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Beyond materials, techniques and linguistic analyses: The role of motivation, beliefs and identity

There is general agreement among language teaching methodologists and practitioners alike that there are no easy answers to the question of what it is that determines success in the foreign language class. Earl Stevick claims that "success depends less on materials, techniques and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom" (1980: 4). This implies that there is a wide range of factors that influence the outcomes of the teaching / learning process. Whereas Stevick does not maintain that materials and the skills and techniques that teacher training generally tends to focus on are insignificant, he stresses the even greater importance of less obvious processes in language learning. In this paper, it is these less obvious processes that I am mainly going to look at. I will stress the focal role in these processes of the positive and negative beliefs of both learners and teachers, and I will discuss the significant influence that higher order beliefs, beliefs about capabilities and beliefs about identity, have on the students' learning outcomes, and in particular in determining their motivation and influencing their self esteem.

This should not be dismissed as advocacy of what might be called 'flower-power teaching'. I do not claim that all the teacher in the EFL classroom needs to do is think positively and everything will be all right. Nor do I propose that the only reason for failure in language learning is, or even can be, a lack of positive beliefs. Quite the contrary: we should be wary of simplistic propositions of this kind, which in reality amount to nothing more than wishful thinking. However, there is more than anecdotal evidence that beliefs do play a significant role in areas of life as diverse as art, sport, health and learning. In medicine, for example, it is well documented that *placebos* do have a surprisingly high healing effect, although when one looks at their ingredients from a scientific point of view, they definitely should not make any difference. Likewise, even the most traditional representatives of the medical profession will not deny that patients can significantly support their healing process if they truly believe that they can get well again. In the same way, in the foreign language classroom, who would not agree that a student who has supportive beliefs will have a better basis for success than someone who is convinced that they are a hopeless case when it comes to language learning? Two examples from case- studies may illustrate this.

Some time ago I was asked to do work as a consultant for a senior business executive of a large company. He was learning Spanish as a foreign language. His mother tongue was English, and his aim was to develop enough competence in Spanish to be able to communicate with business partners from Spanish-speaking markets both professionally and socially. After a semi-intensive course of about a year or so, his listening and speaking skills had reached intermediate level, and both his teacher and he himself were quite pleased with the results. Soon, however, one striking problem arose. Whenever he was supposed to make a telephone call in Spanish, especially, when he was rung up by someone speaking Spanish, he experienced total failure. "I just don't know what to do," he commented. "As soon as I hear the other person's voice, my mind seems to go blank and I have a total blackout. Then I feel like an idiot."

The man's 'failure' certainly could not be explained using any of the standard arguments. Neither did he show any lack of motivation: on the contrary, he was highly motivated. Nor was he a person who one could in any way call unintelligent. In addition, he was receiving up-to-date practical language teaching. In fact, his teacher tried everything she could think of to help, from intensive practising of repair strategies in the foreign language (for example, asking the other person to repeat what had been said, to speak more slowly, etc.) to simulated phone calls in the classroom.

I set up a simulation that came close to the 'real' situation that he would normally fail in. We arranged for his teacher to telephone him from the next-door office and talk Spanish to him while I was sitting with him in his office in order to be able to observe what was going on. It turned out that he had a very powerful strategy of blocking himself off from his own resources. The process he went through was more or less like this: as soon as he heard someone speaking Spanish to him over the telephone, he would get a very strong feeling of what he called "incompetence". Almost at the same time as this feeling occurred, he would see a picture in his mind's eye which he described as "very negative". He found later that the picture was a memory of a situation at school in which, as a twelve or thirteen-year-old, he had been ridiculed by a teacher in front of his classmates. Finally, in addition to his feeling of incompetence and the memory of the situation at school, he would go into an inner monologue, saying to himself something like, "I'll never be able to do this."

It is common knowledge that making a telephone call in the foreign language is much more demanding than talking to a person face-to-face, partly because of the lack of visual clues that could assist us in the process of interpreting meaning. Instead of using his undoubtedly rich cognitive resources which he needed to support him in the task, the business executive experienced stress stemming from a combination of affective sources (his emotions), visual memories (of a past negative experience) and auditory processes (his inner monologue). This complex activation of his neurology led to an emotional block and a limiting belief, which he actually verbalised when he said to me, "I'll never be able to do this."

The second case-study was carried out in a class of eight-year-old Austrian learners of English as a foreign language. One of the children in that class was a girl called Barbara. She was the child in the class who clearly excelled in learning the foreign language. Not surprisingly, an interview with her, focusing on her thought and emotional processes during the language lessons, showed that she found the lessons highly enjoyable. It also turned out that she had clear ideas concerning why it was good for her to learn a foreign language and what she wanted to achieve. When we were talking to her, one of the things we were particularly interested in was her perception of learning situations in which she was not successful. Below is an excerpt from the interview. (The interview was carried out in German, and has been translated into English.)

At this point in the interview, Barbara has just commented on how much at ease she is with remembering sentences or words that she has previously heard her teacher use, and how she finds it enjoyable playing with these sentences and trying to use them meaningfully. She was then asked:

I: OK, let's say you can't remember it, even if you think very hard. What do you do then?
B: (laughing) That doesn't matter.
I: It doesn't matter? What do you mean?
B: Well, it doesn't matter if I can't do it now.
I: Uhuh.
B: Yeah, then I just tell myself, one day I will be able to do it, it doesn't matter that I'm not able to do it now. One day I will be able to do it, I'm sure I will.

When we continued to press her on what made her so sure of this, it turned out that she had clear representations of future situations in her mind. She obviously perceived herself as a successful future user of the foreign language, and this belief was there in spite of any possible momentary failure in the learning process:

B: I can see myself when I am older. And I am somewhere else, I mean, for example in London or somewhere. And I am older, and there are friends with me, but they don't

understand me when I speak, I mean they don't speak German. I can see myself speaking English with them, and I feel like I am one of them.

Beliefs are strong perceptual filters. They serve as explanations for what has happened and they give us a basis for future behaviour. This is why sports professionals, for example, regularly work on the development of positive beliefs. Picture the state of concentration of professional skiers before the start of a run. They engage in meditative mental routines, visualisation techniques and positive affirmation exercises aimed at releasing as much as possible of their resources. Barbara's inner representations of her future successes as a foreign language user can be compared to the supportive inner state of successful sports professionals.

The businessman described earlier, however, is like a skier who, before catapulting himself down the slope, feels that he is going to fall. Metaphorically speaking, during the first few seconds of the race he sees pictures of a time when he went skiing as an adolescent and broke his leg. These not very supportive memories are further worsened by an inner voice that tells him that he is a failure. The effect of learner beliefs on learning outcomes, often materialising in negative or positive self-talk, has been discussed in various studies, for example by Seligman (1991), Oxford & Shearin (1994), Ehrmann (1996), and, most recently, Arnold (1999). The latter stresses the impact that such negative belief patterns exert, without students (and teachers I may add) being aware of the power that such beliefs commonly have. "Many learners, especially low-achievers, have been strongly affected by years of negative self-talk, much of it on a semi-unconscious level." (1999: 17).

In order to discuss the systemic dynamics of beliefs on the outcomes of the teaching / learning process, I would like to examine three specific questions:
- Why do beliefs have such a powerful effect on students' learning?
- How are beliefs formed and maintained?
- What can teachers do to influence their students' beliefs in a respectful and positive way?

Why do beliefs have such a powerful effect on students' learning?

In order to answer this question, we need to consider the complexity of human thinking from a systemic point of view. Following on from the work of the anthropologist Gregory Bateson, Robert Dilts (1990: 60) developed a model that specifies the different levels of influences on the human thinking process and shows how these different levels organically influence one another.

Dilts claims that human thinking is organised on five different logical levels. The basic level of influence on an individual's thinking is his or her environment.

What are the factors that can be regarded as environment in the foreign-language class? Examples include the teaching materials, the availability and quality of technical equipment, the seating arrangement, the size of the classroom and the number of students, and the structure of the timetable. These are all important factors, although some may be more influential than others. The teacher and the students (inter)act in that classroom environment through their behaviour. Behaviour, in this case, does not mean only disciplinary behaviour, although any teacher of, for example, teenager learners will certainly agree that this is an important element that does have a serious impact on learning outcomes. Behaviour implies all the teaching and learning routines, everything that the teacher and students do in the foreign language class. The students' behaviour is, to a certain degree, influenced by their capabilities. A student who has efficient learning strategies will learn better and faster than a student who lacks them. The students' capabilities, in turn, are organised by their belief systems, and these are influenced by their identity, their sense of who they are.

Dilts stresses that the model is a hierarchical system. The higher the logical level that we operate on, the more influential it becomes on the outcome of a thinking process or an act of communication. Change on a lower level might influence a higher one, but change on a higher level will always have some effect also on the levels below. Somebody might study under very poor environmental conditions and might not have very effective behavioural and mental strategies. Such a person might still be successful in achieving the planned outcome as long as they have strong and supportive beliefs that they can be successful and an identity that is in line with the outcome they want to achieve. This person will probably also gradually develop proper behavioural procedures and find the proper mental strategies to help to achieve the aim.

The argument can also be turned on its head: students in the most comfortable classroom with the most modern equipment will nevertheless remain unsuccessful if their level of motivation is low or if they identify themselves as poor foreign language learners. This will be the case in spite of attempts by the teacher to teach them efficient behavioural routines and learning strategies.

According to a dictum of Albert Einstein, one can never solve a problem on the same level as that on which it occurs. Teachers of teenage learners, for example, are often confronted with the fact that if a learner misbehaves, it does not help at all to try to tell him or her to stop the behaviour. We need to consider that what lies behind disruptive behaviour is frequently conflict at the level of belief / motivation or, even more strongly, issues of identity. Telling a teenager to stop behaviour that we find disruptive is about as effective as advising someone who wants to give up smoking not to put cigarettes into their mouth any more. For many people, giving up smoking is difficult not because of the behaviour that they engage in in itself, but as a consequence of that behaviour being a part of who they perceive themselves to be - their identity - or alternatively of limiting beliefs that make it seem to them impossible to be able to stop the behaviour they want to be rid of.

To return for a moment to the two case-studies presented earlier: what we can see is that the beliefs the two people display are so powerful because they are higher-level beliefs. Both refer to situations of failure in their learning processes. What is clearly different in the businessman's reaction in a situation of failure and that of the girl is the inner representations of the failure and the generalisations they each make from them. When the business man says, "I just don't know what to do. As soon as I hear the other person's voice, my mind seems to go blank and I have a total blackout. Then I feel like an idiot," he refers to his identity. And because for him his failure is an issue of identity, his problem is extremely difficult to overcome. If someone perceives a failure as a consequence of the environment in which they find themselves, they can react by changing the environment. It is relatively easy to learn new behaviour or adopt a different cognitive strategy. This, however, would not have helped the businessman. In order for him to be able to tackle his perceived problems, what was needed was change at the level of beliefs. This is also the reason why all the repair strategies that the teacher was using were bound to fail - they were aimed at enriching his behavioural and cognitive skills, and did not take into consideration that what he really needed was a change on the belief level.

What we have here is a confusion of logical levels - something that also frequently occurs as a consequence of insensitive error correction in the classroom. When we correct a student's error, the student may interpret our feedback as a negative signal about his or her capabilities or identity. Over time and through repeated similar negative experiences, the student develops a higher-level limiting belief and this pattern can then have detrimental effects on his or her learning outcomes. As O'Connor and Seymour put it,

Behaviour is often taken as evidence of identity or capability, and this is how confidence and competence are destroyed in a classroom. Getting a sum wrong does not mean you are stupid or that you are poor at maths. To think this is to confuse logical levels, equivalent to thinking that a *No Smoking* sign in a cinema applies to the characters in the film. (1990: 90).

Let us return to the little girl for a moment. She has a very strong positive belief that refers to the highest possible level of an individual's thinking - identity. What she says is that she can see HERSELF in a future situation, using the target language with ease. In addition to this, she has a strong positive belief about her own capabilities that supports her in spite of possible failure and which she reveals when she says, "It doesn't matter if I can't do it now. It really doesn't matter. One day I will be able to do it, I'm sure I will."

How are beliefs formed and maintained?

Let us now turn to my second question, that of how beliefs are formed and maintained. Beliefs have an important function because they serve as our guiding principles. They are generalisations about cause and effect, and they influence our inner representation of the world around us. They help us to make sense of that world, and they determine how we think and how we act. There are certain beliefs that have a high level of testability and stability. These are beliefs about the physical world. They are based on laws of nature. We do not need to find out every day anew that we need to look right and left (or left and rigth) before we cross a road, for example. Beliefs like that are learned at a very early age, and we can trust them and rely on them. However, there are other beliefs, for example, beliefs about identity or capability, where the evidence we use in order to form them can be much less reliable. And yet, once we have formed such beliefs, we take them as reality.

When we believe something, we act as if it is true. And this makes it difficult to disprove. Beliefs are strong perceptual filters of reality. They make us interpret events from the perspective of the belief, and exceptions are interpreted as evidence and further confirmation of the belief. In contrast to the conclusions we draw about the laws of nature, however, many limiting beliefs are not based on reality. How then are they formed? Primarily through the modelling of significant others, and through conclusions we draw from repetitive experiences. Especially for young learners, their foreign-language teacher is a significant other. According to O'Connor and Seymour,

> The expectations of the significant people around us instil beliefs. High expectations (provided they are realistic) build competence. Low expectations instil incompetence. We believe what we are told about ourselves when we are young because we have no way of testing, and these beliefs may persist unmodified by our later achievements. (1990: 93).

It was as early as 1966 that Rosenthal and Jacobson stressed the significant influence that the teachers' beliefs and the teachers' expectations have on the results of their students' learning. Although their work was initially criticised for major research design flaws, a vast number of articles, documents and dissertations published since about the phenomenon of the so-called 'self-fulfilling prophecy' have shown beyond any doubt that, as Babad put it, "expectancy bias is an undisputed phenomenon" (1985: 75). An excellent overview of such studies can be found in the recent book *Self-fulfilling Prophecy* by Tauber (1997).

It is widely acknowledged these days that teacher beliefs and teacher expectations can turn into self-fulfilling prophecies. However, what is a lot less commonly known is that

self-fulfilling prophecies have a systemic pattern to them. These patterns are the often covert forces behind the phenomena described.

Tauber (1997: 17-31) also gives an overview of various studies into how the patterns of self-fulfilling prophecies manifest themselves. Teachers have certain belief systems, and these belief systems influence their expectations. If a teacher is to teach a class that she has strong and positive beliefs about, her expectations will be different from the ones she will have for a class that she does not think very highly of. The next step in the pattern is that we do not leave our expectations in the staff room. We take them with us into the classroom, just as we take with us the teaching materials that we need. And we communicate our expectations to our learners. Some of this communication is done verbally, but most of it works on an unconscious or semi-conscious level, because it is carried out in non-verbal ways. This communication in turn evokes certain behaviour on the students' side. If this process is repeated, over time what we get is that the students' actual behaviour comes close to what we initially expected. If we look at how expectations are communicated to students at the micro level, various studies show the following pattern of interaction between teachers and so-called 'Lows' (students of whom we expect little), on the one hand, and 'Highs' (students of whom we have a high level of expectation), on the other:

 - We tend to smile more often and have more eye contact when we interact with *Highs* than with *Lows*.

- *Lows* get less time to answer a question, whereas we tend to give *Highs* more time to think. While we wait for an answer, we tend to send out non-verbal signals to the *Highs* that are perceived as supportive - for example, we nod our head or smile. *Lows* often do not get any non-verbal communication in this phase at all, or they get signals that can be interpreted to mean that the teacher is impatient or is sceptical that the student can provide a good answer.

- When a *High* gives a wrong answer, the teacher tends to reframe it. For example, "That's an interesting answer. It's not quite correct, but..." Or the teacher repeats the question, and gives hints that enable the student to self-correct the answer. Or the teacher asks another question. When *Lows* give wrong answers, they more frequently get negative feedback from the teacher, often followed by a reprimand.

- When *Lows* give a correct answer, teachers frequently do not react at all. They call upon the next student without giving the learner previously called upon any feedback at all.

- *Lows* generally get less challenging tasks. It often seems we have given up on them. Interestingly, *Highs* not only get the more challenging tasks, they also seem to get more support from the teachers in solving them.

What can teachers do to influence their students' beliefs in a respectful and positive way?

In looking for an answer to my third question, relating to what teachers can do to influence their students' beliefs in a respectful and positive way, I shall draw mainly on work in young learners' classrooms, although the suggestions may be relevant for older learners as well. I do not claim to have any complete theory here - what I suggest is based on experience rather than on any perceived sense of expertise.

I would like to make five suggestions. The first can be summarised in the saying that *Success comes in 'cans', not in 'can'ts'*. This is in line with what Veronica Andres (1999) suggests when she calls for the creation of a "can-do spirit" in our classrooms. We will achieve such a *can-do* classroom culture if we can manage to involve our students in language practice where the emphasis is on the construction of meaning - certainly not a new claim, but one I believe that still awaits implementation in many classrooms. Likewise, students need to be given plenty of opportunity to assess their own learning

progress, preferably also in the form of portfolio and process-oriented testing, as convincingly advocated by Kohonen (1999) and others.

Secondly, I would like to stress the importance of teaching thinking skills and learning strategies alongside the teaching of the foreign language. As Robert Fisher (1992) stresses: "Thinking is not some natural function like breathing, walking, seeing and talking. Thinking does not necessarily improve with age and experience. Thinking needs to be developed." For the practitioner, this means facilitating the development of learning strategies and the students' metacognitive thinking, considering the students' individual learning styles and multiple intelligences (See Gardner, 1993) and also taking into consideration the affective dimensions of learning.

Thirdly, I believe we need to give learners opportunities to explore the language they are learning rather than being solely recipients of it, and, depending on the students' age, to get them to take part in the construction of learning paths (as suggested by, for example, Williams & Burden, 1997) and in the development of their creativity. Involving learners in constructing tasks can, to a certain extent, be initiated at quite an early age.

My fourth point concerns building an atmosphere of trust and rapport with the students. When the students are accepted not only as learners but also as individuals, and when the classroom culture (See Puchta 1999) is one that allows for the strengthening of the students' self-esteem and confidence, there is less danger of confusion of logical levels. Then errors are more likely to be seen as what they are, signs of learning, and not messages about one's capabilities or one's identity. Rinvolucri stresses the specific role that the teacher has in such a classroom culture:

> The teacher will be the sort of person who is aware she is teaching forty individuals, not a mass. She is likely to be a good observer and a good, empathetic listener. If the humanistic exercise is to be relevant and adequate to the task of offering students a new experience of themselves, then the teacher's attitude must be positive, her interpersonal skills good, and her training adequate. (1999: 198).

My fifth and final point is my belief in the need to use pedagogical *placebos*. Studies carried out by Bandura clearly show that if we can manage to raise students' expectations of themselves, the level of their performance will rise accordingly. However, students reach plateaus in their performance. This means that the student has reached a considerably higher level of performance than previously, yet subjectively might interpret such a plateau as getting stuck. A frequent pattern then is that students fall into a crisis and lose their confidence when the point of greatest difference between expectation and actual performance has been reached. This crisis point is also the point where they need our support most. If they do not get it, their level of performance can easily fall below their initial level, whereas if they do get support from us, their level of performance can go up almost to the level of expectation.

I encountered an unusual pedagogical *placebo* about a year ago, while working with a group of European secondary teachers from a grammar school-level context. The language teaching standards in the country concerned are rather demanding, and so are the tests that students have to pass. In the seminar, we were discussing different ways of strengthening students' beliefs, and one participant raised the question of what teachers can do if they have a student who they know has studied hard, but who is about to completely lose trust because in spite of studying hard, he or she keeps failing tests. Another participant made the following contribution: he said, "If this happens in my class, if a student really works hard, and yet there is a danger of this student failing yet another test, although he or she has studied intensively for it, then I cheat." We all asked, "What do you mean, you cheat?" "Well," he said, "I take a pen that has the same colour ink as the student used to write his or her test, and I correct some of the mistakes

so that the student does not notice, and I can give him or her a positive mark. And then of course I follow this up with a lot of appraisal and support." This teacher claimed that he is very careful about when to use this strategy, but he also claimed that he had learnt it from his father, who was a teacher as well, that it had worked for his father, and that it worked whenever he applied it. This colleague spent the rest of the seminar defending himself from the attacks of the other teachers in the group, who claimed that what he was doing there was illegal.

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