

Understanding Changes in Chinese Immigrant Language Learners' Beliefs in New Zealand

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in language learners' beliefs in second language acquisition (SLA). Nonetheless, few studies to date have investigated the extent to which learners' beliefs develop, and the factors that contribute to this development have not been examined seriously. Employing a naturalistic inquiry, this longitudinal study investigates the development of five Chinese immigrant learners' beliefs in a new learning context, New Zealand. Using a multi-case study design, this study identified three major changes in the learners' beliefs and the factors that led to these changes. Cognitive dissonance was the first and the most important factor. Another factor stemmed from the teaching methods the learners were exposed to. Finally, the learners' own language progress, their positive learning experiences, and the encouragement from their teachers also contributed to the change in their self-efficacy beliefs. The study reveals that apart from these three noticeable changes, the majority of the learners' beliefs remained relatively stable over the observed period, which suggests a duality of their beliefs. The findings of this study have important theoretical and practical implications, particularly in terms of advancing our understanding of the nature of learner beliefs in SLA.

Keywords: language learner beliefs; changes in learner beliefs; Chinese learners; self-efficacy; cognitive dissonance

Introduction

Scholarship on learners' beliefs has received increasing attention in SLA in recent years. It is believed that these beliefs guide learners' actions and determine their ultimate success (Dörnyei, 2005; Ellis, 2004, 2008). Over the last two decades, considerable research has provided insight into language learner beliefs, and consistent belief patterns have been found among learners from different backgrounds (Bernat & Gvonzdenko, 2005; Horwitz, 1999). It has also been found that learner beliefs underlie learners' choice of learning strategies (Park, 1995; N. Yang, 1999; Zhong, 2008) and influence their levels of learning autonomy (Cotterall, 1999; Zhong, 2010), as well as

their learning outcomes (Tanaka, 2004). However, research into learner beliefs in SLA is fairly peripheral compared to studies of other individual learner factors, such as motivation, aptitude, learning strategies and personality (Ellis, 2008). For this reason, previous findings are somewhat mixed and inconclusive. Many issues have yet to be investigated, particularly with regard to the nature of learner beliefs. A review of the literature also indicates that the majority of previous studies examine learner beliefs as a static trait (e.g., Horwitz, 1988,1999; Wenden, 1998), and very few studies investigate the evolution of learner beliefs over a prolonged period of time. In addition, little is known about the factors that contribute to changes in learner beliefs.

This study examines the development of five Chinese learners' beliefs in New Zealand over an 18-week period and explores the factors that influence changes in their beliefs. Theoretically, the empirical evidence provided by this study will help advance our understanding of the nature of learner beliefs, the role they play during an individual's learning process, and factors that contribute to shifts in learner beliefs. More practically, findings from the study will help language teachers make better sense of what their students bring to the learning context.

Literature Review

BALLI Questionnaire Studies

Research on learner beliefs in SLA started in the mid-1980s when the notion was first introduced into the field by Elaine Horwitz (1985; 1987; 1988). A large amount of early studies were conducted using quantitative methods, particularly with the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) questionnaire (Horwitz, 1987;1988). The BALLI questionnaire is designed to examine learners' beliefs in five major areas: difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivations and expectations. Since its development, the BALLI has been used with English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) learners, as well as foreign language (FL) learners in various parts of the world, including Australia (Bernat, 2006), Korea (Park, 1995; Truitt, 1995), Lebanon (Diab, 2006), China (Su, 1995), Taiwan (N.Yang, 1999), the United States (Horwitz, 1987, 1988; Kuntz, 1996; Oh, 1996) and Turkey (Kunt, 1997; Ariogul, 2009; see Zhong, 2012). These studies seek to measure the strength of learners' beliefs in different populations of learners and/or compare the different beliefs among them. Consistent belief patterns have been found across these studies; learners mostly endorse the concept of language aptitude, the language difficulty hierarchy, and the importance of learning new words. Findings from these studies have provided teachers with important information about learners' belief patterns and helped them make classroom instructional decisions (Horwitz, 1987, 1988).

In recent years, BALLI researchers have moved beyond identifying the strength of language learner beliefs to examining the factors that influence language learner beliefs. These factors include gender (Bernat, 2007), national origin (Horwitz, 1999) and the socio-cultural context (Bernat, 2006; Diab, 2006). However, results yielded from these studies are mixed and inconclusive. For example, Diab's study of Lebanese EFL students' beliefs (2006) revealed that learner beliefs were related to the political and socio-

cultural context of foreign language education in Lebanon. On the other hand, having compared the results in her study with those from a counterpart in the United States (Siebert, 2003, as cited in Bernat, 2006), Bernat (2006) revealed many similarities in all categories of the BALLI in the two different contexts. These studies have provided some insight into the influence of varying factors on language learner beliefs; however, further inquiry is needed.

The Situated and Dynamic Nature of Learner Beliefs

While most of the early belief studies were based on the assumption that learner beliefs are static and resistant to change, more recent work has argued that beliefs are dynamic and situational (Barcelos, 2003; Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011). For instance, Tanaka (2004) employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the development of 56 Japanese students' beliefs about language learning over 12 weeks during their study abroad stay in New Zealand. The quantitative results showed no statistically significant differences in the learners' responses; however, the qualitative data from five learners' diaries and an interview with 29 participants indicated two notable changes in Japanese students' beliefs. One change related to the learners' perceptions about grammar and vocabulary learning; they began by rejecting grammar study but eventually recognized the need for additional instruction on formal grammatical features of the language. They also came to realize that linguistic forms and the use of the language were equally important in their language learning. Another change was that the learners became more realistic; they realized the significance of their own efforts and the lengthy process of language learning.

Similarly, Amuzie and Winke (2009) combined quantitative and qualitative measures to explore the changes in 70 international students' beliefs as a result of a study abroad program in the United States. The participants came from diverse language backgrounds, including Arabic, Chinese, French, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese, and were divided into two groups. Group One comprised the learners who had been in the United States for six months or less, while Group Two included learners who had been in the United States for more than six months but less than two years. The results revealed statistically significant belief changes in both groups relating to learner autonomy and the role of teachers. The learners in both groups reported that while they were abroad, they came to believe more strongly that they should find opportunities to use their L2 and that success in L2 learning depended more on their own efforts outside class. They also came to believe less strongly in the importance of the teacher's role in learning. The study revealed that those who spent more time abroad developed significantly stronger beliefs in learner autonomy than those who spent less time abroad. This suggests that the learning context and length of exposure influenced belief changes.

In recent years, some researchers have recognized the socio-cultural dimension of learner beliefs and used a case study design to investigate the dynamic nature of learner beliefs. In his study of the changes in one Chinese first-year college student's beliefs in an EFL context, Peng (2011) used an ecological approach to collect data over 7 months. Peng's findings revealed substantive changes in the student's belief systems as mediated by classroom affordances, which suggests that learner beliefs were emergent, fluid, and context-responsive. In the same vein, J. Yang and Kim (2011) framed their study using

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to examine changes in two Korean learners' beliefs in two different study-abroad (SA) contexts, one in the U.S. and another in Philippines. The findings indicated that one learner's beliefs were constantly evolving with her SA experiences. On the other hand, the SA learning environment appeared to have little impact on the other learner's belief and learning. This suggests that individuals are different in their responses to learning environment. Finally, in her case study, Mercer (2011) investigated the extent to which an Austrian learner's self-beliefs evolved over a three-year period. Mercer found that some dimensions of the learners' self-beliefs changed to reflect contextual changes, whereas other dimensions were more stable and appeared to be less immediately influenced by context, suggesting the dual features of learner beliefs.

A review of previous scholarship indicates that although a few recent studies have investigated the development of learner beliefs over a period of time, there is a clear need for additional work in varying contexts. Amuzie and Winke (2009) highlight the necessity of longitudinal work that examines a single group at two different points of time to better capture the dynamic change of beliefs. Furthermore, the factors that affect belief changes have largely been neglected in the literature. Additional studies are needed to account for changes from wider perspectives to further our understanding of the nature of changes in learner beliefs. To fill this gap in scholarship, this study addressed the following questions:

1. What changes occur in the Chinese learners' beliefs as a result of the new learning context?
2. What factors account for the changes?

The Study

Research Setting and Participants

This study was conducted at a language school at a large tertiary institution in New Zealand. Because the purpose of the study was to provide an in-depth understanding of Chinese immigrant learners' beliefs and to detect the extent to which their beliefs developed as a result of a different learning context, I employed a naturalistic inquiry design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to collect data over 18 weeks. Purposive sampling (Patton, 1990) was used to select potential participants to gather meaningful data. The criterion was that participants had to be recent students from China who had been in a New Zealand learning environment for no longer than six months. Chinese learners were identified as the participants for this study because they constituted the majority of the student population at the language school. In addition, due to the low language proficiency of the participants, it was necessary to conduct all the interviews in their first language (L1) in order to obtain meaningful data.

Ethical standards and procedures for research were strictly followed. Eight learners were recruited and five of them agreed to participate. The five learners were all full-time students in the Certificate of English programme at the language school. Two were elementary level learners and three were pre-intermediate students.

Table 1 provides a summary of the participants' profiles. Pseudonyms are used in this report to ensure confidentiality.

Table 1. Summary of Participants' Background Information

Name	Peng	Bing	Ding	Shan	Fei
Gender	Male	Male	Female	Female	Female
Age	25	35	21	41	28
Educational background	University graduate	Art academy graduate	High school graduate	University graduate	University graduate
Length of time in New Zealand	10 months	6 years	12 months	18 months	Added up for 6 months
First time learning English	Primary school	A few months before coming to New Zealand from a private tutor.	Primary school	High school	Intermediate school
Length of Time Learning in CE program	First semester	Second semester	First semester	First semester	First semester
Course taken in CE program	Elementary II	Elementary II	Pre-intermediate	Pre-intermediate	Pre-intermediate

Data Collection

Data were gathered longitudinally over 18 weeks at the beginning (hereafter referred to Time 1) and at the end of the study (hereafter referred to Time 2). A number of instruments were used to triangulate data. Two interviews were conducted. The learners were asked a set of open-ended questions relating to their beliefs about language learning, class activities, course materials, fellow classmates and the learning situation (see Appendix). Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. With permission from the learners and teachers, the learners were observed and videotaped in their classrooms during weeks 5 and 10 of the study. Each observation lasted 120 minutes. Two stimulated recall interviews were conducted within two weeks after classroom observations when participants' memories were still fresh. While watching the pre-selected classroom video clips, learners were asked to comment on what was happening in the classroom, what they were doing, and why they were doing what they were doing. The purpose of these interviews was to help learners reflect on their classroom behaviours and articulate their tacit beliefs. Finally, the learners were asked to keep one to two journal entries where they could write their thoughts about anything that they considered to have an effect on their language learning.

Data Analysis

I analysed data based on the principles of qualitative research and followed the inductive process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I first transcribed and translated all the data I gathered in order to familiarize myself with them. Then, I read them repeatedly while jotting down notes in the margins. After several readings, I started open coding; codes were affixed to the units of analysis which included either single words, short phrases, complete sentences, utterances or extended discourse. All these units expressed learners' beliefs about language learning. Table 2 summarizes the criteria I used to identify learners' beliefs (see Wenden, 1987).

Table 2. Criteria for Identifying Learners' Beliefs

Language feature	Example
General statements relating to language learning that expressed opinions	<i>I believe/think/in my opinion/ to my view, it's important to learn English in an English-speaking country.</i>
Statements that contained modal verbs	<i>You/I/We/Students need/must/have to/ should spend more time on grammar.</i>
Definitions about language learning and teaching	<i>Learning English is mainly about rote learning new words.</i>
Hypothetical statements	<i>If I were younger, I would learn English faster.</i>
Statements that included superlatives or comparatives	<i>The best way to learn English is to enroll in a formal class.</i>

After coding all data, I grouped similar themes into tentative categories. Propositional statements were made for each of these categories. All data were analysed recursively; new codes were added until saturation was reached (i.e., no new themes were found), and until salient themes or recurring patterns emerged.

In order to examine changes in the learner beliefs, I compared data collected at Time 1 with data collected at Time 2.

Results and Discussion

Following the inductive data analysis procedures described above, I established five exhaustive (i.e., all instances could be assigned to a category) and exclusive (i.e., all instances should be assigned to only one category) categories of learners' beliefs about language learning for this study. Table 3 provides a summary of these five categories.

Table 3. Classification of Learners' Beliefs about Language Learning.

Category	Definition
1. Beliefs about the learning situation	Referring to learners' overall views about learning and teaching in New Zealand and in China, for example, "Teaching in China was not flexible while teaching in New Zealand was motivating."
2. Beliefs about external factors	Referring to a range of external factors, particularly classroom-related factors that had an impact on learners' language learning. External factors consist of sub-beliefs about error correction, the role of teachers, exams, and collaborative learning.
3. Beliefs about personal factors	Consisting of two sub-beliefs. One referred to those individual learner factors relating to age, language aptitude, memory and self-efficacy; the other belief included learners' beliefs about their own language proficiency, for example, their own strengths and weaknesses in English.
4. Beliefs about learning a second language	Relating to those beliefs concerning English grammar, vocabulary and the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), as well as participants' beliefs about the importance of accuracy and fluency.
5. Beliefs about approaches to language learning	Referring to those beliefs about general approaches to language learning, for example, "Learning English is about using it in real life", and also participants' epistemological beliefs about learning, for example, "Learning is a cumulative process where I have to accumulate my English knowledge gradually".

Beliefs about external factors

The data indicated that one new sub-belief about collaborative learning emerged as participants' learning experiences expanded and courses progressed. At Time 1, all learners in the study did not express their views about working in pairs and/or groups because they had never participated in collaborative learning in China. As Shan pointed out, "[I]n China I didn't feel learning had anything to do with my fellow students. Teacher talk dominated and you learned on your own" (Shan, Interview 1). On the other hand, the school programme document in New Zealand revealed that teachers in New Zealand endorsed the communicative teaching approach; they claimed to be responsive to learners' needs and emphasized meaningful communication. To enhance learners' communicative competence, one of the key techniques was to allocate enough time for learners to work in pairs and groups. As the learners experienced more group and/or pair work in the new learning environment of New Zealand, a new belief emerged about collaborative learning in classrooms. However, learners' views about working in pairs and/or groups varied. Peng, Shan, and Fei held positive views about pair/group work as a learning and social opportunity:

I like pair/group work because if I learn by myself, I will easily get bored. When we do some activities with partners, we can discuss questions, think of answers, deepen understanding and form an agreed solution...some of them may have larger vocabulary than me. I may not know the meaning of some words and they can teach me. (Peng, Stimulated recall, 1)

These learners did not perceive learning as an individual activity but as a process of sharing with other persons through collaboration, joint scaffolding, and co-construction. During the process of collaborative dialoguing (Swain, 2000), Peng found himself able to achieve a goal that he was not able to perform independently. In this sense, working with peers may have helped him cognitively (e.g., building his vocabulary knowledge about the L2), as well as socially and affectively (e.g., increasing enjoyment and social integration).

Another advantage participants commented on was the practice opportunities that collaborative learning provided for. According to Fei:

[I]t [pair and group work] can help me consolidate what I learned. Especially when we did those grammar focused speaking activities in pairs, I forced myself to pay attention to my accuracy. It was really good. (Fei, Stimulated recall, 1)

Fei's comments lent support to the argument that pair and group work can provide learners with opportunities to focus on form and produce pushed output (Swain, 1985). In his study of learners' participation in a Thai context, McDonough (2004) reported that learners who participated more in pair and small group activities demonstrated improved production of the target form.

Finally, the three learners, Peng, Fei and Shan, all regarded pair/group work as an opportunity for communication, which they were keen to make full use of.

I really like talking with my classmates and practising speaking with them. For me, classrooms are the only place where I can practice speaking English. When I go home, I'm surrounded by Chinese. All my friends are Chinese. We chat in Chinese, so I don't have enough opportunities to speak English...I really want to improve my oral English. I'm not concerned about making mistakes in the classroom. If I am corrected, I can learn and improve .I can progress faster in this way. (Shan, Interview II)

In contrast, the views of the other participants (Bing and Ding) on pair and group work were more negative. While appreciating the less threatening opportunity to speak that pair/group work offered, these two learners also expressed their concerns about their fellow students' ability to correct them. In Ding's view, the product of learning (i.e., what she learned and her accuracy) mattered more than its process (i.e., how she learned):

I came here to learn. Whether it [learning] is interesting or not depends on what is going on in the classroom and whether it helps me learn ... I'd rather teachers asked us to make sentences by using words than work in pairs...there is no point speaking because what we said was wrong anyway and we couldn't spot and correct each other's mistakes (Ding, Stimulated recall 2)

Shaped by these beliefs, Bing and Ding questioned the effectiveness of collaborative learning, particularly group work because no one took responsibility and turn distributions were not even. Similar learner concerns about uneven turn distributions and group affiliation have been reported in other studies (e.g., Cao, 2011; Léger & Storch, 2009).

It is evident that the views about collaborative learning were different among the learners. The data suggest that the differences in their views seem to be related to their beliefs about other aspects of language learning. Learners who held positive views about collaborative learning regarded meaning as paramount to their learning. The process of negotiating and interacting with peers was also regarded as important, and they all benefited from the interactional opportunities that were offered to them to improve their oral fluency. The opposite was true of the other two learners. They equated learning with accuracy and were more conscious of the end results of the activity. That is, they focused on whether they got the correct answers but missed out on opportunities for language use.

All five learners did not express their views about learning collaboratively at the beginning of the study. As their learning experiences broadened, they were exposed to different approaches to language teaching, which gave rise to this new belief. The emergence of this new belief about collaborative learning is clearly related to the teaching methods and the new learning environment the learners experienced. This finding lent further support to the argument that learner beliefs are context specific (Barcelos, 2003).

Beliefs about personal factors

One of the questions I asked the learners in the two in-depth interviews (see [Appendix](#)) was, "How confident are you as a language learner? Please rate your confidence on a scale ranging from 1 to 10. 10 is the maximum." Table 4 compares the learners' perceived self-efficacy belief at Times 1 and 2 and shows that the five learners' perceived self-efficacy about learning English varied at Time 1. While Peng and Fei were very confident about their abilities to learn English well, Bing, Ding and Shan held a low self-efficacy belief about their capabilities. Their self-rated self-efficacy ranged between 3 and 4.

Interview data provided some insight into participants' varying views of learning. Bing's low self-efficacy seemed to be related to his belief that he did not have a good memory. Similarly, Shan believed that her poor memory constituted a major barrier in her language learning. In addition, she believed that she lacked perseverance and doubted if she could persist in her learning to the end of the course. Finally, Ding considered herself to be 'very low' in aptitude. Her 'unsuccessful' learning experiences in China made her doubtful about her ability and thus she lost hope of learning English successfully.

Table 4. A Comparison of Learners' Self-Rated Self-Efficacy at Times 1 and 2

	Bing	Peng	Ding	Shan	Fei
Time 1	4	8	3	4	10
Time 2	6	8	6	8	10

* The self-rating scale ranges from 1 to 10. Ten is the maximum.

On the contrary, Peng and Fei's self-efficacy was very high. At both times, Peng rated his capability at 8. His confidence was related to the realistic goal he set for himself ("to be able to communicate in daily life"), which he considered to be "achievable." This finding supports Bandura and Schunk's (1981) argument that setting proximal goals enhances self-efficacy and helps increase learners' capability to learn. In comparison, Fei's high self-efficacy seems to be related to her past successful experiences in learning. Success built an unshakable belief in her self-efficacy and helped her develop into an extremely confident person. At both times, she rated her ability to learn English well at the maximum of 10. She commented, "I believe you have to believe in yourself so that you can make progress. I believe the only person you can rely on is yourself and your effort" (Fei, Interview 1).

In summary, learners' level of self-efficacy was different at Time 1. The low self-efficacious learners (Bing, Shan, Ding) doubted their capabilities and tended to focus on their perceived personal deficiencies or factors that they were unable to control or alter; on the other hand, high self-efficacious learners either set proximal goals to enhance self-efficacy or believed in themselves and their own efforts.

While displaying some differences in the learners' self-efficacy at Time 1, Table 4 also shows that the learners' self-efficacy underwent a noticeable change at Time 2. To a varying degree, Bing, Ding, and Shan all demonstrated increased self-efficacy at Time 2. Bandura (1997) suggests that perceived self-efficacy is readily affected by four different types of experiences. The first and most influential source stems from enactive experience, which is based on personal experience. Success raises self-efficacy and failure lowers it. The next source is vicarious experience, which involves comparing oneself with someone else. People persuade themselves that "if others can do it, I can do it as well." Vicarious experience is indirect and based on observations. The third source comes from verbal persuasion, where "people are led, through suggestion, into believing they can cope successfully with what has overwhelmed them in the past" (Bandura, 1977, p. 198). As the outcomes of actions are described and conveyed verbally, an increase in one's self-efficacy depends on the credibility of the persuader; positive persuasion increases self-efficacy. Finally, people base their self-efficacy judgments on their emotional arousal. Their perceptions of their physical responses to stressful and taxing situations will alter their self-efficacy.

Drawing on Bandura's social-cognitive theory, three main sources seem to be related to the growth of the learners' self-efficacy in this study. The first is their enactive

experience, or English learning. For example, Shan, had an extremely pleasant learning experience at the school, the outcome of which increased her self-efficacy. She said:

I believe this [self-efficacy] has a lot to do with teachers and school management in this school. This is the first time that I have formally studied English in New Zealand. If I came across a teacher who didn't take teaching seriously and who didn't care about attendance, I would've given up half way through...I have studied for only three months but I feel that I have made huge progress. Now I've become more confident. I know as long as I don't stop learning, I'm confident that I can learn the language well. (Shan, Interview 2)

Language progress is also linked to the growth of learners' self-efficacy. Evidence of participants' language accomplishments helped increase their self-efficacy. As Ding stated:

In the past I never believed what I said was correct as I really didn't know. Now I have learned a lot of grammar and I know the reason why what I said and wrote is correct. I don't ask him [her tenant] for help anymore. I feel he is not as good as I am. Why should I believe in him? (Ding, Stimulated recall 2)

It is evident that when learners see some tangible changes after comparing where they were before and where they are now, they become more motivated to learn and their confidence in their ability increases. This suggests that language proficiency enhances learners' self-efficacy.

The third factor for the change in their self-efficacy comes from verbal persuasion. In this case, the persuaders were the teachers. Encouragement from teachers helped increase their self-efficacy significantly. Ding wrote in her diary, "When teachers said 'you are doing well,' I would become more confident about my learning, thinking 'it turned out that I could do it.'"

The findings about the changes in the learners' self-efficacy provide support for Bandura's (1997) argument that self-efficacy concerns performance capabilities, rather than with personal qualities such as one's physical or psychological characteristics. Thus, self-efficacy is responsive to changes in personal contexts and influenced by experience.

Beliefs about approaches to language learning

The learners' beliefs about approaches to language learning underwent a noticeable change between Time 1 and Time 2. At the beginning of the study, all learners except Fei adopted an analytical approach to language learning, perceiving language as a system that was made up of discrete grammatical rules. They shared the view that the aim of language learning was to master the explicit grammatical system and memorize vocabulary lists cumulatively:

I believe the most important of all in language learning is to memorize the words and to learn about its [explicit] grammar rules, esp. sentence structures...after I have had enough vocabulary and grammar knowledge, I will then be able to listen more and speak more like what other people have said. (Bing, Interview 1)

Horwitz (1987) noted that when learners hold “a restricted view of language learning,” they will almost certainly “invest the majority of their time in memorising vocabulary lists and grammar rules at the expense of other language learning activities” (pp. 123-124). In the same vein, Stern (1990) suggested that people who adopt analytical approaches focus on specific features of language (e.g., grammar and pronunciation) and pay close attention to accuracy and error avoidance. At Time 1, four learners (Peng, Bing, Shan and Ding) all attended to the formal properties of the English language and showed great concern for accuracy. In the classroom, they expected their teachers to correct their errors all the time. Outside the classroom, the learners reported consulting grammar books to clarify grammar rules they learned in class, doing discrete grammar exercises, and memorizing vocabulary lists.

However, at Time 2, three of them (Bing, Peng and Shan) changed their beliefs about the nature of language learning. They started noticing the communicative function of the language and believing that language learning involved more than memorizing and learning rules in classrooms; they believed that it was vital to learn English by using it in communication:

Before I thought grammar was the foundation of English learning. I should focus on the accuracy of my English. But the problem is I can't understand people when I go out. Neither can I communicate fluently. The more I learn, the more I realize the importance of listening and speaking. At the end of the day, they are the basic and fundamental means of communication. (Shan Interview 2)

Festinger (1957) argues that three relations may exist between cognitive elements of irrelevance, dissonance, and consonance. When there is a dissonance, psychological discomfort will motivate the person to resolve the dissonance and achieve consonance. He suggests three ways to reduce dissonance. One way is to change the dissonant beliefs so that they are no longer inconsistent. The second way is to add new cognitive elements that are consonant with the dissonant elements, and finally, to reduce the importance of one or both elements in the dissonant relation.

In line with Festinger's theory of dissonance, at Time 1, the beliefs the learners held were that “learning English was about mastering its grammar rules” (Shan) and that “I have to read grammar books and do heaps of grammar exercises” (Ding). These beliefs reflected the education they received in China and the social environment they had been in. As discussed above, the instruction they had received in China focused on forms and aimed to enable learners' mastery of grammatical and lexical items, rather than develop their communicative competence. When learners invested their time and energy in learning explicit grammar rules and doing grammar exercises, they were rewarded in exams.

In the EFL setting, participants barely used English in social settings. However, after they immigrated to New Zealand, they came to realize that they needed to be able to communicate in English in order to survive. Furthermore, English instruction in New Zealand aimed to foster learners' communicative competence. The learners had to engage in communication with their teachers, their fellow classmates, and their community. In this new learning and social environment, the learners found that the

explicit grammar rules they had learned did not help them much in speaking and listening most of the time. In fact, they became less fluent when they focused too heavily on accuracy. The dissonance between their existing belief that “learning English was about mastering grammar rules” and the new belief about the need to develop communicative skills exerted pressure on the learners to change their existing beliefs or bring “*the appropriate cognitive elements into correspondence with that reality*” (Festinger, 1975, p. 11, italics in original). Consequently, the beliefs that “learning English was about using it for communication” (Shan) were introduced in place of the previous beliefs, as Shan stated “I have to learn grammar well before using it.”

Ding and Fei, on the other hand, held different opinions about language learning. Their views about the nature of language learning did not change between times 1 and 2. At both times, Ding believed that grammar and accuracy should remain the focus of her learning. Her learning revolved around the formal aspects of the language features, such as grammatical and lexical items. Unlike all the other learners, she did not regard New Zealand as a place where she would live permanently. In the long run, she wanted to go back to China. As a result, she denied the fact that she was living in an English speaking country and that she needed to communicate with people in English in authentic settings. In that sense, she still lived in her own reality where there was no dissonance among the beliefs she held, and thus there was no need to change her existing beliefs.

Like Ding, Fei’s beliefs remained similar at both Times 1 and 2; however, her views about the nature of language learning were the opposite of Ding’s. Fei was of the opinion that learning English was about using the language in communication. From the very beginning of her learning, she was very clear about the ultimate goal of her language learning, that is, “to express myself freely when I have conversations with Kiwis” and “to participate fully and competently in society” (Interview 1). To achieve this goal, she took every opportunity to communicate in real life. At both Times 1 and 2, Fei’s beliefs about the communicative function of the language and her learning behaviours were consistent with each other and also with her new learning environment. As the course progressed, these beliefs were reinforced.

Four learners came to the school believing in the importance of learning grammatical rules and memorizing vocabulary lists explicitly. As the course progressed, three of them found that their beliefs were dissonant with reality. They felt uncomfortable about their inability to communicate freely and adequately in real life. To reduce their discomfort, they changed their beliefs from grammar-oriented to communication-oriented.

Apart from these three noticeable belief changes, the majority of the learners’ beliefs remained unchanged over the observed period. At both times, all the five learners held favourable opinions about their learning experiences in New Zealand, while they were very critical of their learning in China. They considered the teaching methods in China to be “obsolete,” “traditional” and “old-fashioned.” They also stated that teachers’ presentational style in China was “inflexible” and “monotonous,” and that class activities were limited. They found learning in China “dry,” “passive,” “not motivating and boring.” In comparison, teaching in New Zealand was more learner-centered, interactive,

responsive to their learning needs, and easy to follow. Participants felt “motivated” and “fascinated” by different teaching techniques they experienced.

In terms of their beliefs about other external factors, at both times all learners believed that error correction was a “crucial” and “important” aspect of learning. They equated speaking and writing with errors to loss of face. Therefore, they welcomed teachers to correct their errors at all times. At both times, they considered the teacher as a knowledge transmitter; however, they all held a firm belief that diligence was pivotal and that successful learning was contingent upon the effort they put into their learning. It appears that all these stable beliefs were either related to their direct personal learning experiences and observations (e.g., their beliefs about the learning situation) or deeply rooted in their cultural values (e.g., their beliefs about the role of teachers and efforts). This suggests when a belief is formed through direct observations and linked to self-identity, it is normally held with maximal certainty and strength. Similar results were also reported in Mercer’s (2009; 2011) study, where she found that learner’s self-beliefs could be dynamic and also relatively stable depending on their centrality; core self-beliefs remained more stable and peripheral beliefs were more dynamic.

Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

This multi-case study investigates the extent to which five Chinese learners’ beliefs developed over an 18-week period. Findings reveal that the learners’ beliefs were influenced by their previous learning experiences. Learners’ beliefs were context and situation specific; however, they were not immutable. The qualitative analysis identified three major changes in their beliefs over the observed period. First, a new belief about collaborative learning emerged after the learners were exposed to new approaches and techniques of language teaching in New Zealand. At the end of the study, three participants expressed positive views about working in groups and/or pairs, although two of them were also concerned about its impact on their accuracy. Another change was related to their self-efficacy beliefs. Three out of the five learners became more confident in their ability to learn English at Time 2. Finally, three out of five learners changed their beliefs about approaches to language learning from an initial analytical approach to a later experiential one. At Time 2, they became more conscious of the importance of language use, exposing themselves to English in real life and nurturing a feel for English.

Although some previous studies (e.g., Amuzie and Winke, 2009; Peng, 2011; Tanaka, 2004) have investigated changes in learner beliefs, the factors accounting for learner belief changes have not been studied seriously in SLA. This study identifies three factors for the changes in the learners’ beliefs. Cognitive dissonance was the first and the most important reason for change. Another reason came from the teaching methods that learners were exposed to. In the new learning context, all learners were taught predominantly by the communicative approach. In every class, they were encouraged to work collaboratively in groups and/or pairs. This led to participants forming a new belief about collaborative learning. Finally, the learners’ own language progress, their pleasant learning experiences, and the encouragement from their teachers led to the change in their self-efficacy belief. As the course proceeded, three out of five learners

noticed that they were able to perform better than initially; their language progress enhanced their confidence in their own performance capability.

As already noted, this study aims to contribute to existing scholarship on the nature of learners' beliefs and the factors for changes in learner beliefs. However, this is only a beginning. First, this study emphasizes the dual nature of learner beliefs. That is, some learners' beliefs may develop over time while the majority of them remain relatively stable. More studies are needed to examine the nature of learner beliefs in different contexts and with larger samples. Future research also needs to examine which learner beliefs change, which beliefs are resistant to change, and why they are resistant to change. Furthermore, this study reveals that the learners differ in the beliefs they hold and the extent to which their beliefs change. Due to scope and space limitations, the impact of other individual learner factors on changes in learner beliefs was not included in this inquiry. Future studies should investigate if differences in learner beliefs are related to other individual learner factors, particularly personality and learning styles.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. How did you learn English in China?
2. Could you describe a typical English lesson for me, e.g. your instructional materials, your classroom activities, your role in the lesson and your teacher's role?
3. Each person has their particular way of learning English. Could you tell me some of the things you did to help you learn English then? And why?
4. How did you like your English learning experience in China?
5. Let's talk about your learning experience in N.Z:
 - Why did you choose to study here?
 - Are there any differences in teaching between N.Z. and China? What about learning?
 - How are you enjoying your study?
 - What are some of the things about learning and teaching in N.Z. that surprised/impressed you?
6. Why are you studying English?
7. Have you made progress in English? What skills, in your opinion, have you improved a lot? And what helped you improve?
8. What do you think of English language? What is the most difficult part in your learning English? And why?
9. In your opinion, what is the best way to learn English well?
10. Do you have any kiwi friends? What do you think of Kiwis?
11. How often do you use English outside the classroom?
12. How good would you like your English to be? And why?
13. What do you think of yourself as a language learner? Do you think you can learn English well ultimately? How would you rate yourself between 1 and 10 ranging from the least confident to the most confident?
14. What do you expect teachers to do help your English learning?
15. When you make a mistake in your English, how important is it, in your opinion, to be corrected?
16. Please describe what you do every day to help you learn English.
17. What do you think you should do to improve your English further?
18. Which is more important for the success of your language learning? Your teachers? Your own efforts? Your practice or using the language? Could you arrange them in the order of importance?

19.How do you think of the role of tests in your learning?

20.How do you assess your English progress?

21.What do you think of vocabulary in your learning? Is it important to look up every word?

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