TESOL Connections
Keeping English language professionals connected

4 Counterproductive Learner Beliefs and How to Tackle Them
by Chiara Bruzzano

A great deal of TESOL literature shows that learners are likely to hold certain beliefs on language learning, which strongly influence the way in which they regard and approach tasks. Learners are also reluctant to let go of these beliefs, which can significantly clash with our own views as teachers. When this happens, research (Brown, 2009; Huang, 2006) suggests that the consequences are, among others, learner dissatisfaction, potential discontinuation of language study, reduced learner confidence in teachers, reduced willingness to participate, and classroom tensions. If we want our classrooms to be a place of productive, collaborative, and respectful learning, we need to avoid the temptation of dismissing our learners' beliefs as naïve and actually address them.

In this article, I will address some common beliefs (or misconceptions) held by learners and propose a framework to manage them in three steps:

1. Investigating the possible origin of the belief
2. Self-audit on your teaching practice
3. Constructively challenging the belief

Belief 1: "Grammar Is the Most Important Thing"

Origin: This might well be the queen of misconceptions about language learning! It is frequently due to previous learning experiences with methodologies akin to grammar-translation and deductive teaching of grammar. Learners will expect "a lot of grammar" and equate this to successful language learning: Their expectations will simply not be met if you teach communicatively.

Self-audit: Am I neglecting the teaching of grammar? In what way am I incorporating it into my communicative classes?

Challenging the belief: Have an open discussion with your learners. If you feel that this is an issue (or if they think they do not do enough grammar), start by asking them to rate the importance of pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar on a scale from 1 to 10, so that you can in fact see if this is a problem without asking a leading question. Alternatively, you can ask them what they think is the most important thing they need to know to succeed in an English exam or to rank the four skills and grammar based on their importance. (Some learners I have had as participants in a study were convinced that grammar was one of the four skills!) Acknowledge that grammar is indeed important, but what they should be striving for is a balance between accuracy and fluency, and their primary objective should be effective communication.

Belief 2: "Speaking Correctly Means Speaking Like a Native Speaker"

Origin: In English as a foreign language (EFL), learners are often only exposed to a dichotomy of British and American English pronunciation. What's more, they are encouraged by their families (and what appears as common sense) to regard native teachers as the only acceptable model for language learning. They may also confuse the concept of pronunciation with that of accent and feel that they are underachieving for the mere fact that they cannot seem to get rid of their native-language accent.

Self-audit: Am I only exposing my learners to few varieties of English (e.g., British/American)? Have I raised their awareness on English as a lingua franca?

Challenging the belief: First, elicit (and if necessary, clarify) the difference between pronunciation and accent. Then, explain the concept of intelligibility and English as a lingua franca. With adults or young adults in EFL contexts, it will be easy to elicit their personal experiences of using English in real life: How often do they speak or listen to native speakers as opposed to nonnative (but fluent) speakers of English? I have also found it helpful to show students a video of a famous or well-regarded personality from the learners' country (I chose a video of former Prime Minister Mario Monti on CNN for my Italian learners) speaking English correctly with a non-English accent. This helps convince them that a native accent is not necessary for effective communication, even at very high levels.

Belief 3: "Listening Is Only a Matter of Practice"

Origin: This belief can be the result of previous learning experiences lacking any specific listening instruction. When I researched this topic in Italian secondary schools, some teachers even said that they did not believe in explicit listening instruction and teacher talk time was all the listening practice that the learners needed.

Self-audit: Am I teaching listening as a skill to develop or am I mostly leaving it to extensive listening practice?

Challenging the belief: Learners must be sensitised to the importance of developing listening strategies, both to pass exams (a short-term goal) and to achieve effective communication. Most course books now include exercises aimed at developing listening strategies, such as prelistening exercises to predict content by using context and prior knowledge. The trouble is that many learners are not at all aware that this is what they are doing. This lack of awareness makes them want to skip through the prelistening work and go "straight to the point."

It is therefore crucial that, if this seems to be a problem in your class, you sit down with your students and explain why you have them do each task. To help persuade them of the importance of developing their listening strategies, you can explain a few technical aspects of how listening works (e.g., bottom-up versus top-down processing) so that they feel more in control of what happens.

Finally, one practical tip that I have found useful is to practise listening strategies individually rather than in the typical sequence composed of pre-, while-, and postlistening tasks. For example, you could show the learners the value of predicting content by giving

them a listening task to complete without giving them much time to make any hypotheses beforehand; then, give them another related listening task, but this time allow some time to think and go through the gaps in the text. Facilitate by showing how certain gaps can only be filled by certain word classes and by eliciting their previous knowledge on the subject, thus activating their schemata.

Belief 4: "I Can't Speak Because I Don't Know Enough Words"

Origin: Learners with this belief might be overly focussed on accuracy to the detriment of fluency; native-language interference might be frequent; they may not be at all trained in the use of communicative strategies; or they may have high affective filters, such as speaking anxiety.

Self-audit: Am I interrupting my learners for correction even in fluency-based activities? Am I scaffolding the vocabulary used in production tasks? Am I emphasising communication strategies?

Challenging the belief: Acknowledge that while vocabulary is certainly fundamental, other factors might be influencing performance, such as anxiety or an excessive focus on accuracy. Some practical ideas to tackle this belief (and objective problem) are the following: Teach communicative strategies (circumlocution, using synonyms, etc.), make sure that you recycle and scaffold the vocabulary needed for production tasks, and sometimes allow your learners to plan their output for a minute or two. Research (Sangarun, 2001) shows that this can increase levels of accuracy.

Beliefs are hard to change, but if you analyse your own teaching practice and give your learners the chance to express themselves, counterproductive beliefs will be easier to examine and tackle.

References

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