enough time to study English, though.
- Some students consider they do not have the ability to learn English. This idea about themselves is part of what in this project was called Students' Self-concept. We dare to say that they developed this belief due to the experiences they had with the target language. It would be nice for further research to explore these students' capacities to learn the foreign language and to realize their real capacities to learn the foreign language.

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