

## 2.1 Terms, definitions and reasons for interest

But what are beliefs, and why are they important? As always, the definition is already a comment on the subject. A dictionary definition provides a starting point. The Oxford English Dictionary web site defines the English<sup>2</sup> word *belief* for example as follows:

1. Mental acceptance of a proposition, statement, or fact, as true.
2. The thing believed; the proposition or set of propositions held true; in early usage, esp. the doctrines believed by the professors of a religious system, a religion. In modern use often simply = opinion, persuasion.

According to these definitions, beliefs indicate that individuals accept something as true. Beliefs also often form systems, as is the case with for example political and religious beliefs. However, while beliefs often get linked to things like religion, isms, personal convictions or superstitions, people do hold beliefs about a whole range of issues – from raising children and matters of health and illness, to the merits of different brands of orange juice.

As per the dictionary definition, beliefs are ideas that are considered to be true – it does not necessarily imply that the ideas actually *are* true in any objective sense. In everyday language use it appears that beliefs are often separated from knowledge. Alexander and Dochy (1995) conducted a study on how adults in the United States, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and Sweden defined and conceptualised knowledge and beliefs. They found that knowledge tended to be described with words like "learned" and "factual", whereas beliefs were considered "subjective", "personal" and "unproven" (Alexander & Dochy 1995: 425). The people who participated in the study thus felt that knowledge was something that could be proven by some objective means, whereas beliefs had a subjective component to them. Knowledge was more likely to be based on something objectively factual; beliefs were often characterised by individual idiosyncrasy.

In scholarly contexts the line separating knowledge and beliefs is hazier. Knowledge is often considered to be a more all-encompassing concept, and knowledge and beliefs are thought of as existing on a continuum. In this context, beliefs become a form of knowledge rather than a class of their own. For example Nespor (1987), in his study of teacher beliefs, suggested that beliefs are distinguished from other forms of knowledge by four characteristics:

- 1) beliefs frequently contain assumptions about the existence or non-existence of entities, that is, *existential presumptions*;

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<sup>2</sup> The term "belief" is discussed here in English – terms obviously vary from language to language, and for example the Finnish term used in the study of learner beliefs is in fact *käsitys*, conception or idea, rather than *uskomus*, belief.

- 2) beliefs are often marked by *alternativity*, conceptualisations of ideal situations;
- 3) beliefs rely more heavily on *affective and evaluative components* than other types of knowledge; and
- 4) beliefs usually have an *episodic structure*; they are derived from personal experience or from sources like folklore.

Nespor's suggestion thus seems to be that other types of knowledge are more rooted in reality, more objective and based on perhaps more scientifically valid data than beliefs are – a view similar to the one presented by the participants in Alexander and Dochy's study of 1995. Kagan, who also studied teacher beliefs, defined them as “a particularly provocative form of personal knowledge” (1992: 65) and “tacit, often unconsciously held assumptions” (1992: 65) – suggesting that while beliefs may have strong effects they are not necessarily consciously recognised. It thus seems that even in scholarly discourse other forms of knowledge are generally taken to refer to something more factual, scientifically proven and formally learnt; beliefs tend to be considered more personal, are seen to have an affective component not found in knowledge, and do not necessarily hold up to scientific scrutiny. Sometimes beliefs may even be considered to be inferior to knowledge – based on assumptions rather than on something scientifically factual. However, Pajares (1992: 310), among others, maintained that there cannot exist any kind of knowledge without a certain element of judgement or evaluation<sup>3</sup>. The notion that knowledge is somehow purer than belief in this sense would therefore not hold up to scrutiny, either.

The distinction between knowledge and belief may be further complicated if we take a look at the kinds of things that generally qualify as knowledge. Let us take a simple statement like “Mount Everest is the highest mountain in the world”. Do we actually know this or did we read it somewhere and believed it? One could argue that knowing such a thing would, strictly speaking, require that we have personally measured every mountain in the world. Taking this to the extreme we could say that we can only know what we have experienced personally – and yet it is precisely the things based on personal and subjective experience that tend to get labelled “beliefs” rather than “knowledge”.

According to many of the definitions, beliefs represent what an individual *considers to be true*, so comparing her beliefs to some kind of objective truth may be irrelevant. The beliefs an individual holds represent her reality – the way the world *is*, from her point of view. Whether her beliefs are scientifically proven or not is beside the point: for her, they are true.

One of the most important reasons for research into beliefs is that they appear to *influence human actions* in various ways. According to McDonough (1995: 9), beliefs can be important stimuli for action:

...what we believe we are doing, what we pay attention to, what we think is important, how we choose to behave, how we prefer to solve problems, form the

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<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, it is, of course, difficult to imagine people having strong emotions about  $2+2=4$ , for example.

basis of our personal decisions as to how to proceed. An important fact about this argument is that it is not necessary for these kinds of evidence to be true for them to have important consequences for our further development.

As beliefs essentially represent an individual's worldview, beliefs function as a filter, influencing one's perceptions of oneself, others and the world in general (e.g. Abelson 1986, Alvermann & Commeyras 1994, Lewis 1990). It also makes sense to act according to what one feels is true and real, so beliefs may be good indicators of the decisions individuals make (Bandura 1986, Nisbett & Ross 1980, Dewey 1933).

For better or worse, beliefs thus appear to influence an individual's actions somehow. This has made beliefs a point of interest also for scholars studying learning and teaching: how do the beliefs of teachers and students affect learning? At first, research focused more on teacher beliefs and examined how teachers' beliefs about language teaching influenced their teaching practices; it is assumed that the teacher's beliefs would also have an effect on how learners end up viewing and learning languages (e.g. Chapman 2001). The teacher was thus considered to have a great impact on how her learners' beliefs about language turned out and, consequently, how the learners went about learning a language.

Later on, however, the focus shifted from teachers to learners. As the views of the learner and of the process of learning changed, so did the emphases of research. According to Kalaja and Barcelos (2003: 1), the change reflected a more fundamental shift in the focus of language learning research: earlier, research had mainly concentrated on teachers and teaching, but now the focus moved to learners and their contributions to language learning. The learners' point of view and their subjective experiences began to be seen as important. It became apparent that no amount of theoretical knowledge by researchers and other experts influenced learning outcomes, because, as Riley (1997: 128) puts it:

the issue is not one of finding the objective reality, the truth, but subjective reality, their truth. What [the learners] believe will influence their learning much, much more than what we believe, because it is their beliefs that hold sway over their motivations, attitudes and learning procedures.

Beliefs research built on an even earlier discussion of what characterises a good language learner: what are the traits (personality, attitudes, motivation etc.) that make language learning successful (e.g. Naiman, Frohlich, Stern and Todesco 1978, Rubin 1975)? Learner beliefs began to be considered a learner trait that could influence the outcome of the learning process (Kalaja & Barcelos 2003: 1).