

INSIGHTS INTO LEARNER ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS, AND BELIEFS IN LITERATURE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

This literature review examines recent research in the area of learner attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs about language learning and about themselves as language learners, together with the consequences of these perceptions on learning outcomes. After an overview of relevant definitions of these complex concepts, the review goes into research studies that have focused on how learner attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs relate to their traits and characteristics; studies that have examined how these notions relate to the learning outcomes looking at some specific learner's characteristics and contexts, ending with practical model of variables of foreign language learning. The literature review concludes with suggestions related to research design and research questions that would address current gap in the field.

Key words: Language learning anxiety, learner attitudes, learner beliefs, learner perceptions, motivation, variables

Understanding language learners is a matter of examining a variety of evidence, both observable and unobservable, about their learning language. This review of the literature is largely concerned with a certain subset of unobservable attributes of language learners: that of their attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs about language learning. In that these attributes are unobservable, the researchers who examine them largely ask language learners to share what they think, and assume that these thoughts are pertinent and important to understanding how languages are learned and taught.

One can generally categorize the scholarly works in this review of the literature as focusing more on the learner as the agent, and how learners' static, largely unchanging attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs relate to their learners' attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs as affected by their learning situation and focusing on the interaction between the learner and the learning environment. Numerous scholars have noted the distinction between the trait and state orientations in research on language learner attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs (Barcelos, 2003; Dornyei, 2009; MacIntyre, 2007). The third orientation has been suggested by Barcelos (2003) and others to characterize studies that focus on the dynamic, constantly negotiated, embedded, and interconnected nature of learners' attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs.

This review of the literature aims to examine research in the area of learners' attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs about language learning and about themselves as language learners, together with the consequences of these perceptions on learning outcomes in different foreign language contexts. Earlier works and works from related language learning contexts are referenced as appropriate.

Background and Definitions

The groundwork for the enquiry into learner attitude, perceptions, and beliefs was laid for the most part in the 1970s and 1980s, with studies that emphasized defining and validating key concepts such that further research could take place. Work like Bartley's 1970 article correlating attitude with attrition, Gardner's (1985) exploration of the attitude-dependent socio-educational model of language learning, and Horwitz's work with anxiety (Horwitz, and Cope, 1986) and

learner beliefs (Horwitz, 1988) largely focused on the task of operationalizing the target construct, crafting a survey from its primary identified components, and validating that survey. Important instruments like Foreign Language Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) (Gardner, 1985), the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Horwitz et al., 1986) and the Beliefs and Attitudes Language learning Inventory (BALLI) (Horwitz, 1988) were the tools that were created, validated, or used in those studies. Other texts of the time that focused on individual learner differences, notably Spolsky (1989) and Skehan(1989), also depended on these instruments to define these concepts.

Although high-profile qualitative research (e.g. Norton, 1995) and critiques of the prevalence of survey research (e.g. Dornyei, 1994) about language learner attitudes, perspectives, and beliefs were published in the 1990s', the dominance of survey research has continued to the present day. These surveys have been frequently composed of Likert-scale items that reflected the components of the construct being investigated.

A brief definitions of these three concepts offers further foundations for understanding the issues in the current literature in the field. Learner attitudes have often been addressed in the literature in relation to two different targets: attitudes toward the learning situation (Gardner, 2005), and attitudes toward the target community. Attitudes toward the target community have been addressed in recent work by Yashima (2009), who develop the idea into notion of "international posture", which relates to how students see themselves as "connected to the international community, concerns for international affairs and ... a readiness to interact with people"(Yashima, 2009, p.149). The controversial views on the interrelationship between success and attitude ended in the emergence of socio-educational model. Gardner's (1989) socio-educational model is based on the idea that L2 learning is "acquiring symbolic elements of a different ethnolinguistic community" (Gardner, 1979, p.193). However, Wenden (1985) presented a more inclusive definition of the term "attitudes". According to him, "attitude" encompasses three components: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. "The cognitive component is related to beliefs and idea or opinions about the object of the attitude. The affective factor is about the feeling and emotions that one has towards an object, likes or dislikes, with or against." (p. 33). And finally, the behavioral component is made up of one's consisting actions or behavioral intentions towards the object. Regarding Wender's theory of attitudes, Van Els et al (1984) claims that "it does not really matter whether all or only one of the three components are measured: the relationship between the components is so close that sufficient information on an attitude can be obtained by measuring only one component, no matter which" (p.33).

Learner perceptions, like learner attitudes, have been commonly associated with two targets in the literature: perceptions of themselves and perceptions of the learning situation. Perceptions of themselves have often been defined as how students understand and make sense of themselves and their own learning (Liskin-Gasparro, 1998: Williams and Burden, 1999).Learner perceptions of the learning situation have included how students experience and understand aspects of the classroom, like instructor behaviors (Brown, 2009). It is important to note, although many researchers have chosen to focus on one perceptual target or the other, most have operated under the assumption that these two types of learner perceptions are interrelated.

Learner beliefs, although rarely distinguished formally from learner perceptions in the literature, have often been assumed to be more overarching and pervasive than perceptions, which have tended to focus on specific experiences. Learner beliefs have included what learners think about themselves, about the learning situation, and about the target community. Beliefs that learners have about themselves have often been related in the literature to the notion of self-efficacy, or "the judgments hold about their capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to master academic tasks"(Mills, 2007, p. 417).The notion of self-efficacy rejects whatBundura (1997) has called the "Crude" idea that everything is externally controlled (Bundura, 1997, p.23). A related type of self-belief is language-learning self-concept, or how students generally feel about themselves as language learners (Mills, 2007, p. 423). Learner beliefs can be focused on more external targets as well; ideas about the task of learning a second/foreign language" (Barcelos and

Kalaja, 2003, p.231). Yet more generally, Hortwitz (1988) defined beliefs as “student opinions on a variety of issues and controversies related to language learning” (Hortwitz, 1988, p. 284). Ostensibly, these definitions allow for beliefs to be not just about the learning situation, but about the target community, language, and culture as well.

Finally, two important related concepts, motivation and anxiety, have often been placed in casual relationships with learner attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs in the literature, featuring prominently in many of the foundational texts mentioned above. Motivation has been closely connected with “the affective characteristics of the learner, referring to the direction and magnitude of learning behavior in terms of the learner’s choice, intensity, and duration of learning” (Dornyei, 2009, p.231). As Gardner (2005) has attested, motivation can be a way of understanding learner attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs, in that it offers “one parsimonious way of accounting for individual differences in second language acquisition” (Gardner, 2005,

Another important concept is anxiety, which has been typically characterized as situation-specific anxiety (Horwitz, 2010). Aida (1994) explained that Horwitz and her colleagues have conceptualized FL anxiety as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning processes” (Horwitz, 1991, p.31). Similar to motivation (which incidentally has included anxiety as a component in most models), anxiety has offered researchers a way to understand and contextualize learner attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs in a framework that is easily measured and understood in the field. Works of research on the constructs of motivation and anxiety are referenced in this review particularly when they emphasize the components of attitudes, perceptions, or beliefs that contribute to the constructs.

Ultimately, as this review of the literature demonstrates, the importance of consistent and reliable definitions of learner attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs cannot be underplayed. All too often, the body of literature and development of a dialogue has been hindered by unclear definitions or inconsistent application of guiding principles in examining a specific notion. Hopefully, this review can contribute to the dialogue that can improve this present dynamic.

Studies with a “learner” orientation have focused on describing, measuring, and understanding learners’ attitudes, perceptions and beliefs about language learning in a manner that is independent of the learning context and other environmental factors. Often, these scholars have depicted learner attitudes, perceptions and beliefs as unchanging and static.

Describing Learner Attitudes, Perceptions, and Beliefs

Some studies with learner orientation have remained at the descriptive level, refraining from linking learner attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs to outcomes, although those implications were often suggested. For instance, authors of studies using both structural equation modeling (Csizer and Dornyei, 2005) and qualitative interviews (Graham, 2006) have provided detailed descriptions of motivation and self-efficacy. These researchers did not provide evidence connecting the findings with learner outcomes, but they did suggest, that the positive academic outcomes were expected, given the effort implied in highly motivated students or students with high self-efficacy.

Descriptions of student perceptions have also been common in the field, often focusing on specific aspects of the language learning classroom: first language (L1) usage (Rolin-Ianziti and Varshney, 2008), technology (Peters, Weinberg, and Sarma, 2009), the native versus nonnative class instructor (Hertel and Sunderman, 2009), and, in the context of incoming freshmen in a university program, preferred classroom activities (Mandell, 2002). Similarly, Price and Gascoigne (2006) sought to describe more general attitudes from college students about the “importance of foreign language study” and “postsecondary foreign language” requirements: (Price and Gascoigne, 2006, p.386). Usually, these studies have been imperative in nature, depending on the analysis of essays, interviews, and other forms of data, but some, notably Peters (2009), have used surveys with Likert-scale and rank-order questions to ascertain students perceptions. Note that these studies, when considered together, do not create a body of coherent findings about student perceptions; they

represent isolated cases of exploratory work that each contribute to a different knowledge base about disparate topics (e.g. L1 usage, technology) in language learning.

One group of similar studies has focused on tracing the relationship between learner and instructor perceptions. Scholars have examined this relationship as it relates to target language use in the classroom (Levine, 2003), learners' self-expressive speech (Yoshida, 2007), effective FL teaching (Brown, 2009), accents in the target language (Drewelow and Theobald, 2007), and teaching strategy frequency (Bernaus and Gardner, 2008). These studies all found that learners' perceptions did not match those of their instructors.

This can be an interesting area of inquiry, and it proves that the investigation of learners' attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs without necessarily connecting it outcomes can be an important contribution to the discourse in the field.

Learner's Characteristics and their Attitudes, Perceptions, and Beliefs

Another group of learner-oriented studies has emphasized how learner characteristics can be connected with learner attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs. In most cases, these studies have examined a group of individuals with a specific characteristic (e.g. heritage learners), or groups with contrasting characteristics in the same environment (e.g. male/female, L1/second language background), and explored their perceptions of themselves and of their language learning, often as related to their learner characteristics. Some of these authors have linked the characteristics to their attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs, and then in turn to outcomes. Note also that these studies have represented a variety of research approaches; although there have been some purely quantitative studies (e.g. Comanaru and Noels, 2009; Schmidt and Watanabe, 2001), most of the studies have contained at least some qualitative elements, and may have been completely interpretive in nature.

The literature on heritage learners has dominated this particular areas of inquiry. Case studies of heritage learners of German (Dressler, 2010) and interviews with heritage learners of Chinese (Wong and Xiao, 2010) in a special issue of the *Heritage Language Journal* revealed that how some university students viewed themselves as heritage learners had strong relationship with how they felt about their own linguistic expertise and investment. The connection between heritage identity and linguistic and cultural investment was supported by a qualitative study by Barse and de Jong (2008), which contrasted Spanish L1 students and English L1 students in a two-way high school language immersion program. The authors found that Spanish L1 students valued Spanish foremost for its connection to their families and their identity (Comanaru and Noels, 2006). In all of these studies, the heritage learners' beliefs about what was valuable in language learning related to their own identities as heritage learners and their self-concept.

Beyond heritage learners, groups defined by other learner characteristics have also been investigated in the literature, but much more infrequently (e.g. male/female or racial and ethnic minorities; different sexual orientation, learners living in poverty or with development or behavioral differences).

Connecting Learner Attitudes, Perceptions, and Beliefs with Outcomes

The most abundant body of literature on cognitive, social, affective variables with learner orientation, however, has focus on how those variables can be related to a diverse array of outcomes. These variables are strongly connected to learner attitude, perceptions and beliefs.

Learners' attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs about themselves as language learners have been associated with outcomes like enjoyment (Brantmeier, 2005) and achievement on proficiency measure or grades. Similar studies have correlated learners' perceptions of themselves as language learners and their levels of FL anxiety (Yan and Horwitz, 2008) and their extrinsic or intrinsic motivation (Noels, Clement, and Pelletier, 2001). Of these studies, Graham (2004) and Yan and Horwitz (2008) offered the only non-survey data, in the form of interviews. Note that several of these studies focused on the principle of self-assessment, where the learners offered evaluations of

their own ability in language class, essentially indicating their beliefs about themselves as learners (Brantmeier, 2005). Other researchers looked at the concept of self-efficacy, asking the students to comment on their confidence in completing specific tasks (Mills, 2006). The findings in these studies generally showed that more positive learner attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs were associated with more positive outcomes of the types listed above (e.g. more enjoyment, higher achievement, lower anxiety). However, some of the studies also raised questions about how the interaction of different attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs might have influenced outcomes in different ways, such as with motivation and anxiety (Graham, 2004; Yan and Horwitz, 2008).

Learners' attitudes, perception, and beliefs related to the process of language learning have been connected to outcomes as well. In some studies, learner attitudes toward language learning have been seen as a contributing factor in achievement, but only as mediated by other contributors. Aida (1994) connected learners' attitudes and fears about the class with their anxiety, which Aida then connected with their performance in class. Quantitative studies on motivation have been characterized by this type of modeling of contributors to achievement (Bernaus and Gardner, 2008). For instance, Bernaus and Gardner (2008) connects student' attitudes toward the target community have been seen as contributing to either their "integrative motivation" (Hernandez, 2006) or their "international posture" (Yashima, 2009), which then in turn influenced motivation in general, which led to achievement. This brief summary of these quite complex studies, while necessarily simplified, allows for an important perspective on how these concepts have been linked to outcomes.

These learner-oriented studies have connected learner attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs to outcomes, in their correlational analysis and focus on relationships, have offered clarity to the field of literature. They have provided strong evidence of the importance of these concepts in any understanding of language education and the experience of the language learner. However, one important critique of these studios, as suggested in the works of Donato (2000), lies in the nature of correlational relationships. Associating or correlating two learner attributes, such as learner self-efficiency and high levels of proficiency, does not provide proof that self-efficiency produces high proficiency. The possibility cannot be ruled out that students who have higher proficiency, perhaps as a result of an unknown or unmeasured variable like access to better learning strategies or members of the target community, then have higher self-efficiency. Finally, scholars should embrace when a relationship is not found when expected, and they should allow themselves to explore and interpret the reasons.

Ultimately, these studies examining how learner characteristics relate to their attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs have offered strong insights into learner identity and language learning, although some important critiques must also be mentioned. One must be careful to avoid equating correlation and causation. In addition, any examination of individuals with similar characteristics must take care when looking at a group as a unique, identifiable, consistent category. Weger-Guntharp (2006) suggested that scholars looking at heritage learners also consider "the complexity of individual backgrounds", avoiding clear markers such as place of birth in categorizing students as heritage or non-heritage (Weger-Guntharp, 2006, p.39). Also any researcher has a responsibility to consider the power differentials that are implicated in any identification and difference in society.

It is clear from this review that there has been little serious, focused inquiry about attitude, perceptions, and beliefs of many subgroups of FL learners.

Expanding the knowledge base in this manner is imperative, given the findings of the studies outlined above about the importance of the connection between learner attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs, and learner success and persistence in FL education.

Summary

Summarizing some important considerations regarding FL studies on the topic and some further research questions that would target areas where additional investigations are needed on the topic of learner attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs.

It is also beneficial to study at close range both social and affective variables associated with FL, paying particular attention to emotion, and conduct research that looks at the crucial links among cognitive, social, and affective variables.

This literature review would offer some insightful ideas about the integration of these variables in FL contexts. Some studies are loosely connected to FL acquisition theories and based on thoughtful, although not necessarily methodologically rigorous analyses. This literature review adds some connection between research works with practical pedagogical insights and implications for practitioners on FL learner's attitudes, beliefs, perceptions.

The learner on the highest layer of FL acquisition is supposed to achieve the level of communicative use of FL moving forward through the complex of variables in different contexts and environments (see Figure1).

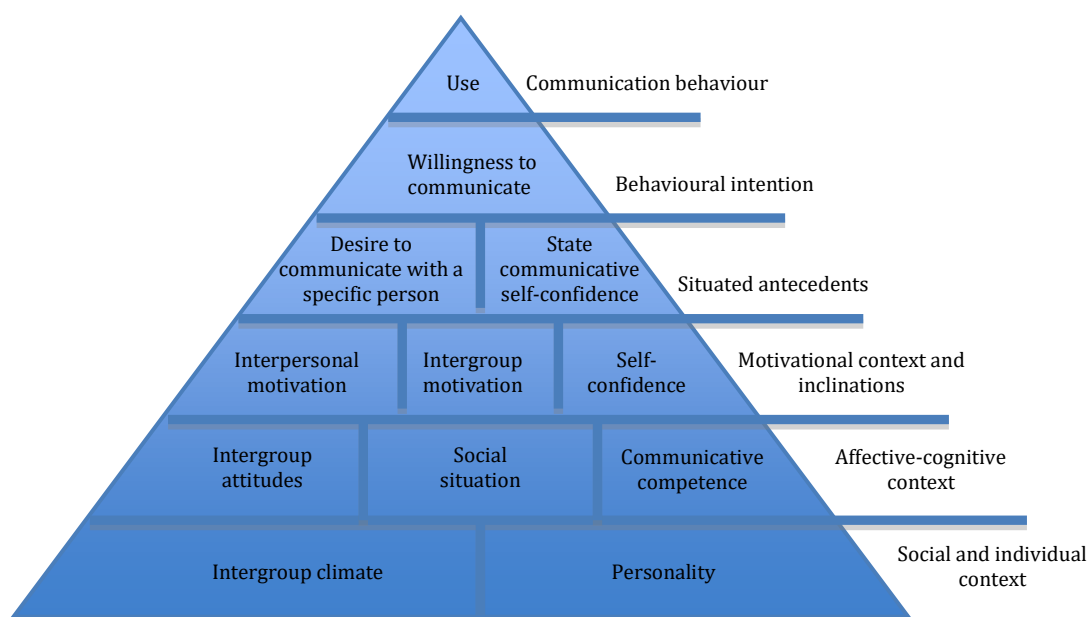


Figure 1. Practical Model of Variables of Learning Foreign Language

The field of research on language learner attitude, perceptions and beliefs is built on a foundation of well-defined constructs. As MacIntyre, MacKinnon, and Clement warned, scholars must avoid the proliferation of related concepts, what they called “the naming problem” (2009, p.58). However, building on these foundational concepts in new and different ways is necessary at this point in time. It is advised to continue to diversify the research methodologies, without necessarily discarding the theoretical frameworks.

Research questions

Some research questions that have been suggested in this review of the literature:

1. Is there any causal relationship between learner attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs and outcomes like achievement or proficiency? Although correlations have been identified, there has been a lack of clarity and few conclusive findings about the directionality of this relationship, particularly across different contexts of study.
2. How do subgroups of FL learners with different learner characteristics vary in their attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs? As shown in this review, with the exception of heritage learners have been systematically represented in the research.
3. What are crucial links among cognitive, social, and affective variables associated with LLS, paying particular attention to emotion?

The scholarly community has crafted rigorous, thoughtful, and enlightening work about learner attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs in language learning. These questions offer an opportunity to continue to develop our scholarly knowledge of these complex concepts. So we can position ourselves to understand the language learner even more completely, an understanding that will serve us well in the implementation and expansion of high-quality FL programs across the country.

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