

10 Students' Beliefs about Learning English as a Foreign Language at Secondary Schools in Argentina

M. Inés Valsecchi, M. Celina Barbeito
and M. Matilde Olivero

Introduction

As a result of our experience as teacher educators and from evidence in previous studies in the area of second language teacher education (SLTE), we embrace the idea that beliefs about learning English as a foreign language (EFL) are a valuable resource to understand learning processes and teaching practices (e.g. Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011; Borg, 2003; Horwitz, 1988; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003; Woods, 1996). Thus, in order to advocate for meaningful learning approaches that will cater to students' needs, we are convinced that teaching practices should consider students' voices. There is a clear need for further research on beliefs about learning a foreign language (FL) at the secondary school level. Moreover, to the best of our knowledge, no large-scale studies have been conducted in Argentina to explore students' beliefs about EFL learning in this context. Given that secondary school students in our context tend to finish their studies without the level of competence expected, and considering the influence of beliefs in the learning process, a study was carried out to explore students' beliefs about how they envision learning EFL in secondary schools in the central region of Argentina.

The insights gained from this study would be a point of reference for further inquiry about students' beliefs on their process of learning EFL in Argentina. This study also serves as a contribution to the field of EFL teaching and SLTE, especially in South America, as exploring secondary school students' beliefs about EFL learning can be beneficial for students, teachers and teacher educators.

In this chapter, we first explain how the term ‘beliefs’ has been defined by educational psychologists and second language (L2) researchers and how it will be operationalized in the present study. Then, we provide an overview of belief studies in the field of applied linguistics over the past three decades. After that, we explain the role of English according to current curricular designs, describe the secondary school context in Argentina and explain the importance of studying beliefs about EFL learning in this context. We continue with a description of the design of the instrument for data collection and the steps taken to conduct the study, followed by a discussion of the main findings. We then conclude the chapter by addressing both the main pedagogical and research implications of this study in the field of L2 education.

Literature Review

Defining beliefs

Research in educational psychology and applied linguistics has documented that the beliefs we hold about learning act as filters and heuristic cues, impacting the way that we perceive new knowledge, and consequently, how we approach an activity (e.g. Borg, 2001; Johnson, 1994; Kubanyiova, 2012). Even though there is a vast amount of research on beliefs in these fields, there is still disagreement on how to define them. In a critical literature review, Barcelos (2003) recognizes that beliefs have been defined from a variety of perspectives, including folk linguistics (Nespor, 1987), theories of learning (Miller & Ginsberg, 1995), learner representations (Holec, 1987), learners’ philosophy of language learning (Abraham & Vann, 1987), metacognitive knowledge (Wenden, 1986, 1987) and the culture of learning languages (Barcelos, 1995), among others. From these perspectives, as Barcelos (2003) suggests, it becomes evident that beliefs are not only cognitive, but also cultural and social.

The ever existing disagreement on how researchers have attempted to define beliefs can be partly related to the different theoretical frameworks underlying the investigations. Pajares (1992) states that beliefs are culturally bound, formed early in life and tend to self-perpetuate. From a cognitivist point of view, beliefs are defined as metacognitive knowledge, that is, individual understandings that are relatively stable but may change over time (Wenden, 1999). Within a contextual framework, Barcelos (2003) characterized beliefs as being dynamic, emergent, socially constructed and contextually situated. More recently, Barcelos and Kalaja (2011) added to the notion of beliefs as being fluctuating, related to affective constructs, other-oriented and influenced by reflection. In alignment with Barcelos, in our study we define beliefs as

a form of thought, constructions of reality, ways of seeing and perceiving the world and its phenomena which are co-constructed within our experiences and which result from an interactive process of interpretation and (re)signifying, and of being in the world and doing things with others. (As cited in Kalaja *et al.*, 2015: 10)

Beliefs about language learning

Beliefs about FL learning in the field of applied linguistics have been a topic of interest for the last 30 years. Research has documented the use of multiple instruments for data collection. Some authors have resorted to questionnaires to explore learners and teachers' beliefs among large populations (e.g. Horwitz, 1985, 1987; Peacock, 2001; Rieger, 2009; Riley, 2009). In more recent studies, researchers in favor of discursive approaches have explored beliefs through qualitative data sources, including learning journals, self-reports, interviews, metaphors, drawings and classroom observations, among others (e.g. Allen, 2002; Aragão, 2011; Barcelos, 2000; Kalaja *et al.*, 2008; Mercer, 2011). Many others, instead, have adopted both quantitative and qualitative methods (e.g. Pan & Block, 2011; Sakui & Gaies, 1999) in an attempt to explore beliefs from multiple perspectives and, in this way, have a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Results from previous studies have demonstrated that beliefs play an essential role in the learning of an FL (Cotterall & Murray, 2008; Horwitz, 1987, 1988; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003). Given the recognition that in formal learning situations beliefs are always contextualized in relation to some learning task or situation (Benson & Lor, 1999), researchers in L2 education have been particularly curious about how students' beliefs about different dimensions influence their language acquisition.

Of special interest to us are those beliefs that relate to the variables that mostly impact our learning environment, including the beliefs that students hold about the importance assigned to the FL, the influence of beliefs on motivation, beliefs about the role of culture in the FL class, the use of technology, beliefs about the teaching of grammar and language learning strategies and the development of reading skills.

In the last decades, researchers have been concerned about the relationships between beliefs and the above dimensions of learning, mainly among university students (e.g. Diab, 2006; Genç & Aydin, 2011; Kamhi-Stein, 2003; Loewen *et al.*, 2009; Yamashita, 2007; Zhang, 2010). Diab (2006) studied EFL and French Lebanese university students' beliefs about the importance of English and their motivation for learning the language. Results revealed that the role of EFL in Lebanon was related to the political and sociocultural context of FL education. The students viewed English as an easy and important language, and manifested a strong instrumental motivation for learning.

Genç and Aydin (2011) explored motivation and attitudes toward Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) among 126 EFL university students. The quantitative analysis of their data showed that whereas more than half of the students held positive attitudes toward the usefulness of CALL in FL learning, there was still a considerable percentage of students who did not believe strongly in CALL or did not feel motivated in the EFL class when working in the computer lab. The contents and quality of materials on the internet seemed to be important factors in determining students' motivation and attitudes toward CALL.

Loewen *et al.* (2009) investigated the beliefs of English as a second language (ESL) and FL learners at a North American university about the role of grammar instruction and error correction in L2 learning. Responses to a Likert-scale questionnaire showed that ESL learners considered the efficacy of grammar instruction less positive than FL learners did. Regarding the way that grammar should be taught, the open-ended responses revealed that ESL learners tended to favor deductive approaches. Moreover, most participants expressed that grammar should be taught for communicative purposes, in context and by using examples from everyday speech.

Researchers have suggested that metacognition and language learning strategies have an impact on L2 reading. Kamhi-Stein (2003) explored the relationship between first language and L2 strategy use and beliefs about reading among four underprepared L2 college students. Results showed that the beliefs that students have about reading will influence the way that they approach a text and the different strategies they will use. Other studies on beliefs about reading have focused on how students' beliefs impact their comprehension. In a recent meta-analysis on the correlation between reading comprehension and different reading component variables, Yamashita (2013) found a weak correlation between metacognition about reading and reading comprehension. However, Zhang's (2010) qualitative study indicated that there is a strong relationship between the two, and that successful and less successful EFL readers differ in the amount and quality of metacognitive knowledge they possess.

As noted above, research in students' beliefs about reading in applied linguistics has increased significantly in the last decades around the world, and Argentina has been no exception. Most Argentine universities include English for specific purposes (ESP) courses in their curricula with the main aim of developing students' reading comprehension skills within their area of studies. In preparation for university work, students are expected to learn to critically read texts of different genres and topics associated with a specific field such as biology and tourism, among others. Few studies have investigated students' beliefs about L2 reading and their relationship with other variables such as behavior (Longhini *et al.*, 2008), content-based teaching methodology (Barbeito & Placci, 2008) and motivation (Placci *et al.*, 2012).

Beliefs and secondary schools

Limited research has focused on beliefs and secondary schools, and more specifically, students' beliefs. Sakui and Gaies (1999) and Oz (2007) have noticed this gap in the literature and addressed the need to further investigate this specific context. Saeb and Zamani (2013) compared the language learning strategy use and beliefs about language learning of high school students and students attending English institutes in Iran. Results revealed significant differences between the two groups investigated: the institute students used significantly more learning strategies and held stronger beliefs about the difficulty of language learning than their peers in high school. Also in Iran, Reza and Azizi (2013) explored high school students' general attitudes toward CALL and the use of CALL for learning receptive skills. Their findings showed that the majority of students in their study had positive attitudes toward CALL, especially for receptive language skills teaching purposes. In another related study that implemented exploratory factor analysis, Oz (2007) investigated what beliefs Turkish students in secondary education held about EFL learning, how their belief systems were organized and whether there were significant differences in belief systems among learner groups. The results concluded that learners' metacognitive knowledge or beliefs about language learning had variability in terms of social and educational contexts, age, gender and stages of language. From an emic perspective, De Costa (2011) studied how the language ideologies and discursive positioning of a 16-year-old immigrant ESL learner from China affected her language learning outcomes positively. Beliefs in this study were discursively constructed through the participant's negotiation with the different social actors that surrounded her. The findings prompted him to argue for an expanded learner beliefs framework characterized by the constructs of language ideology and discursive positioning, as these help explain how learner beliefs develop and influence language learning outcomes.

In South America, recent studies demonstrate that the interest in beliefs about learning in secondary schools is incipient, with the exception of Brazil where several studies have been carried out (see Lima, 2012). In fact, Lima (2012) has documented that students in Brazilian public secondary schools did not believe that English could be learned in that setting due to various reasons, including students' disruptive talk and behavior, few lessons per week, insufficient materials, crowded classrooms and students' lack of basic knowledge of the English language. In Argentina, Portesio and Vartalitis (2009) investigated the beliefs of 50 sixth-year¹ students about the usefulness of learning English as a school subject and the role of the teacher of English in the learning process. Findings indicated that students regarded EFL as a relevant tool, but evaluated English as a school subject negatively, and assigned teachers a key role in their process of learning.

Although there are belief studies among university students, and to a lesser extent, secondary school students, in Argentina, there is an evident gap in the study of EFL learning beliefs at secondary school level. In an attempt to provide a first snapshot of the ways that students understand their EFL learning process, a large-scale study (Valsecchi *et al.*, 2011) was carried out with the aim of exploring both secondary school teachers and students' beliefs about teaching and learning EFL in secondary schools in the central region of Argentina. The study presented in this chapter is part of the larger study mentioned above, and aims at describing the beliefs that students hold about seven dimensions that might play a predominant role in our EFL secondary school classrooms: the importance assigned to the FL, the influence of beliefs on motivation, the role of culture, the use of technology, the teaching of grammar, the teaching of language learning strategies in the FL class and the development of reading skills.

Secondary schools and second languages in Argentina

Argentina is situated in the southern area of South America and it has a population of 36,260,130 people (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censo, 2010). Due to colonization by Spain in the 16th century, Spanish was established as its official language. With the exception of Brazil, where Portuguese is spoken, the rest of Argentina's neighboring countries also speak Spanish, and the same happens in most of the countries in South America.

The English language, in particular, has been used in Argentina for centuries: Nielsen (2003) explains that it was used to do commerce with British merchants in the early 19th century, to negotiate British investments in the early 20th century and to communicate among British farm administrators in the south of the country. Additionally, by the end of the 19th century, the British managed the meat industry in Argentina and by 1914, British companies owned and ran 80% of the railway system.

Several decades after 1900, English, French and Italian started to be used for commerce, communication with other countries and education. As a consequence, the teaching and learning of English and French at schools was encouraged due to the instrumental value of the former and the cultural heritage of the latter. In 1993, Portuguese replaced French (National Law 24.195, Ministerio de Cultura y Educación de la Nación, 1993) after the creation of the MERCOSUR (Southern Common Market) (Porto, 2014, Pozzo, 2009). Additionally, in 1998, when the teaching of one FL was made compulsory by Federal Agreement A 15 [Acuerdo Marco para la Enseñanza de las Lenguas] (Consejo Federal de Cultura y Educación, 1998), more than half the provinces chose English as the sole FL of elementary and secondary education (Nielsen, 2003). (See Banfi, this volume, for a description of the initiatives implemented in the educational system in Argentina.)

In secondary schools, curricular guidelines include both the development of native language competence and the ability to understand and communicate in an FL (Article 30, Law 26.206) (Ministerio de Educación, Ciencia y Tecnología, 2006). The arguments that support the inclusion of FLs in the educational system are grounded on two dimensions of learning. On the one hand, there is a cognitive dimension, which supports the notion that learning an additional language helps students to reflect upon native language processes and optimize their use. On the other hand, there is an intercultural dimension, which considers that L2 learning enables students to become aware of the existence of other cultures and peoples, leading to a wider vision of the world and its diversity.

The secondary school level in Argentina lasts from five to six years, depending on the provinces, and is divided into two cycles: a basic cycle, core to the different areas of study, and a specialized one, which focuses on one of 10 areas of study (e.g. social science, natural science, tourism, etc.) (Article 31, Law 26.206) (Ministerio de Educación, Ciencia y Tecnología, 2006). The secondary school curriculum includes five or six levels of the FL (one per year) with an average of one 80-minute class per week.

In the province of Córdoba, the Curricular Guidelines 2011–2015 issued by the Ministerio de Educación de la Provincia de Córdoba (2011) state that, in secondary schools, FL teaching, particularly English, should consider the following dimensions: (a) *English for communication*, involving linguistic, discourse and sociocultural knowledge as well as oral and written practice; (b) *English and information and communication technology* (ICT), including the integration of new technologies to develop the ability to operate, access and search for data, increase the capacity to interpret reality and develop autonomy; and (c) *English and literary discourse*, entailing a space for sensitization to the world of literature through different genres, and for the development of reading habits.

In secondary schools in Córdoba, it is expected that classroom work focuses on the development of the four language skills at increasing levels of difficulty and in a variety of contexts. The activities to be included comprise those that promote autonomy through the application of learning strategies and foster metacognitive, metacommunicative, metalinguistic and intercultural reflection (Ministerio de Educación de la Provincia de Córdoba, 2011).

At present, secondary school is one of the most critical and complex levels in the Argentine educational system, as evidenced by dropout rate indicators, poor performance on academic tests and institutional functioning shortcomings (Tiramonti & Montes, 2009). Valsecchi *et al.* (2013) suggest that students' level of L2 competence when finishing secondary school does not seem to correspond to the standards of achievement expected after six years of systematic and uninterrupted teaching, which should allow students to perform effectively in the workplace and/or educational

world. In this vein, Liruso (2009) claims that nowadays not all students graduate having reached a ‘threshold level’ of English.

Contextual factors, internal and external to the classroom, such as the number of students in the classroom, classroom management, availability of resources and school policies, among others, play a key role in shaping students and teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning English at secondary school (Borg, 2003; Lima, 2012; Longhini *et al.*, 2004). In our own experience as EFL teacher trainers for over 20 years, we have witnessed heterogeneous classes with groups of up to 40 students, teachers and students with low levels of motivation, the implementation of traditional teaching methods, a neglect of the integration of ICT and a lack of concern for the development of the four macro-skills for communicative purposes (Placci & Valsecchi, 2005). In fact, although curricular guidelines require the development of the four macro-skills, many secondary school teachers of English tend to focus almost exclusively on grammar and reading comprehension (Barrionuevo & Pico, 2006; Longhini *et al.*, 2004). In most cases, this has been the case because of the great need to develop ‘bottom-up’ processing skills (e.g. lexical and grammatical decoding) simultaneously with ‘top-down’ ones (e.g. inferencing and making associations) for students to be able to achieve a minimum threshold level that will allow them immediate and automatic access to the necessary linguistic forms for the mind to achieve true negotiations or real communication (Longhini *et al.*, 2004).

Method

Our study was designed to address teachers and students’ beliefs about teaching and learning EFL in secondary schools in the central region of Argentina. It was a large-scale, mixed-methods study, implemented in two phases. While Phase 1 focused on students’ beliefs, Phase 2 focused on teachers’ beliefs. In this chapter, we will report the quantitative findings of Phase 1, which sought to explore students’ beliefs about seven dimensions related to learning English at secondary school. The dimensions analyzed in this report are as follows: importance assigned to the FL, influence of beliefs on motivation, role of culture, use of technology, teaching of grammar, teaching of language learning strategies in the FL class and development of reading skills.

Participants

A total of 1522 secondary school students, from 40 schools, participated in the first phase of the study. They were, on average, 17 years old, attending the fifth year of private ($n=836$) and public ($n=686$) secondary schools in the district of Río Cuarto and surrounding areas. The choice

of this particular age group was made on the basis that it would provide a comprehensive picture of the way that the English language had been taught and learned at their institutions. The school authorities' consent was determinant since, as our participants were under 18, we wanted to guarantee that ethical issues were considered carefully before collecting the data. For this reason, prior to sending the final version of the survey to the school authorities, we had it supervised and authorized by the Research Ethics Committee of the National University of Río Cuarto.

Instrument

The data collection instrument for this part of the study was the Likert-scale section of the 'Secondary School Students' Beliefs Questionnaire' (Valsecchi *et al.*, 2011), which was designed specifically for our context. It was necessary to create a new instrument since others, such as the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) (Horwitz, 1988), failed to capture the reality of our specific context of Spanish-speaking adolescent students. The instrument had a demographic section, which inquired about students' age, gender, previous language experience, self-assessment of their performance and use of technology in the English class.

The questionnaire was semi-structured and was made up of two sections. The first section was a six-point Likert-scale which ranged from 'Totally disagree' (1) to 'Totally agree' (5). A sixth option was also incorporated, 'Never thought about that' (6), in order to offer participants the possibility of expressing that a certain idea was not part of their prior belief repertoire. This section was composed of 67 items organized under the following dimensions: importance assigned to the FL, influence of beliefs on motivation, role of culture, use of technology, teaching of grammar, teaching of language learning strategies, development of reading skills, role of the teacher, role of the student, teaching materials, role of context, role of practice, error correction, type of interaction, language skills and assessment. In this report, the dimensions considered for analysis are the first seven. The report of the answers of the complete questionnaire will be presented in a forthcoming publication. The questionnaire was built on the basis of some pre-established categories derived from our experience as teacher educators responsible for observing secondary school settings in a practicum course for more than 28 years, and from bibliographic inquiry. The instrument was piloted with a sample of 120 students from a public secondary school and those statements that did not discriminate well were reworded, removed or conflated.

The second section of the questionnaire was qualitative in nature and included three open-ended completion items. Two items inquired about perceived difficulty when learning the language skills and one item asked about ways in which EFL could be best learned in the secondary school

context. The analysis of the qualitative section will not be reported in this chapter.

The choice of an approach to study secondary school students' beliefs was not simple. Even when the approach to data collection and the descriptive nature of the study could be associated with a normative approach² (Barcelos, 2003), we felt our approach was more related to the way that beliefs are understood in the social context where they develop, 'encompass[ing] limited *a priori* expectations and allowing meaning to emerge from the data' (Freeman, 1996, as cited in Barcelos, 2003: 27). In our case, the design of a semi-structured questionnaire was considered to be the most useful option to capture a first snapshot of a wide population of secondary school students, which would allow us to deepen our understanding of their beliefs later on through qualitative data sources. As Barcelos (2003) states, when investigating beliefs, it is not always simple to position a study within one specific approach.

Data collection and analysis

The Likert-scale items of the questionnaire were tabulated into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software (SPSS), version 22. As the statements of the questionnaire sought to inquire about participants' beliefs, and thus were not susceptible to be rated as correct or incorrect, the typical statistical procedures to calculate the internal and external consistency of the instrument were not carried out. For this reason, no Cronbach's alpha value for the scale was calculated. Instead, frequency distributions were run with SPSS in an attempt to obtain a description of the beliefs that our participants held. In order to simplify the data and ease the interpretation of the results, the responses 'Totally agree' and 'Agree' were combined into one category called 'Agree'. Similarly, 'Totally disagree' and 'Disagree' were combined into one category called 'Disagree'. In this way, four different types of responses were analyzed: Agree=5/4; Disagree=1/2; Neutral=3; Never thought about that=6.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the data revealed that whereas there seemed to be agreement on some ideas about the learning and teaching of EFL in the secondary school context, there was not much consensus on others. Some responses to items belonging to the same dimension revealed that the students' beliefs were somewhat contradictory.

Of the seven dimensions, the two that indicated strong agreement included *the benefit of being able to use English in the students' future careers* and *the importance of including language learning strategies in the EFL classroom*. In relation to the first dimension, *the importance assigned to the English language*,

most of our participants (82%) agreed that English would be beneficial for them in the future. This response could be attributed to the value given to the English language in the Argentine sociopolitical and educational contexts. English has been considered the most important FL in many national universities in an attempt to reach the goal of the full internationalization of the university community. Also, more than half of our respondents (57%) expressed that the purposes for which English is taught in their schools would probably serve their near future needs. A similar percentage (54%) considered English to be one of the most important school subjects and 42% reported that they found English to be more difficult than other subjects in the curricula (see Table 10.1). These findings seem to contradict Portesio and Vartalitis' (2009) and Lima's (2012) studies. In Portesio and Vartalitis' (2009) study in Villa María, Córdoba, students considered EFL as a valuable tool but evaluated English as a school subject negatively, considering that the English they learned at school was not of much use in the future. Similarly, Lima (2012), whose study was conducted in Brazil, found that his participants did not believe in the value of EFL learning at secondary school.

Table 10.1 EFL secondary school students' beliefs about the importance assigned to L2, influence of beliefs on motivation, role of culture and use of technology ($n=1522$)

<i>Dimensions/items</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Agreement (%)</i>
<i>Importance assigned to the foreign language</i>		
Learning English will be beneficial for me in the future	1244	82%
English learned at school will be useful for my future	859	57
English is one of the most important school subjects	820	54
English is more difficult than other subjects in the curricula	638	42
<i>Influence of beliefs on motivation</i>		
We are difficult to motivate	986	65
The teacher of English motivates me to learn	818	54
<i>Role of culture</i>		
Culture is an important aspect to be developed in the foreign language class	700	46
The English teacher should teach contents, culture and values	740	49
<i>Use of technology</i>		
Textbooks should be complemented with technological resources	642	45
I learn more when we use the internet in class	459	30
The use of technology in class does not change the way I learn	494	33

The second dimension that showed strong participant agreement was the one titled *language learning strategies*. The vast majority of the participants were definite about their beliefs that language learning strategies should be fostered in the English class (83%). In addition, more than half of the students expressed that they would use learning strategies if they were taught (55%). The students' beliefs seem to be in alignment with the results of many studies in this area of research, which emphasize the importance of explicit strategy instruction, i.e. the systematic and explicit teaching and application of language learning strategies embedded in everyday classroom language instruction (Oxford, 2011; Oxford *et al.*, 2014). In fact, as Oxford (2011) points out, when enhancing strategy-based instruction, teachers are enabling students to take responsibility for their own learning by teaching them how to gain self-control and autonomy. Participants' responses also showed beliefs related to the development of learner autonomy. More than half of the secondary school students in our study (61%) indicated that they believed it was the teacher's task to encourage them to learn on their own (see Table 10.2).

Table 10.2 EFL secondary school students' beliefs about teaching of grammar, language learning strategies and development of reading skill (n=1522)

<i>Dimensions/items</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Agreement (%)</i>
<i>Teaching of grammar</i>		
Grammar activities are the ones that help me the most in my foreign language acquisition process	865	57
The teacher should foster grammar self-discovery	655	43
It is useful that the teacher explains the grammar rules	1199	79
Learning English means, to a great extent, learning its grammar	1044	69
Knowing about grammar rules is not enough to be able to communicate in English	824	54
<i>Language learning strategies</i>		
I think I would use LLS, if taught	831	55
Language learning strategies should be fostered in the English class	1252	83
Strategies are difficult to apply	477	32
The teacher should encourage students to learn on their own	925	61
<i>Development of reading skills</i>		
English classes at school help me understand written texts	845	56
I learn better in the English class when we read authentic texts, such as magazines, newspapers and information from web pages	531	55

The responses for the other dimensions did not reflect as much agreement as for the two above. Specifically, in regard to participants' *motivational aspects*, 65% expressed that they considered they were, in general, difficult to motivate: a surprising finding when observing that a high number of students had rated English as beneficial for their future. In fact, previous studies on motivation have found that students who perceived English as important were motivated to learn (Genç & Aydin, 2011). Interestingly, more than half of the students (54%) believed it was the teacher of English who motivated them to learn (see Table 10.1). Students' answers seem to place a lot of responsibility on the teacher as an external source of motivation.

Beliefs toward *the importance of developing cultural competence* in the English class were also explored in our study. Almost half of the participants (46%) manifested that this was an important aspect to be developed in the EFL class, and 49% believed that the English teacher should develop not only linguistic but also intercultural competence by addressing their own culture and that of others (see Table 10.1). Given these results, it would be interesting to engage in more in-depth studies in this respect, since cultural competence in the secondary school curricula does not seem to be receiving much attention (a conclusion made by Salcedo and Sacchi [2014] in their study of EFL teachers in Río Cuarto, Argentina). Their results suggested that even though teachers believed in the teaching of culture, they did not integrate it into their teaching practices due to a variety of contextual factors, including the content of the course curriculum, time constraints and lack of pedagogical knowledge.

Another dimension explored was in relation to the students' beliefs about *the use of technology* in the English class. When asked whether textbooks should be supplemented with technological resources, participants' responses varied considerably. While almost 37.5% reported being indifferent to this issue, 45% manifested to be in favor of technology integration and another 8% expressed never having thought about this topic.

No definite answer was provided to the item 'I learn more when we use the internet in the English class' since students agreed and disagreed about this issue in equal percentages (30%). A similar indefinite stance was found in relation to the actual use of technology in the EFL class: 33% believed technology could help change the way that the FL was learned; 28% did not believe that the use of the internet promoted better learning; 25% did not have a definite opinion on the topic; and 15% expressed never having thought about it (see Table 10.1). This is an interesting finding as it was expected that students would have a more favorable attitude toward technology given that in 2010, the national government implemented a nationwide digital inclusion program called 'Conectar Igualdad' (*Connecting Equality*) (Poder Ejecutivo de la Nación, 2010, Act 459/10) with the aims of

enhancing the public school system and reducing digital, educational and social gaps in the country (see the chapters by Banfi and Veciño in this volume for a description of Conectar Igualdad and a project implemented under Conectar Igualdad). Between 2010 and 2012, this program made possible the distribution of about 3,000,000 netbooks among students and teachers from Argentinean public high schools, schools of special education and teacher training institutes (Fontdevila, 2012). The conclusions of a study carried out about the ‘Conectar Igualdad’ program in a school in Jujuy, Argentina, are somewhat similar to our results. Vásquez Luc and López (2015: 14, own translation) reported that ‘not in all cases the changes brought about by the netbooks in the classroom and its dynamics have been positive or enriching’.

Beliefs about the way that *grammatical competence* should be developed were also a focus of our inquiry. The results of this study revealed that the majority of students (79%) found it useful that the teacher explained grammar rules. Also, for a high number of participants (69%) learning English meant, to a great extent, learning its grammar. These results seem to favor a deductive approach to grammar instruction, and are in consonance with Loewen *et al.*’s (2009) findings, which revealed that students preferred to be explained grammar rules. However, in contrast to these results, in another response item, 43% of the participants indicated that the teacher should foster grammar self-discovery. Therefore, a contradiction could be observed in relation to how students conceive the most useful approach to learn grammar, since students reported to believe that both inductive and deductive approaches were the best ones. Still, regardless of the approach to grammar instruction favored by the students, in our study, more than half of the participants (57%) believed that grammar activities were the ones that helped them the most in their EFL learning process (see Table 10.2). This belief might stem from the fact that in our secondary school context, many teachers conceive teaching as the development of linguistic competence and, to this end, engage students mostly in grammar exercises (Milanesio, 2014). However, a total of 54% of the participants stated that knowing grammar rules was not enough to be able to communicate in English. This finding, once again, seems to reconfirm the complex and conflicting nature of beliefs.

Regarding the *development of reading skills*, more than half of the participants (56%) believed that the instruction received in the five years of schooling attended at the moment of data collection had been conducive to the enhancement of their reading skills. During the last 20 years, there has been a focus on the development of reading skills in the English secondary school curricula, especially in the last two years of the specialized cycle. In 1997, for instance, Longhini *et al.* (2004) proposed implementing a reading approach to instruction designed to foster the simultaneous development of both ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ skills on the basis of an interactive,

constructivist and process-oriented model. In this way, the joint action of teacher, student and text would be promoted. Agreement (55%) was also found in the participants' responses as to the type of activities that they believed were the most useful in reading classes: activities based on authentic texts taken from magazines and newspapers (see Table 10.2).

Conclusion and Implications

The results reported here constitute an exploration of secondary school students' insights into EFL teaching and learning, which may impact the way that students and teachers approach the processes of learning and teaching. As shown above, these findings reflect the complex, multifaceted and sometimes contradictory nature of beliefs.

In this study, our students' voices express clear views about what they consider should be offered in their EFL classes in secondary schools: they favor the use of authentic texts; prefer a deductive approach to the teaching of grammar; think that the teaching of language learning strategies should be enhanced; and believe that the teaching of EFL in their years in secondary school has led to the development of their reading competence. At the same time, they believe that English is important in their education, while acknowledging being difficult to motivate and not having a definite positioning about the roles of technology and cultural competence in the EFL class. Students' beliefs seem to be in consonance with the curricular guidelines proposed by the government. However, sometimes, teaching practices might be in dissonance with some of these beliefs. These connections are beyond the scope of this study and will be addressed in upcoming work.

The findings revealed in this study give rise to a variety of pedagogical and research implications that could help advance the field of L2 education. Most specifically, we believe that there are two specific pedagogical implications and a research implication that address the need for teachers to engage in continuing professional development (CPD).

The first classroom implication draws from participants' beliefs regarding the potential benefit of language learning strategies. We believe that our findings should serve as a catalyst for the adoption of a strategy-based approach in our secondary school classrooms. However, adopting such an approach may not always be feasible due to lack of published materials suitable to our students' learning needs. In order to fill this gap, for more than 20 years, our research team has studied different ways of implementing strategy-based instruction, and published EFL learning materials for secondary school students with the aim of helping them develop their autonomy as language learners (Longhini & Martinez, 1997). We adhere to the idea that the strategies to be taught should be tailored to the aims of instruction, be context-specific and be related to the task

at hand (Oxford *et al.*, 2014). In light of this idea, more materials should be designed and used in secondary schools since the inclusion of language learning strategies could help democratize the EFL classroom, in the sense that they can provide students of heterogeneous socioeconomic and educational backgrounds with similar learning opportunities and ways of approaching the learning process. In Oxford *et al.* (2014: 18), it is claimed that in Argentina there is an 'urgent need for teachers to appeal to resources that [can] help them offer their students similar academic opportunities, that is, resources that can help them equalize in the classroom what is so unequal in the outside world'. (See Pozzi in this volume for a study on classroom inequities in Argentine classrooms.)

Another pedagogical implication of this study leads to the reconsideration of how grammatical competence can be developed in the secondary school English class. The participants of our study assigned an important role to grammar learning since they reported that grammar activities were of great help in their English language learning process. However, there was no consensus regarding the preferred way in which grammatical instruction should be delivered in secondary school, since both deductive and inductive approaches were favored.

Our participants' preference toward a deductive approach to grammar teaching may be explained by the way in which they were taught English at elementary and secondary school. As Milanese (2014) affirms, most teachers in Argentina seem to favor deductive grammar approaches. Consequently, if the influence of the so-called 'apprenticeship of observation'³ phenomenon (Lortie, 1975) is considered, it would seem that students in our study believe that those practices which they have observed to take place in their lessons and experienced for years are the only ways to learn grammar. However, research suggests that an inductive approach to the teaching of grammar seems to offer students a meaningful and memorable way of learning the grammar of an FL (Brown, 2007). In light of this, we propose that grammar instruction at secondary school in our context could also be implemented following a learner-centered approach in which *form-meaning* connections are promoted (Nunan, 2003; Sharwood Smith, 1981). In this type of rule-discovery learning approach, learners are encouraged to identify for themselves the relevant grammatical features present in the oral or written input that will guide them toward the comprehension of the relationship existing between certain grammatical forms and the meanings which they signal (Ellis, 2004). In this sense, learners first observe a number of specific instances of a certain grammatical pattern, and then, on the basis of that observation, are able to infer a general principle. It is an approach that intends to bring order, clarity and meaning to learners' experiences (Eisenstein, 1987). The guidelines for grammar discovery learning can be framed as follows: focus on one teaching point at a time; keep meaning in focus; get learners 'to do something' with the input (VanPatten & Sanz,

1995); focus on the development of procedural rather than declarative knowledge (Nunan, 2003); use both oral and written input; and check students' comprehension or rule activation (Widodo, 2006). Many of these premises are illustrated in the contextually bound handbook *Understanding Grammar: Grammar Awareness*, which was the result of a three-year action research study conducted with third-year Argentinean secondary school students (Valsecchi & Busso, 2003). It is worth noting that after a certain grammar teaching approach is adopted, it is always necessary to assess its acceptance among the population where the proposal is implemented – surveying students and teachers alike – in search of possible adjustments or modifications.

The last major implication relates to the need for EFL teachers in our secondary school setting to be mindful of their teaching practices and their students' learning process. In light of this, we suggest that secondary school teachers should be encouraged and given spaces for CPD through which they can reflect on their classroom practices, and thereby on their students' learning experiences. Through reflection, teachers will be able to think consciously of what, how and why things are done in the classroom (Burton, 2009) and take the necessary actions to better cater for their students' needs. We propose that secondary school teachers should engage in CPD projects, which involve being researchers of their students' learning process as well as of their teaching practices. Such instances of CPD may include: (a) exploration of students and teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning EFL through different artifacts and classroom activities; (b) reflective meetings between teachers and supervisors; and (c) collaborative reflection among teachers within the same institution and other secondary school settings.

Regardless of the specific instances that CPD teachers choose to engage in, it is important to note that long-lasting changes, conducive of potential success, tend to be those that are gradual and bottom-up instead of radical and imposed in a top-down manner, for example, by government policies (Hayes, 2014). In this vein, in order for changes to be intrinsic and meaningful, we firmly believe that when planning and implementing CPD projects, realities of the local setting should be acknowledged. In the case of our EFL secondary school setting, any CPD initiative would need to consider contextual factors, such as teachers' heavy workload, possible unfamiliarity with CPD activities, the institutional support they would receive and lack of interdisciplinary work that tends to exist among teachers in the same institution (involving English teachers and teachers who teach the other school subjects) and between teachers and supervisors. These aspects that broadly describe our secondary school setting will surely influence the types of professional development activities that participants choose to engage in, their experiences throughout the projects, as well as the final outcomes of such actions.

Final Remarks

This study on secondary school students' beliefs about EFL learning in Argentina has intended to provide a description of the EFL secondary school context and explain the role assigned to English in the current curricular designs. It has also served to give voice to students' views, which are otherwise mostly unheard in the educational context. The results obtained have provided us with a first picture of the beliefs that secondary school students hold about EFL learning and teaching in the Argentine setting, and have thereby offered the possibility to engage in deeper inquiries of the phenomenon in follow-up studies.

Findings indicate the presence of salient beliefs about the benefit of strategic learning in the EFL classroom, the role of grammar in EFL learning and the importance of learning EFL in a Spanish-speaking country like Argentina. Participants valued the reading skill instruction received at school, and considered their teachers to be motivational sources and responsible for enhancing autonomy. Also, students' responses suggest somewhat contradictory beliefs about the role that technology and culture play in their FL acquisition process. It was surprising to find indecisive answers in relation to the use of technology in the language class as this population is mostly composed of digital natives. On the other hand, the inclusion of culture in the curriculum has been a more recent requirement by the Ministry of Education, a reason for which many students might not have considered it an important component of learning an FL. Undoubtedly, more qualitative research is needed on these issues.

What is certain, as mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, is that inquiring into secondary school students' beliefs about EFL learning and teaching can be enriching for students, teachers and educators. Firstly, students would benefit from knowing about their own beliefs as these would inform them about how to better approach the learning process. In addition, exploring students' beliefs would provide teachers with an understanding of what specific approaches to embrace in order to cater for their students' needs. Finally, it is likely that inquiring into students' beliefs will impact curricular design policies and practices as they will shape the way that FLs are taught in the Argentine secondary school context.

Questions for Reflection

- (1) How is ESL/EFL learning viewed at the secondary school level in your teaching context?
- (2) In what ways do you think students' beliefs can impact instructional practices at the secondary school level?

- (3) In what ways could you explore the beliefs that students hold in the institutional setting you teach? How do you think those beliefs would inform and permeate your teaching practice?

Notes

- (1) In the province of Cordoba, Argentina, high school lasts six years.
 (2) The studies within the normative approach describe and classify the type of beliefs which learners have. This approach generally resorts to Likert-type questionnaires, such as the BALLI (Horwitz, 1988) to collect data.
 (3) Lortie (1975: 61) asserts that 'the average student has spent 13,000 hours in direct contact with classroom teachers by the time he graduates from high school'.

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