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BELIEFS

Introduction

This chapter examines the nature of beliefs, illustrating ways in which our beliefs influence our actions, and, more specifically, our approach to learning and teaching. We will see that some beliefs are helpful to learning, while others can be unhelpful; thus, teachers can play an important role in fostering beliefs that facilitate learning. Our beliefs can change; they evolve over time and are influenced by context and culture, including the culture of the classroom. We begin the chapter by thinking a little more carefully about what we mean when we use the term 'beliefs' in connection to learning. We then move on to focus on three different types of beliefs that are important in classroom settings and that teachers need to understand and work on in order to facilitate learning:

- 1 the beliefs individuals hold regarding the nature of knowledge and learning
- 2 various powerful beliefs that people hold but may not be aware of or able to articulate
- 3 the beliefs learners develop in order to explain their own personal successes and failures.

In the final part of the chapter, we turn our attention to specific manifestations of beliefs in language classrooms, and here we look at not only learner beliefs but also those of teachers. We hope to encourage teachers firstly to develop a greater awareness of their own beliefs about language learning and language learners, and ultimately to understand their own role in influencing the beliefs of the learners with whom they regularly interact.

What are beliefs?

All of us have beliefs about who we are, the world we live in, and how we should act within that world. Some of these beliefs are deeply held and central to how we regard ourselves, while others may be altogether more peripheral. Similarly, those of us involved in language learning have beliefs about the nature of and processes involved in teaching and learning a foreign language, as well as about our own capabilities. These beliefs affect how we approach learning or teaching, and it is the

nature of these beliefs—and the ways in which they can influence our actions—that we explore in this chapter. Before going further, let us look at some beliefs that teachers hold and consider how these might influence their actions.

Exploring teachers' beliefs

Here are statements collected from teachers in schools in Thailand (Malkiad, 2001). What do you infer about the beliefs of each teacher from the statements? In each case, how would you expect that teacher to act in the classroom?

Teacher	Belief
1. ... is ... receiving knowledge and jing it!	
2. ... me which one students should master it be correct grammar . Then they will jence! With this confidence , their fluency soon after!	
3. ... learn well if they have a chance to touch	
4. ... best and most efficient [method] is to ... to speak ... to teach them to listen and ... I think that I should let them try out the	
5. ... are like white clothes. Nothing is painted ... language is a new thing in their life. So ... ining, they just try and test things. They ... : correctly or incorrectly!	
6. ... tudents speak, I stop them immediately make mistakes. And I correct them by right thing and tell them that the right d be like this!	
7. ... ssroom I expect [the children] just to id the knowledge I transmit to them and	

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We can see from this activity how teachers' beliefs can have a profound influence on their classroom actions. If, for example, teachers believe that knowledge is transmitted from teacher to students, they are likely to teach by presenting and practising language forms. If, on the other hand, they believe that learning involves actively constructing knowledge, they are likely to put learners in situations that involve using the language.

A common-sense definition of a belief is that it represents an acceptance or conviction that something is true. Nevertheless, if we unpack this definition a little, we can see that it is somewhat unsatisfactory since it suggests that beliefs are binary: we either believe something or we do not. Of course, this is not the case, as we believe some things more strongly than others. It is more accurate to think of beliefs as existing on a continuum from 'slight hunch' to 'firm conviction'.

Believing or knowing?

Since researchers began taking a serious interest in the role of beliefs in language education in the mid-1990s, numerous terms have been used to discuss and examine beliefs in SLA. The literature contains terms such as *(meta)cognitions*, *personal theories*, *philosophies*, and *perceptions* (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003). In their influential book investigating beliefs within the field of language learning, Paula Kalaja and Ana Maria Barcelos describe beliefs as being the opinions and ideas that teachers and learners have about the process of learning a foreign language.

If we think a little about this description of beliefs—about the opinions and ideas that teachers and learners hold—then one key distinction that needs to be made is that between belief and knowledge: we may know that the Earth orbits the sun, but some people may also believe that some form of intelligent life exists elsewhere in the universe. This is a relatively clear-cut example. However, there are cases when the borders between belief and knowledge are not so clearly demarcated. There may be certain beliefs that we hold so strongly that we cease to recognize them as being beliefs, regarding them as incontrovertible facts. When individuals fail to identify their beliefs as such, they are less likely to reconsider them or to be receptive to challenges to those beliefs (Woods, 2003).

In respect to language learning, individuals are likely to be more certain about some beliefs than others. For example, consider an adult learner who believes strongly that adults are unable to improve their pronunciation skills no matter how hard they try. How might this belief affect his attitude to improving pronunciation? How willing might he be to engage in conscious strategic efforts to improve his pronunciation and how open to techniques suggested by the teacher? In contrast, another learner may hold a similar belief about the inability of adults to improve their pronunciation in a foreign language but without the same degree of certainty. Such a learner may be more open to suggestions from the teacher about working on her pronunciation skills and more willing to try alternative approaches. Those beliefs that are deeply entrenched and that we feel most certain about are less susceptible to change than beliefs which we hold with less conviction. More often than not, those strongly held beliefs are those which are central to our self-concept or to which we feel some form of emotional attachment. (See Chapters 3 and 5.) It is clear that when individuals hold very firm beliefs about language learning, it can be hard for teachers to encourage those students to reconsider them.

In addition to the strength of a belief, we should also address the issue of how helpful, or otherwise, different beliefs can be: some beliefs are conducive to successful learning—**facilitative beliefs**—while others hinder learning—**debilitative beliefs**. However, deciding what constitutes a facilitative or a

debilitative belief can be problematic. It is difficult to make generalizations as there is considerable variation across individuals, and even within an individual: what is facilitative for one person may not be for another and what is facilitative for somebody in one context or at a certain time may not be in another. Nevertheless, for us as teachers, it can be helpful to consider what beliefs our learners hold and how these beliefs may be affecting their learning in positive or negative ways. Activity 4.2 illustrates this point.

2 Analyzing facilitative and debilitating beliefs

Consider the following statements made by learners of English in Malaysia (Choy 2003). What underlying beliefs do they reflect and do you believe that these are likely to be facilitative (F) or debilitating (D) beliefs for the learners you typically work with?

Statement	Belief	F/D
I am English. I usually wait for my teachers, expect them to have expert knowledge and authority in English, to teach me and help me learn the language.		
On my teachers to give me model essays to copy so that I can use these to help me write my own essays.		
I am culturally understanding English in school. I understand my lessons and I do not like the teacher because it is very difficult to become good in English.		
I am English because it is an international language and I can use it to communicate with people from all over the world.		
I am afraid of using the wrong words when speaking English. I am afraid of making mistakes. I often repeat myself or write down on a piece of paper what I want to say to avoid mistakes.		
I want to be like people who speak English well and I think I should look up to me if I spoke the language well before I want to learn the language well.		
I am going to practise until I am better in the English language. I usually try to watch more English videos to understand and speak better.		

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As a teacher, how would you respond to learners in your class holding beliefs that appear to be hindering their learning?

As teachers, we are constantly evaluating the actions of learners and, by extension, the beliefs that underpin those actions. This is an integral part of the teaching process. Nevertheless, these evaluations are, to a great extent, shaped by our own beliefs about language learning. This suggests that we need not only to pay attention to the beliefs of learners in our classrooms but also to develop a greater awareness of our own beliefs and how they are affecting the decisions we make. Of course, it makes sense to intervene and help in cases where we feel that a specific belief is having a debilitating effect on an individual's learning. However, we need to take care that we do not simply impose our own beliefs on all our learners; there may be specific beliefs that work for certain learners in certain situations but not for others.

Beliefs in context

In the past, beliefs were often characterized as residing in the mind of the individual. Within this framework, beliefs were regarded as static, discrete cognitive entities. However, since the mid-1990s (see Benson & Lox, 1999; Kalaja, 1995; Kalaja, Menezes, & Barcelos, 2008), there has been a shift towards more contextualized understandings of beliefs. This means that different aspects of the context or situation are acknowledged as playing a role in how individuals form their beliefs.

Contextual factors affect our beliefs in different ways. It can be useful to think of these contextual influences as occurring at a number of levels. As we discussed in Chapter 2, it is possible to distinguish between different levels of context. In the current discussion, we will focus on three basic levels: macro, micro, and interactional. At the macro-level, we would include national or educational cultures that affect individuals' beliefs. At the micro-level are aspects of the immediate situation, such as the lesson, teacher, and peers. At the interactional level, there are particular experiences or interactions with specific individuals. Of course, in real life, things are likely to be considerably more complex, with overlap between levels of beliefs. Nevertheless, this basic three-level distinction may serve as a useful guide for teachers trying to understand the various factors influencing the formation and development of beliefs inside their classrooms.

Beliefs and cultural background

As members of any society, we all learn tacitly through our continual, lifelong interactions which particular beliefs are valued within that society—a process known as **socialization**. Since we are exposed to such beliefs from an early age and they are being constantly reinforced throughout the lifespan, they tend to be the most stable and resistant to change. Of course, some people move between different societies and cultural settings and in such cases beliefs may be challenged and evolve in response to these challenges. The implication for language teaching is a need to recognize and accommodate the various beliefs about language learning that may be 'typical' for a given culture. In particular, in cases where teachers

and learners do not share the same cultural background, some degree of mutual understanding and respect is required, and attempts by teachers to 'impose' their culturally based beliefs on learners holding other beliefs are likely to encounter resistance. This conflict between different cultural beliefs about education can also manifest itself when teachers in one socio-educational context attempt to use educational materials developed in, and perhaps for, another.

Situational and interactional factors

As we discussed in Chapter 2, it is important not to oversimplify the impact of cultural factors. Individuals within a particular culture do not all hold identical beliefs. We are also influenced by factors in our family settings and in our various social relationships, as well as by specific situations or interactions. A situational view of beliefs implies that schools and classrooms play a significant role in influencing the beliefs of the individuals within them, and that a key role for teachers is to work towards creating a classroom culture that generates a facilitative set of beliefs about language learning among learners. Let us consider a teacher dealing with a group of young learners taking their first steps in foreign language learning. As with any group, some individuals are likely to be more successful than others. How does the teacher choose to respond to that success? Some teachers may highlight the successful outcome and the speed with which those successful learners 'picked up' the language, implying that these learners have some form of natural aptitude or talent. In such an environment, learners may come to believe in a strong link between innate talent and successful outcomes. On the other hand, in cases where the teacher chooses to focus on the process rather than the outcome, or on efforts as opposed to notions of talent, learners are more likely to develop a belief that their own efforts can lead to success.

The individual choices teachers make are subjective judgements based on their own beliefs and understandings of language and learning. As such, teacher beliefs are a major contributory factor to the culture of any classroom and, by extension, to the beliefs of learners within it. This presents teachers with three crucial challenges: firstly, to be aware of their own beliefs; secondly, to understand how these beliefs impact upon their teaching and students' learning; and thirdly, to consider ways to promote the beliefs they consider most helpful to learners.

At another level, learners' belief systems are also affected by their own unique experiences and their interactions with other people around them. Let us imagine a learner with a family member, say a sister, who has married someone from a different linguistic background and has successfully made efforts to learn that language. Conversations and interaction with this sister may prove to be a significant influence on this particular learner's beliefs about language learning. In this case, these beliefs would be unique to this individual, not shared by the whole class.

Emotional factors

A further important aspect of beliefs is their emotional nature (Frijda & Mesquita, 2000). Individuals can feel strong emotional attachments to their beliefs and this has powerful practical implications. (The connections between beliefs, emotions, and behaviour is a topic we return to in Chapter 5.) The essential underlying theme of this chapter is that learners' beliefs about the nature of language learning influence their approaches to learning; therefore, teachers need to be both aware of these beliefs and equipped to help learners re-evaluate any beliefs that may be impeding learning. In order to achieve this, teachers need to understand the emotional significance of some beliefs.

From a practical point of view, teachers ought to be aware that learners can be more emotionally attached to some beliefs than to others; this connects back to the distinction between core and peripheral beliefs that we made at the beginning of the chapter. A strong emotional attachment to a particular belief can be problematic when the teacher judges that belief to be harmful to learning. For example, let us think of an adult learner who has always done things in a certain way and strongly believes that this is the best—even the only—way. However, you, as the teacher, disagree; you have been watching patiently as this learner makes no progress at all, offering gentle suggestions, all of which seem to be ignored. What can you do in such a situation? You cannot simply ignore the belief and its damaging effects. It may well be the case that the more the learner persists with this belief—and the less successful the learning efforts—the greater the emotional investment. This may be highly irrational and, in such cases, a purely rational approach from the teacher encouraging the learner to reappraise these beliefs may, in fact, be counterproductive if not handled skilfully. Simply pointing out the flaws in the current approach and suggesting an alternative may cause the learner to resist and become even more invested in the belief. In order to help learners reappraise their beliefs, teachers need not only to be aware of the specific beliefs that learners hold but also to understand something of the emotional significance those beliefs have for learners, and to develop non-threatening strategies that encourage learners to re-examine them.

Beliefs across time

In the previous section, we discussed how beliefs are liable to change across different contexts. Beliefs may also evolve over time. At one level, changes in beliefs reflect various changes in cognitions that occur across the lifespan; these tend to be predictable and are common to most people. At the same time, changes in beliefs are also shaped by our own particular experiences and social interactions that occur over time; these changes are unique and individual. Beliefs are not static, but neither do we suddenly come to believe or disbelieve something. There is likely to be a questioning process, with doubts gradually creeping in as to the veracity of certain beliefs, or a gradual strengthening of other beliefs occurring as a result of confirmatory experiences or interactions with others. In fact, it is possible to argue that all our beliefs are, to some extent, in a state of flux and that the major difference is one of degree, with beliefs at the 'strongly held' end of the continuum being more stable.

The recognition that beliefs are situated and dynamic represents positive news for teachers, as it suggests that learner beliefs can change and are influenced by the learning environment. As teachers, we have a role to play in the development of positive learner beliefs. We are in a position to monitor and assess the various beliefs that our learners hold in our teaching situations and use these assessments to encourage both the questioning of what we regard as unhelpful beliefs and the strengthening of facilitative beliefs.

Types of beliefs

We can hold beliefs about any aspect of learning and teaching processes, the language itself, how it is best learned, and ourselves in relation to these processes. However, certain beliefs appear to be more influential than others in enhancing or hindering learning. We have chosen here to focus on three central sets of beliefs: **epistemological beliefs, mindsets, and attributions.**

Epistemological beliefs

We all have beliefs about the nature of knowledge and learning: what knowledge is and how it is acquired. These are known as epistemological beliefs. To a certain extent, these beliefs are a reflection of the particular time and place in which we live. In different periods of history and in different cultural settings, various theories of knowledge have tended to dominate. The issues of what constitutes knowledge and how knowledge is transmitted are complex. For the purposes of our current discussion, it is helpful to provide an outline of some of the main principles regarding epistemology.

The fundamental epistemological question underpinning language education concerns what it means to learn or to know a language. One key distinction that has been made is between learning how and learning about. When we learn or know how to do something, this means that we develop an ability to perform a certain skill. For example, we learn how to drive a car without necessarily knowing the detailed workings of a four-stroke engine. On the other hand, when we learn or know about, we develop an understanding of how something operates or how a skill is performed, without necessarily being able to perform it. So, staying with the driving illustration, it is possible for somebody to understand when and how to change gears on a manual car but not actually to be able to perform the task in real time. In the case of language learning and teaching, if we believe that knowing a language means understanding its formal properties, then we may favour an approach to teaching that stresses knowledge of formal aspects of the language, such as its syntax. However, if we believe that actually being able to use this language is central to knowing it, then we are more likely to be inclined towards approaches to teaching and learning that stress the communicative nature of language. Indeed, this distinction has informed a major shift in formal language education, from a focus on form and structure to more of an emphasis on language as a communicative skill.

Following on from the fundamental question of what constitutes knowledge of a language is the other half of the epistemology equation: how is this knowledge transmitted? This question concerns beliefs about how best to teach and learn a language. One such belief relates to whether language is transmitted from teacher to learner. Individuals who believe in a unidirectional transmission of knowledge are more likely to believe in the authority of the language teacher and the legitimacy of that teacher as a model for learning or source of the target language. Meanwhile, someone who regards language proficiency as something that emerges through interaction will probably have very different expectations of both teachers and learners.

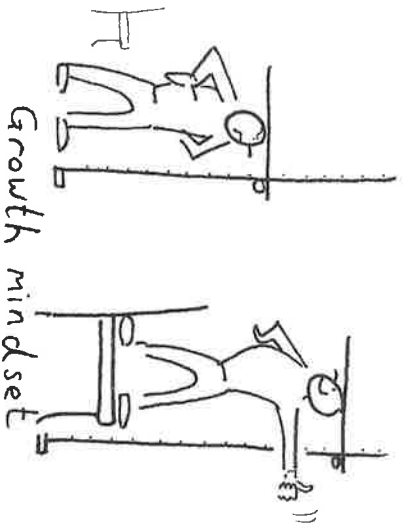
People tend not to have a single overarching set of beliefs that spans all domains of learning; our beliefs may differ greatly across domains. For example, a student may approach the study of literature in a very critical fashion, ready and eager to challenge the teacher's pronouncements. Yet the same individual may approach language learning in a very uncritical manner, accepting the teacher's expertise and authority. The finding that beliefs can differ across domains and that even within a single domain, such as language learning, beliefs may vary across sub-domains, such as writing and speaking, is an important one. Another feature of epistemological beliefs we need to take into account is that their effects are not always direct or obvious. For example, a greater trust in authority figures can lead language learners to display a greater reliance on L1 when learning a foreign language (Mori, 1999). As epistemological beliefs essentially deal with the nature of knowledge and how we learn, they are central to how we see ourselves and the world around us. Like all beliefs, they can be facilitative and debilitating, but as they are so central, it is unlikely that they can be immediately modified. However, there is a distinct possibility that learners' epistemological beliefs might be modifiable in the longer term.

Implicit beliefs and mindsets

A further key issue concerning beliefs and learning is individuals' awareness of their own beliefs. Sometimes we are conscious of our beliefs and able to articulate them; these are known as **explicit beliefs**. For example, an individual may have a strong belief in the dangers of global warming and the need to take action to prevent it. Such an individual is likely to have some awareness that this is not universally accepted and that others may not share the belief. However, it is often the case that people are unaware of some of their most deeply held beliefs; these are known as **implicit beliefs**. For example, consider an individual who strongly believes that luck plays a significant role in the outcome of human endeavours and that there are lucky days and unlucky days. This belief may be a key factor in behavioural decisions; this person may be more willing to take risks on a lucky day. Yet the individual may not be aware that this is a belief at all, instead assuming it to be knowledge shared by everyone. As such, this belief is likely to remain impervious to counter-arguments. We all hold implicit beliefs in various areas of life, including language learning, and these beliefs can have far-reaching effects on how we approach learning tasks. Within educational psychology, the work of Carol Dweck (1999, 2006), along with various

colleagues, has played a leading role in exploring the relationships between implicit beliefs and learning. Dweck identifies two core sets of beliefs about learning: an **entity theory** and an **incremental theory**. Individuals holding an entity theory tend to believe that human qualities, including intelligence and the capacity to learn, are fixed within the individual. They believe that we are endowed with the talents that we are born with and there is little we can do to change this. In contrast, incremental theorists believe that human nature is malleable, and, in the case of intelligence and learning, this means that people are capable of developing their intelligence and talents through focused practice and effort. A more accessible terminology for these implicit beliefs is mindsets: we refer to an entity theory as a **fixed mindset** and an incremental theory as a **growth mindset**. It is generally believed that a growth mindset is more likely to facilitate learning since it helps individuals to see that with effort they can improve and become more competent.

There are several factors that contribute to the formation of mindsets of language learners (see Mercer & Ryan, 2010). One of these is the notion that the capacity to successfully learn a language is dependent on an innate talent. A person with a strongly fixed language learning mindset may believe in a 'gift for languages'—that some people are simply naturally good at learning languages, and that those who do not possess this gift are unlikely ever to succeed. However, language learning mindsets are not solely dependent on beliefs relating to a natural talent for languages. We also hold beliefs about other factors we feel play a role in successful language learning. For instance, a person may believe that personality plays a significant role. If this is accompanied by the belief that our personalities are essentially fixed, then that individual is likely to tend towards a fixed language learning mindset. Language learning mindsets result from learners' beliefs about what qualities are desirable in successful language learning combined with a further set of beliefs concerning the malleability of these qualities (see Ryan & Mercer, 2012).



Mindsets are both complex and powerful, and their significance in language learning is only just being recognized. Mindsets link to a range of other issues, such as goal-setting and motivation, providing an underlying framework for approaches to learning. For example, someone holding a fixed mindset is likely to set goals that avoid risks and possible failure, as such failure would expose the limits of any innate talent. Meanwhile, someone with a growth mindset is more likely to set challenging goals, as this presents an opportunity for learning.

Clearly, mindsets can both help and hinder learning, and perhaps the most exciting finding from research into mindsets is that, despite their deeply held nature, they can change, and teachers have a role to play in encouraging growth mindsets. A fixed mindset may impede learning, but a growth mindset can function as a powerful resource, influencing learner motivation, the setting of goals, and how learners respond to the setbacks and 'failures' that are an essential part of language learning. In the educational psychology literature, there is evidence that pedagogic interventions can encourage growth mindsets in learners, which are, in turn, likely to lead to more successful learning outcomes. For example, Lisa Blackwell, Kali Trzesniewski, and Carol Dweck (2007) designed a series of activities to encourage a group of New York children to regard the brain as a muscle like any other that could become stronger the more it was exercised, and to believe that intellectual growth was something they could influence and control through their own efforts. The research showed that these children subsequently showed a marked improvement in both their grades and their motivation. Although the concept of mindsets has yet to be fully explored within the field of language learning, the research conducted in mainstream educational psychology suggests that nurturing growth mindsets may be a particularly productive strategy for teachers looking to foster more facilitative language learning beliefs.

Attributions

Closely linked to mindsets is the way in which we perceive our successes and failures. On winning a silver medal at the 2012 Olympics, rower Mark Hunter said, 'We gave everything, we tried everything. We wanted to win so badly ... we just feel we let everyone down by not winning.' This quotation is interesting in that it provides some insight into how the mind of a dedicated athlete works and it also reveals how the concept of success and failure is relative. For most of us, participating in the Olympics would represent a huge achievement, yet this athlete feels he has let people down by coming second, and he sees this as a failure. Success and failure are highly subjective terms; one individual's success may be another's failure.

Individuals' perceptions of their own successes or failures and the reasons they provide for those successes and failures are known as **attributions**. Attribution theory is concerned with the question 'To what do individuals attribute their perceived successes and failures?' The word 'perceived' is important here; as the above example shows, we all perceive success and failure differently. This can be due to our different expectations of success (see Chapter 6 on expectancy-value

theory): different opinions of our ability to succeed in a task (our self-efficacy, as discussed in Chapter 3); our interpretation of our previous experiences; and our sense of how important achieving the task is.

Attribution theory originated in the work of Fritz Heider in the 1940s. Heider claimed that it was how people perceived events, rather than the events themselves, that influenced behaviour (Heider, 1958). Later, Bernard Weiner (1980, 1986) developed this theory further. Weiner was particularly concerned with reasons people gave for their successes and failures in academic and other achievement situations. He originally suggested that people saw their successes or failures as being due to one of four possible causes: effort, ability, task difficulty, or luck. He further suggested that these could be seen on two dimensions, which he termed **attributional dimensions**. The first is the internal/external dimension, which Weiner referred to as **locus of causality**. Ability and effort are normally seen as internal—they are believed to come from within us—while task difficulty and luck are usually seen as being external to us. A second dimension is that of **stability**, that is, whether the factor is seen as fixed or changeable—in other words, can it change or is it something fixed? So effort would normally be seen as changeable, while ability can be seen as fixed or as changeable, depending on whether we believe ability to be something static (a fixed mindset) or something that can change (a growth mindset). Weiner, however, put it in the stable category. The relationship between these four attributions is shown in Table 4.1.

Stability		Locus of causality	
		internal	external
stable	stable	ability	task difficulty
unstable	unstable	effort	luck

Table 4.1 Matrix of the four main attributions (adapted from Weiner, 1986)

A third dimension is that of controllability, that is, whether we feel the element is within our control or not. For example, most people would feel that the amount of effort they put in is within their control, but there are considerable differences in views about whether ability is controllable. In school situations, the difficulty of the task tends to be seen as being out of one's control; however, if we see ourselves as capable of breaking a task down into manageable subtasks, we might view it as within our control.

The important point is that individuals perceive success and failure differently, they give different reasons for their perceived successes and failures, and they view these reasons in different ways. Thus, it is how individuals see these aspects that leads to different behaviours among learners. This has considerable implications for teachers in the way they interact with their students. For example, if students firmly believe they are doing badly because they are no good at languages, and see this as a fixed factor that is not within their control, they are unlikely to make any effort to improve, believing this will make no difference. It is then

important for the teacher to help these individuals to see that they can, in fact, get better at languages, and that they can take control of their progress by using appropriate strategies and putting in effort. Students who believe they are doing badly because the teacher has it in for them—an external locus—and feel that there is nothing they can do about the situation, seeing it as uncontrollable, are unlikely to make any effort to learn. However, students who believe that they are doing badly because their friends distract them—also an external locus—could see the situation as controllable, and sit in a different place or ignore the distractions.

It is important to note that attributions are situation-specific, so one's attributions in language learning might be very different from those in sport or music. Similarly, one's attributions for speaking in an L2 might be different from those for reading or writing in the L2. People also tend to develop different attributions for success and failure, often to protect their sense of **self-worth** (Covington, 1992). Many people attribute failure to external sources. For example, not getting a job might be attributed to unfairness or a preference for an internal candidate, rather than to not being good enough. Research has shown that men tend to externalize failure more than women. This tendency to attribute success to oneself and failure to external factors is known as a **self-serving bias**. It seems that women are likely to have lower expectations of themselves and tend to attribute their successes to external factors more than men do.

Although research into attributions has mainly focused on sport psychology, a few studies have been carried out in the domain of language learning. For example, Williams and Burden (1999) found evidence that as primary school children get older, they become more internal in judging how well they are doing in a language task. However, this trend appears to reverse in secondary school, with pupils judging their successes mainly by external factors such as marks or grades. A far broader range of attributions for perceived successes and failures in language learning is given by older children. These include peer influence ('Friends distract me', 'My friends help me'); task difficulty ('The work's too hard'); ability ('I'm no good'); and poor teaching, as well as mood, circumstances, and materials. Clearly, attribution theory is broader than Weiner's original four reasons, and there is evidence of developmental pathways in the types of attributions learners make as they mature (Williams & Burden, 1999).

Other attributions for success that have been reported include the use of the right strategies, the teacher, interest in the subject, and liking the tasks—for example, computers, videos, or games. Reasons for failures tend to include lack of interest, bad behaviour, and the teacher. In addition, girls appear to be more internal in their attributions for failure than boys (Williams, Burden, Poulter, & Maun, 2004).

3 Exploring reasons for failure

Below are some reasons learners gave for not doing well in a language activity in a secondary school setting in the UK (Williams et al., 2004). Give each statement a label such as 'ability', 'effort', 'interest', 'the teacher', or 'behaviour'. Then say whether each of the attributions is more internal (I) or external (E).

nt	Label	I/E
ner doesn't like me.'		
my homework.'		
bothered.'		
cut.'		
ner doesn't control the class.'		
h at German.'		
nertrate.'		
German is more boring than watching paint dry.'		

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As a teacher, how would you interact with your class if they gave these attributions? What strategies would you use for dealing with these kinds of attributions?

Working with beliefs in the classroom

Beliefs about how to teach and learn

It is important to point out that many individuals are not simply either teachers or learners; it is possible—and indeed relatively common—for a person to be both a teacher in one context and a learner in another. When we speak of teacher and learner beliefs, we are referring to the beliefs individuals hold in their roles as teachers or learners. In fact, recalling our earlier discussion about the highly situated nature of beliefs, it is conceivable that the same individual may subscribe to different, even apparently incompatible, sets of beliefs as a teacher and as a learner. As an illustration, Jo McDonough (2002) provides a fascinating account of the internal conflicts she experienced learning Greek while working as a teacher of English. For example, a teacher may encourage learners to tolerate variation and to discover answers for themselves in the classroom during the day, and then, in the evening, while attempting to learn another language, implore the teacher to give simple and unambiguous answers. Such an example highlights one of

the most intriguing aspects of human belief systems: our beliefs are not always consistent and it is not uncommon for individuals to subscribe simultaneously to incompatible or even contradictory beliefs.

Several studies (for example, White, 1999; Loewen, 2007) have examined the potential mismatch between what learners and teachers believe about the processes of language learning and teaching. A broad conclusion of those studies is that differing expectations brought about by these beliefs can cause considerable problems for the effective management of the classroom and the rapport between the teacher and learners. One commonly cited example of a conflict of beliefs concerns the broader educational culture in which language learning is taking place. Teachers believing in more communicative versions of language education often experience difficulties when attempting to implement these beliefs in contexts where learners are either not familiar with or do not value such a communicative approach.

Activity 4.4

Reflecting on success and failure in the classroom

- 1 Ask your students to get together in groups. First, ask them to think individually of something specific in language learning that they did well recently and to write it down. It could be doing a role play, completing an activity successfully, or communicating with someone successfully, for example. Under this, ask them to write the reasons they did well. The group then collects the reasons together and tries to sort them into groups. Assemble these reasons on the board, grouping those that are similar together. Some examples might be working hard, feeling confident, liking the teacher, or finding the topic interesting. Ask which of these aspects they think are important for success. Ask the students to choose an aspect to work on developing and to write it as an aim in their journals, for example: 'In the next two weeks I shall try to work on/improve ...'
- 2 Ask your students to think of something they did not do well in respect to language learning. Again, ask them to write this down, along with reasons they did not do well, and then collect and group these reasons on the board. Then ask them which of these reasons they could do something about—in other words, control—and how they would do this. For example: 'I could spend half an hour more on my homework' or 'I could get to class on time.' If there are any that the students do not think they can do something about, then ask them to consider how they could control these aspects. Once again, ask the students to choose an area to work on and write it as an aim: 'In the next two weeks, I shall ...'
- 3 Record all the reasons your students gave for doing well and not doing well. What sort of differences can you see? What do these tell you about your class? For example, do they lack confidence? Do they tend to see themselves as no good? Do they lack interest?
- 4 After two weeks, put them in groups so that students each report on their progress. Ask groups to prepare a summary of their discussion and plan how to present it orally to the class. What have you learned? How can you work with the class to help them develop more positive attributions?

The various beliefs that teachers hold can be considered a part of what are known as **teacher cognitions** (Borg 1999, 2006). Teacher cognitions refer to the unobservable mental side of teaching—what teachers think, know, and believe—and research in this area has explored how all of these impact upon teaching practice. What is particularly interesting about this view of teaching is that it shifts the focus away from teachers' actions to the various beliefs, theories, and assumptions that inform those actions. Conventional educational research has tended to focus on the behaviour of teachers, with the implicit assumption that this behaviour in itself constitutes teaching and 'produces' learning. Furthermore, the assumption was that these behaviours and practices were interchangeable between individual teachers; when one teacher used a particular activity, it was essentially the same as when it was carried out by another teacher. Thinking about teacher cognitions and how they affect teaching suggests that it is really the personal beliefs underlying our practices that make us unique as teachers.

Beliefs about each other

Some of the most fascinating beliefs in any classroom are those that teachers and students have about each other. A teacher may come to believe that a particular learner is fundamentally lazy and that any efforts spent helping this individual are likely to be in vain. Learners also have beliefs about teachers. For instance, they may feel that a certain language teacher lacks mastery of the target language and this may make them less receptive to input from that particular teacher. Others might feel that a teacher does not actually like them and this might make them reluctant to make any effort. The beliefs we hold about each other can have a profound effect on how we interact in the classroom.

As teachers, it is important that we strive to generate in our classrooms a culture of beliefs that are as facilitating as possible for language learning. We can influence the beliefs that our learners come to hold by our actions and interactions in the classroom. Essentially, we serve as role models and send messages about the nature of language learning through our own behaviour and especially the ways in which we talk about language learning. One way in which teachers transmit their values about learning is through their use of feedback in the classroom. One type of feedback is praise and it is possible to identify two broad categories of praise: ability praise and effort praise. Ability praise highlights both the end product—a successfully accomplished task—and the abilities of the individual, whereas effort praise emphasizes the process of achieving success and the efforts made by the individual learner. There is a broad consensus in the literature (Dweck, 2007; Kamins & Dweck, 1999) that effort praise tends to be more conducive to successful learning because it helps learners to see progress as within their control.

The example of praise in the classroom illustrates how teachers may indirectly or unintentionally influence the beliefs of learners through their use of language or behaviours. However, there may be times when teachers wish to focus on learner beliefs in a more explicit fashion. A key first stage in achieving this is to engage in awareness-raising tasks involving explicit reflection on and discussion of beliefs.

This can be achieved through journal writing, group discussion, or the use of mind maps, for example. Through reflection, beliefs need to be brought to the surface, articulated, and recognized as beliefs before any processes of change can be contemplated. We can also keep an eye out for instances of dissonance in beliefs within the classroom—such as when elements of doubt or differences in opinion emerge—and exploit the potential in these opportunities for discussing beliefs explicitly in the group.

Summary

We all hold beliefs about teaching and learning, and these influence our actions as teachers or learners. Our beliefs are influenced by contexts and cultures, and also evolve over time. We hold some beliefs more strongly than others, and these strongly held beliefs can be difficult to change. Some beliefs facilitate learning, while others do not. The messages that teachers convey to their learners through praise, feedback, and methods used will influence the beliefs of those learners, and strong differences between the beliefs of teachers and learners can lead to conflict. We are aware of some of our beliefs, while unaware of others. We can have beliefs about whether our abilities as a language learner or teacher are fixed or changeable; these are known as fixed mindsets and growth mindsets. In addition, the reasons we attribute to our perceived successes and failures will have a profound influence on our learning and motivation.

Questions for reflection

- 1 What beliefs do you think your choice of materials, methodology, and activities are conveying to your learners?
- 2 What kind of feedback do you give your learners? What messages does your feedback convey to your learners? What sort of feedback do you think you should ideally give?
- 3 How can you help your learners see their attributions for success and failure as within their control?

Suggestions for further reading

Kalaja, P., & Barcelos A. M. F. (2003). *Beliefs about SLA: New research approaches*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.

An essential volume for anyone with a serious interest in beliefs and language learning. The collection of chapters here marks a clear break with past thinking on the role of beliefs in language learning, and ten years after its initial publication, it still sets the theoretical and research agenda in the field.

White, C. (2008). Beliefs and good language learners. In C. Griffiths (Ed.), *Lessons from good language learners* (pp. 121–130). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

An accessible yet comprehensive discussion of some of the concepts discussed in this chapter. It provides a concise historical overview of how thinking about the role of beliefs in language learning has developed, and this serves as a background to considering some of the implications for practice.

Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York, NY: Random House.

Although not directly related to language learning, this book discusses some of the concepts covered in this chapter in a highly accessible and informative manner. Theoretical concepts are illustrated throughout by examples of well-known public figures or discussions of the author's personal experience in a way that makes for a both powerful and enjoyable read.

5

AFFECT

Introduction

In this chapter, we consider how feelings and emotions connect to language learning. In the past, discussions of language teaching tended to be dominated by concerns relating to cognitive knowledge of the target language, specific techniques involved in teaching the language, and the mental processes and capacities required to learn it. While these remain important issues, the field has begun to recognize how all aspects of learning are also coloured by the complex web of emotions and feelings involved in learning and using a foreign language. As LeDoux (1998) explains in his book *The Emotional Brain*, 'Minds have thoughts as well as emotions and the study of either without the other will never be fully satisfying' (p. 39). In this chapter, we will use the umbrella term **affect** to cover all the emotionally related aspects of language learning, whereas cognition will be the term used to refer to a range of mental processes such as memory, attention, or thinking. Although we have separated emotional aspects of language learning in this chapter, these are, of course, intimately connected with our cognitions, beliefs, sense of self, motivations, etc. In reality, it is impossible to truly separate the affective elements of our psychology from other facets of our minds and from interactions with contexts and other people. Therefore, throughout this chapter, we will seek to highlight the links with other themes described in this book and show how our feelings and emotions influence the whole of our psychology.

We will begin the chapter by considering what we understand by affect, emotions, feelings, and moods, as well as why these are so very important for successful learning. The next section will explore the work that has already been carried out on the role of emotions and affective states in language learning. We will then turn our focus to the specific affective factor that has perhaps received the most attention, namely **anxiety**. In this chapter, one of our primary aims is to illustrate that emotions also have a facilitatory role to play in language learning; while negative emotions can impede learning, positive emotions can promote and enhance learning. In order to discuss the constructive role of emotions, we will consider aspects of psychology that have been less frequently examined in respect to language learning, such as positive emotions, positive psychology, and the role of emotional intelligence in teaching.