Adolescents' Beliefs about Learning English as a Foreign Language: An Intervention Study

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Abstract

Research on language learning beliefs has considered for a long time the resistance to change once beliefs become part of people's lives, identity and experiences. This paper focuses on an intervention study carried out with Brazilian state school adolescents learning English as a foreign language. Due to several contextual factors, pupils suggested a disbelief in the possibility of learning English as a foreign language. The study tried to perceive whether after some changes in their classroom routine their beliefs remained the same. Insights are provided to reinforce the argument that as a transitional age, since adolescence is already a common time for change, signs of change in language learning beliefs are perceived as a result of novel and positive experiences in the classroom.

Keywords: adolescents, language learning, beliefs about language learning, public school, belief change

1. Introduction

The general aim of the study was to understand the beliefs of a group of adolescent language learners who do not believe in the possibility of learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in a public school.

The results reveal that adolescents' language learning process in this educational context is dialectically characterized as positive and negative, with good experiences and contextual factors that affect their beliefs and actions.

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The results have also corroborated recent findings on beliefs, pointing out that due to their complexity, they are also variable and open to change, in line with a sociocultural perspective to study beliefs (Alanen, 2003; Lima, 2012; Negueruela-Azarola, 2011). In other words, they are understood as social constructions which mediate human activities such as learning languages.

In the study, signs of change were perceived as a result of positive feedback on the classes they had as well as the materials (artifacts) and activities they experienced as something relevant (Hall, 2011). In the next sections we address the theoretical perspectives and detail the study.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Language Learning Beliefs and Adolescence: Winds of Change

When the notion of adolescence is at stake another word usually emerges: change. Changing is one of the most intrinsic characteristics of this phase, which has been considered both socially and individually. It entails changes not only in the body and mind of the teenager. There are changes in the social roles they take part and in the expectations that society has on them. In a nutshell, we understand adolescence from a sociocultural perspective. Despite the extended research on infants and their various stages of development, Vygotsky (1994, 2012) also considered adolescence, or in his terms, the *transitional age*[2] as another important moment in the ontogenesis of human development. This age, which followed late childhood, presented other features in human development related to thinking and speech, which could help psychology understand deeply the transition an infant went through.

Concept formation is an important activity for the human cognition that still unfolds during adolescence, and imagination is seen as another evident feature.

By thinking in concepts, humans use their cognitive ability to represent objects from the world in their minds.

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[2] In Vygotsky's (2012) *Obras Escogidas,* the fourth volume presents the selected papers which the soviet psychologist studied specifically concept formation, imagination, desire, personality and the development of higher mental functions in adolescence. Most of his other work is related to child development.

And through the internalization of different tools (Wertsch, 1985, 1991), mainly language, interaction is established in different levels, transforming not only the interaction itself but also the people who engage in it (Vygotsky, 1986).

As to the role of imagination in adolescence, it is compared to play in childhood in their relevance for each age. In fact, Vygotsky (1994) suggests that imagination is the *successor* of play, when young people leave behind the objects of their real world (toys) and become capable to rely on their imagination. In the psychologist's words, "images, eidetic pictures and visual conceptions begin to play the same role in the imagination as a doll representing a child, or a chair representing a steam engine, in a childish play" (p.275).

Bearing this is mind, we see a strong relation between adolescence and beliefs. As abstract thinking becomes more refined, the way adolescents perceive the world and people around them reflect on the beliefs they construct, or in other terms, how they will filter their different life events.

The contributions in the works of L.S Vygotsky (1978, 1986, 1994, 2012) have supported different alternatives to the studies in Applied Linguistics concerned with the role of language in social activities such as learning a new language (students) but also learning how to teach these languages (teachers). His unique point of view in regards to the role of culture and interaction with others to human development in socio-historical contexts provide a pair of lens to help researchers and practitioners understand the complexities entailed in formal learning environments, such as the schools.

A recent field in Applied Linguistics which has turned to sociocultural theory in an attempt to understand the complexity of learning and development is the one which studies beliefs about learning and teaching languages. The scope has expanded considerably in the last decades (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011) with new perspectives to study how people perceive and interpret the activities they engage in. In relation to adolescence, recent studies have considered the role of beliefs in this period of life which embodies the notion of change (Lima, 2012).

Once almost everything in their lives is likely to change, understanding how they perceive these changes has become the focus of different studies (Bandura, 2006; Lima, 2012; Schunk & Meece, 2006; Ward, 2005).

Besides beliefs about themselves, adolescents also have beliefs about the activities they engage in, such as language learning. According to Barcelos and Kalaja (2011) learners' beliefs can either help "learning languages or preventing them from learning" (p.281). As suggested by Negueruela-Azarola (2011), they are conceived as "socially relevant and personally meaningful" (p.360). Within this view, beliefs are understood as meditational artifacts (Alanen, 2003). In other words, they act as cultural artifacts that mediate human activity, such as learning languages. They entail both an individual and social dimension (Negueruela-Azarola, 2011), that is, how learners build their own perspective on learning a language and how other peoples' beliefs may be related to this personal construction.

Also, they have to be studied in the actual context, considering contextual factors that surround learning conditions (Lima, 2012). Contextual factors (i.e time, physical space, curriculum, motivation, just to name a few) play an important role because they can both provide or hamper learning possibilities. This, in turn, may reflect on learning experiences which strengthen or even redefine the beliefs that learners hold in a period of their lives that *per se* already embodies the concept of change and transformation.

In today's world where adolescents are surrounded by all kinds of information and technology (Bandura, 2006; Ward, 2005) that have mediated new forms of interaction, sometimes school subjects and some classes are not part of their main interest. Therefore, maintaining their motivation to learn becomes another challenge for the teacher (Hall, 2011; Kumaravadivelu, 2012). Pupils like to go to school to meet their friends but may not be interested in learning (Basso & Lima, 2010). As a way to overcome this problem, Bandura (2006) makes an interesting consideration on what happens when adolescents lose their desire and motivation to learn at school. According to the author, adolescents "need to commit themselves to goals that give them purpose and a sense of accomplishment. Without personal commitment to something worth doing, they are unmotivated, bored, or cynical" (Bandura, 2006, p.10).

In this way, adolescents need to find relevance and meaning in the things they do at school, which may influence their receptivity on classroom activities. When they do not feel that those experiences offer them the feeling of being able to learn something that is relevant, they tend to respond negatively (boredom, apathy, among other options). The dependence on *extrinsic sources of stimulation* is another sign for preoccupation. Learners start caring only about activities that comes down to a final score. Tests and assignments become the only option or alternative for teachers to engage pupils in classroom activities, and these contextual factors accumulate and influence both the teaching practice and pupils' learning.

Other researchers have suggested that for adolescents to become agents of their own learning process, the classroom environment needs to be at the same time "intellectually challenging and supportive" (Schunk & Meece, 2006, p.82). In a sociocultural perspective, we understand this argument as promoting conditions for learning to go beyond their potential (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), extending their development process, but at the same time providing the necessary assistance, through mediated action (Wertsch, 1985, 1991), that ensure that the activity will not lead to giving up. For that to happen, learners have to be required to participate (Basso & Lima, 2010) and also, activities should be negotiated among participants, problems should be exposed and discussed within constructive dialogues (Lima, 2012) respecting learners needs (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). As an attempt to meet our initial claim, we provide more details on the inquiry in the following section.

3. Methodology

3.1 The Study: Participants and Procedures

The study was conducted in an average size Brazilian public school. The group was made up with 32 pupils enrolled in ninth grade, adding up a total of 16 boys and 16 girls with age ranging from 13 to 15 years old. The adolescents were known in the entire school for their disruptive behavior and were referred to as "classroom 09" due to the number of their class. They had two English classes a week and the adolescents purchased a textbook used as reference for the contents to be studied.

Their English teacher had been working in the public school setting for more than twenty years and was initially supposed to be the one conducting the classes during the research period. However, due to health reasons, she obtained a leave of absence and then the classes became our responsibility.

The research design comprised a whole semester, but in order to become familiar with the students and not intimidate adolescents from day one, the study began with an initial observation phase, followed by the intervention and finally an evaluation phase. Table 1 summarizes the three phases and instruments which are described below.

Table 1- Instruments for Data Collection

INSTRUMENTS		
Classroom Observation	*Intervention*	*Evaluation*
✓ Questionnaire	✓ Feedback cards	✓ Questionnaire
✓ Teacher's narrative	✓ Field notes.	✓ Focus Group
✓ Field notes	✓ Classroom audio recordings	✓ Field notes.

The initial phase (diagnosis – phase one) comprised classroom observations in the attempt to become familiar with the group. Data generated in this phase came from different instruments: field notes, pupils' questionnaire (Q1) and a teacher's narrative on her experiences with teaching English for classroom 09.

The following phase (intervention – phase two) entailed a series of classes which provided changes in the classroom routine (activities). These changes were thought based on the adolescents' input in their questionnaires from the previous phase (Q1) and comprised: pair work activities, reading strategies, activities with music and games, among others. Data were generated from classroom audio recordings, pupils' feedback cards (FC) and field notes. In table 2 we present an outline of this phase by commenting on each activity which was carried out with the group.

Table 2: Intervention Classes

TOPIC	ACTIVITY
Speaking	In pairs, students interacted with each other as a way to get to know more about their peers' personal lives. Students had a card with personal information to help during the activity.
Speaking/ Reading	The group started the new unit about music. The group read a text together about famous singers.
Reading/ Writing	Students created cards with personal information about their favorite singers. As an example, students received the biography of a famous politician to read and complete a similar card to the ones they had to make.
Speaking	The students used the cards from previous class. The game consisted of using each card to provide clues for the group to discover which famous person they were talking about.
Vocabulary	Students discussed a list in their book with examples of English words that are common in their daily lives. They contributed to the list by giving more examples.
Test Review	The group received extra exercises to practice the topic they were studying: biographies and English words in their daily lives.
English Test	The group had their first test.
Grammar	The students studied for the first time the affirmative, negative and interrogative form of regular and irregular verbs.
Grammar Exercises	Students completed the exercises in their textbook.
Listening	The students listened to the song "Price Tag" by Jessie J. The group worked in pairs in an activity that focused on the new vocabulary and later discussed the role of money in peoples' lives (the theme underneath the lyrics).
Reading/ Grammar	The grammar topic was reviewed with an activity in pairs. Students received a text about the series "That 70's Show" and a sheet with a puzzle. The pairs had to work together using the text to find clues in order to solve the puzzle.
Reading/ Speaking	The classroom was divided in four groups. Each student in the group received a card with information about a character from the series "That 70's show". They had to introduce the character for the rest of the group.[3]

The final phase (evaluation – phase three) was the moment when students provided feedback on the experiences they had during intervention activities (Table 2) and results were compared to the initial stage of the inquiry.
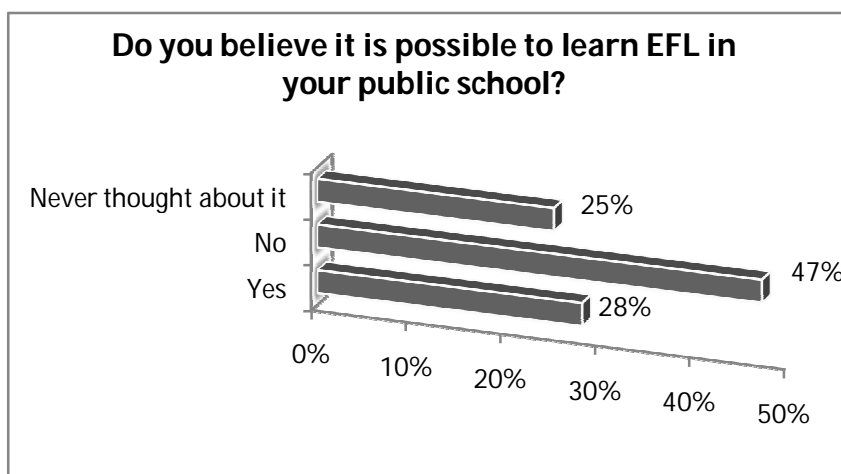
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[3] The students were supposed to keep working on that topic and watch an episode of the show. However, in that year the public schools were shut down for a few weeks due to the teachers' strike for better salaries and more improvements in the public school setting.

The instruments selected were a final questionnaire (Q2), field notes and a focus group with the adolescents. The triangulation of data[4] provided the chance to understand signs of change in the adolescents' beliefs about learning EFL.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Sociocultural Learning Environment, Contextual Factors and Adolescents' Disbelief

According to Alanen (2003), beliefs are embedded in the learners' sociocultural context, which, in our view, comprises aspects inside (teacher/student interaction, materials) and outside the classroom (school staff, conditions of context for teaching, just to name a few). In the group of 32 adolescents, a disbelief in the possibility of learning EFL was noticed in the majority (47 per cent), followed by a strong number of undecided students (25 per cent) and then by the ones who believe in the possibility (28 per cent) see Figure 1.


Do you believe it is possible to learn EFL in your public school?

Never thought about it — 25%
No — 47%
Yes — 28%

Figure 1: The Disbelief about Learning EFL in Classroom 09

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[4] Since data were gathered from different instruments, in this paper we try to use at least three to compare students' perspectives following the scope of the discussion. Due to space limits, it will not be possible to offer a scrutinized description of the intervention phase activities. Then, we make the option to focus on students' perspectives about them.

As the figure 1 shows, the disbelief in classroom 09 was strong for a lot of students. Also, the number of students who seemed to never give a thought about a subject they have been learning for quite some time drew our attention. Thus, we asked students to explain why the disbelief was evident in the majority of students.

Five factors were identified as the ones that influenced the adolescents' disbelief. The most recurrent, according to them, was indiscipline. Within this aspect, pupils gave explanations as to why they believed they could not learn in that context, which is portrayed in Figure 2.
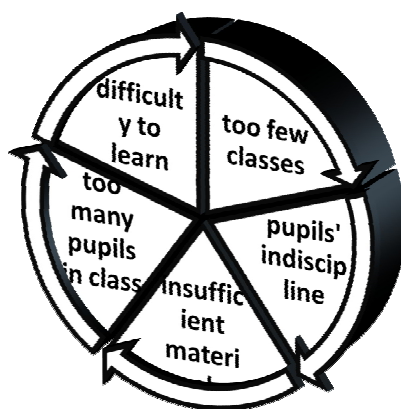
Figure 2: Contextual factors shaping the disbelief

The first explanation was the disruptive behavior (1), constantly mentioned by adolescents themselves throughout the three phases of this research. The adolescents pointed it as the main reason why they did not learn EFL in school, as we can see in the excerpt below.

Excerpt 1

"The teacher tries to teach, but other people (pupils) do not let her explain anything, sometimes they even let her, but most of the classes they do not take the class seriously." (Mariana)[5]

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[5] Throughout this paper students will be mentioned with pseudonyms. Anonymity is part of the consent form the participants signed when they agreed to take part in the study.

Oddly enough, this was something caused by themselves. Yet, the way they talked about it, as if they were not responsible for it. According to them, indiscipline occurred because of an individual who generally *triggered* the other ones. As one person started talking too loud or making fun of people, other pupils felt the same liberty to talk and thus, disruptive talk and behavior prevailed in the class. In short, they acknowledged the problem but did not accept responsibility for it, they attributed it to specific peers in the class instead, especially the ones who were more extroverted among the group.

The number of pupils in class (2), the number of classes per week (3) and the quality of materials (4) were also mentioned as reasons why they did not learn. Some of them explained:

Excerpt 2

"Because we only have two classes a week, only with that we do not learn enough to pass on a test or be hired for a job, travel abroad, etc. And the pupils don't collaborate with the teacher." (Gustavo, Q1).

Excerpt 3

"It's not that the school is bad, but [the number of] classes are not sufficient and there is not enough or adequate material." (Marcelo, Q1).

Excerpt 4

"Because there are too many pupils, the teacher can't give attention to just one [person], so you can't learn right, and there are times that for you to learn right you need to have more attention, when you have a difficulty". (Jéssica, Q1).

Regarding the number of pupils in class, they argued that with a lot of people, the teacher does not have time to offer assistance for everyone as they wanted. As discussed before, the scanty time of two classes a week was seriously compromised by the problem of indiscipline, that is, when the class was interrupted and students misbehaved. The adolescents also showed that they lacked a "basis", in other words, a basic knowledge of the foreign language to help them learn now in ninth grade (5).

Excerpt 5

"It's complicated because we don't have much basis, and because of the mess we do not learn right." (Alan, Q1)

They claimed that they did not learn enough from the classes. However, during classes, as registered in the field notes, it was easy to see they avoided participation by implying they did not know how to do something. But when they actually tried, most of the times they were right, showing they also disbelieve in their capacity to know the foreign language they have been studying in their public school.

As context always plays an important role for humans in the activity they engage in (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986, 1994), such as language learning (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), these five elements seemed to be the most prominent to understand how the disbelief in classroom 09 was constructed. Also, they contributed to the sociocultural understanding of context (Wertsch, 1985, 1991), not only relevant for fostering people's interaction and human development, but also by influencing what they think about this process and how they make sense of it. The factors enumerated here also relate to the characterization of the learning process, as discussed earlier, once beliefs create a strong impact on students' attitudes and decisions for learning (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011). In the next section, we turn our attention to how these adolescents experienced the intervention phase and how the signs of change in their beliefs were perceived.

4.2 Winds of Change: Perceiving the Signs of Change in Adolescents' Beliefs

The study provided evidence for some signs of change in pupils' disbelief about learning EFL in the state school, while in others it did not seem to have happened. The signs of change were influenced by their experience with the materials and activities developed in the intervention phase. At the end of the study, the initial scenario showed in figure 1 was different. Signs of change were perceived as students indicated they were less disbelievers in the impossibility of learning EFL in their public school, see figure 3.
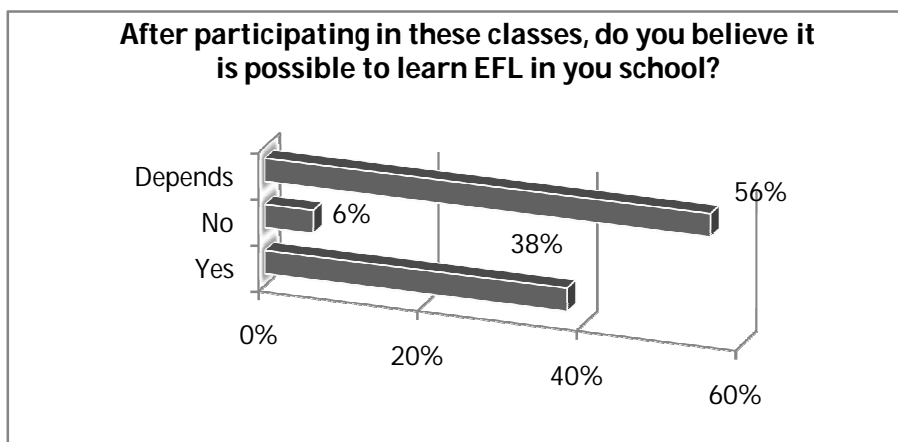
Figure 3: **The Signs of Change in the Disbelief**

In the beginning of the study, 28 per cent of pupils in phase one believed they could learn EFL there while, by the end of the study, it reached 38 per cent of the adolescents. Also, from the 47 per cent of *disbelievers* in phase one, now only 6 per cent demonstrated to feel that they did not change their beliefs. And the majority (56 per cent) believed that learning EFL in that place could be a possibility, though it is conditioned to other factors (i.e. solving indiscipline problems, pupils cooperating to learn).

The experiences during intervention were evaluated mostly as positive by the adolescents. The activities proposed and the way topics were covered seemed to have influenced their optimistic view about the classes instead of the disbelief that mediated their learning activity. However, even with activities they liked, there were also moments when the classes had to be interrupted to call their attention.

Excerpt 6

"I found it really cool, it was a different easy to learn, but I think if the group paid more attention when the teacher was speaking we would have seized the class much better." (Karen, Q2)

Excerpt 7

"With the pupils talking it wasn't possible to learn a lot, but even so I noticed that the English classes can be hard but cool at the same time." (Fabiana, Q2)

The intervention phase had a bumpy start. They did not cooperate with the first activities and classroom management had to become a priority. The adolescents needed to find relevance in the activities in order to participate. Games, pair/ group work and music were alternatives to draw their attention, as we see in their own words:

Excerpt 8

"Cool! I think it was better in pairs because we could solve each other's doubts. I helped Karen and she helped me as well. I think it was way different from the classes I've had." (Jessica, FC, pair work *class)*

Excerpt 9

"Yeah. I found this class amusing. The activity was nice for covering all aspects in the English language, because everything is important [in the lyrics]."(David, FC, music class)

Excerpt 10

"It was very cool, I liked it. It's better in pairs because one helps the other. It would be worse to do by yourself. I helped and was helped by my friend. I wish we had more activities in this way."(Gustavo, FC, pair work class)

The challenges that emerged with these activities were important for the feeling of accomplishment (through competition, i.e. games or pair work) as participation increased, even with the eventual time for calling their attention for the disruptive talk. Thus, *seeing* was important for *believing as* pupils suggested in the feedback cards (FC) and the final questionnaire (Q2) that even with the recurrent indiscipline problems in classroom 09, they felt they were able to learn during the intervention.

By tracing a line from initial phase, going through intervention until evaluation it was possible to observe that their beliefs, as a sociocultural perspective suggested, (Alanen 2003; Lima, 2012; Negueruela-Azarola, 2011) were not only stable but also susceptible for change. At first, they did not engage in activities they were unfamiliar with, and then misbehavior and lack of cooperation prevailed over the classes.

However, when the classes provided activities from which they saw relevance or felt motivated to participate (Kumaravadivelu, 2012), the group showed more involvement. Indiscipline was not fully eliminated, but as data revealed, it was not as intense as reported in earlier stages of the study. They acknowledged such classes as motivating and suggested that they learnt from what was proposed.

The comparison of pupils who believe in the possibility of learning EFL (28 per cent in phase one and 38 per cent in phase two) as well as, the difference observed between the number of pupils who showed a disbelief in phase one (47 per cent) and the post-intervention (6 per cent) is related to Negueruela-Azarola's (2011) claim about beliefs having relevance for the social and yet being meaningful for the individual. Despite the fact that most adolescents demonstrated signs of change in their beliefs, some revealed not noticing any change, even when the rest of the group did not share the same opinion.

Excerpt 11

There were some activities that had never been done like the interpretation of the song, but on the other hand I remain not liking English." (Carlos).

Carlos was an example of someone who remained disliking English for personal reasons, even though he actually enjoyed most of activities proposed. The group showed signs of change in the social level (relevance), but individually there were a few cases in which no signs of change were noticed. In other words, the belief about learning EFL as something possible was not meaningful enough to show signs of change for a few pupils, but it was, for most of the adolescents. Though not completely, the study provided insights that changes in large groups are possible.

Within a sociocultural view, beliefs have the potential to mediate student learning in specific contexts. And as the results showed, belief change can occur when adolescents have learning experiences that provide them chances to re-evaluate current beliefs. Thus, when they feel able to learn EFL in the state schools, such signs reveal positive beliefs being nurtured, which can mediate their activity and help them to make more efforts to learn. As the adolescents experience EFL teaching as an activity that leads to qualitative changes and extend their development they will have more opportunities to recognize the possibility of learning EFL in their context even in the face of adversity.

5. Concluding Remarks

This study, albeit not carried out on a large scale with other classrooms with adolescent learners, brings important insights for teachers in different contexts trying to understand the complexity that entails their pupils' beliefs and the endeavor of learning languages. With the contemporary demands of global society (Kumaravadivelu, 2012) the future generation has to see the need to learn an international language that provide more opportunities regardless of the field and career they intend to pursue.

One of the most relevant aspects is that when teachers try to look at adolescents' beliefs about the language they are there to learn, they find more opportunities to understand what happens inside a classroom. In this particular case, the pupils showed a strong disbelief in the possibility of learning EFL that was related to several contextual factors, some of which they could try to deal with (i.e. indiscipline, difficulty to learn) while others did not rely on them directly (the number of classes per week or pupils in each classroom).

At the same time, their beliefs not only showed what was going on but also what could be done as a way to deal with this situation. These adolescents offered extra insight on what they believed were the alternatives they could indeed learn EFL in their context. These clues were used to the intervention phase in order to compare to pupils' later experiences.

It is important to emphasize, however, that belief change should not be a prescription or a mandatory step for every classroom. It may happen respecting learners' desire, needs and wants, especially in a situation like the one we reported, where a disbelief in the possibility of learning was so intense it could end up hampering their chance to actually learn.

Intervention studies should be conducted with groups that are voluntarily willing to participate. Especially with adolescents, once they tend to engage in activities that are meaningful and relevant (Bandura, 2006). The study also showed, by listening to students' opinion on what were the best alternatives to learn, the collaboration was more effective. It is also in a methodological perspective, needless to say, ethically oriented. And in a sociocultural perspective, it acknowledges the uniqueness of each being and at the same time the importance of the social for the mediates activities we engage (Wertsch, 1985, 1991) and share as part of our culture (i.e learning and teaching through the use of instruments and classroom materials, among other examples).

Conceiving the language learner in a more active role in the language classroom is vital to maintain a learning environment where all people involved know their importance in their own learning process. In other words, that it does not necessarily rely solely on the teacher, as if learners were released from their learning responsibilities. Future studies could compare, for instance, whether pupils' beliefs may differ in different learning situations, such as learning EFL or ESL. Young EFL learners, for instance, may struggle more with EFL learning since they lack daily opportunities to interact in the new language, while ESL learners may be more constantly involved in such opportunities.

Regarding the impact of beliefs on people's lives, disbeliefs deserve a specific attention once they may compete against learners' opportunities to succeed. Although change seems to demand more time and continuous re-evaluation of live events, positive new experiences may come as a possible alternative.

Acknowledgements

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