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Revisiting Foreign Language Teacher Beliefs

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Abstract
This state of the art paper revisits foreign language teacher beliefs. The first part of the paper reviews some factors that have an impact on foreign/second language (L2) teachers' beliefs. The second part outlines some characteristics of teacher beliefs by providing examples from a range of research studies conducted in the field. In the final part, the paper attempts to illuminate the complex nature of L2 teacher beliefs and belief formation processes by addressing Moscovici's social representations theory. The author argues that Moscovici's social representations theory, and Abric's central kernel theory developed as a sub-theory of social representations theory offer the theoretical foundation to explain differing aspects of L2 teacher beliefs. The author claims that central kernels theory provides a clear distinction between peripheral and core beliefs. The author concludes by suggesting future research focusing on L2 teachers' peripheral and core beliefs.

Keywords: Beliefs, core beliefs, peripheral beliefs, central kernels theory, teacher education

Introduction

Teaching is a dynamic process that requires on-the-spot decision making and acting to meet the needs of learners. These decisions are often viewed as reflections of teachers' beliefs, and not necessarily the reflection of the official theory adopted by their institutions. There is now substantial evidence to claim that teachers' beliefs influence their decisions about their teaching practices and affect what happens in the classroom. Relevant literature on foreign/second language (henceforth L2) teacher beliefs, and especially research done in educational psychology, have clearly demonstrated that teachers' beliefs about learning/teaching often lead them to modify the 'official theory' and adopt approaches that are compatible with their beliefs. Borg (1999c) maintained that teachers' tend to use their personal theories (e.g. beliefs, cognitions etc.) to guide them in their teaching practices when instructional contexts are not well defined. Teachers' beliefs about learning and teaching, whether explicit or implicit, thus affect everything teachers do in their classrooms.

The belief construct involves a multitude of complex and interacting agents. Understanding this complexity, regarding teachers' beliefs, necessitates going beyond mainstream L2 teaching/learning theories. Substantial amount of research concerning L2 teacher belief has been conducted in diverse contexts. In the L2 belief literature, influenced by different theories from diverse disciplines L2 teacher beliefs have appeared under different names (e.g. teacher thinking, teacher cognition, hidden agendas, pedagogical knowledge etc). In some cases, different terms are used to define the same concept and in other cases, the same label is utilized to explain different notions. Borg (2003a) reviewed 64 L2 teacher belief studies from the1970s until the year 2002 and documented seventeen different teacher belief terminologies that appeared in these studies. In this paper, the term 'L2 teacher beliefs' is used as a general

term to encompass various conceptualizations used in the teacher belief literature (e.g. cognitions, preconceptions, teacher thinking, pedagogical knowledge, assumptions, hidden agendas, perceptions etc).

The L2 teacher belief literature is vast and covers a wide range of topics. Some researchers have looked into L2 teacher beliefs by focusing on some common L2 issues such as: error correction, grammar teaching, teacher and student role expectations, testing innovation, the use of L1 (mother tongue) in L2 classrooms, learner and teacher perceptions of language activities, teacher and learner beliefs about oral language instruction, and corrective feedback and so forth.

In the first part of the paper, drawing upon the L2 teacher belief literature, I provide a brief description of some factors that influence L2-teacher-belief-formation. In the second part, I sketch some differing characteristics of L2 teacher beliefs by providing anecdotal, experiential and empirical examples from the L2 teacher belief literature. Then, I attempt to shed light on the L2-teacher-belief-formation process, and the complex nature of L2 teacher beliefs by using Moscovici's social representations theory and the central kernel theory (Abric, 1989) developed under this theory. Finally, with the help of central kernel theory, I provide a theoretical explanation for some contradictory elements in L2 teacher's beliefs and offer a distinct categorization of L2 teacher peripheral and core beliefs.

Factors Influencing Teacher Belief Formation

There is now a consensus that L2 teachers acquire their beliefs about teaching through their life experiences in society, prior schooling, professional education, and teaching experience.

It is assumed that teachers' beliefs, like all other beliefs in general, have a cultural dimension, as well as personal. Cultural beliefs that reflect views of the society the individual has been brought up in, form a kind of base on which the individual constructs other beliefs (see Gabillon, 2005). Cultural beliefs are considered to be more resistant to change than other beliefs formed later in life.

Relevant educational and the L2 belief literature provides us with evidence that L2 teachers' prior learning contexts play a central role in shaping their beliefs and therefore their classroom implementations. Williams and Burden (1997) claimed that individual's construction of his/her world is affected by his/her previous experiences. Early relationships with significant others (e.g. teachers) are argued to be representing a prototype that have an influence on what type of teachers individuals become (Ainscough, 1997). Borg (2003a) maintained that research in teacher beliefs provided evidence that teachers' prior experiences as learners inform their pedagogical beliefs and influence their teaching experience throughout their careers. He claimed that in order for teacher education programs to be effective, teacher trainers need to take into account student teachers' prior beliefs. He called for a need for teacher educators to uncover student teachers' prior beliefs and use them in shaping their classroom practices and behaviors. In the same vein, Williams and Burden (1997) asserted that teachers' deep-rooted beliefs about language learning would infuse into their classroom performances more than a particular methodology they have learnt during their teacher education programs.

The teacher belief literature provides us with evidence on how teacher education programs influence shaping teachers' beliefs (Hall, 2005). Hall (2005) claimed that teacher education programs equip teachers with professional knowledge and the knowledge that teachers have on the subject matter, teaching methods, student learning

guide them in adjusting their prior beliefs and to determine which approaches to teaching/learning to employ.

Borg (2003a) asserted that the teaching context determines the extent to which teachers' are able to implement their teaching compatible with their beliefs. In the same vein, Flores and Day (2006) highlighted the strong influence of personal histories and the contextual factors of the workplace.

Borg (2003a), after having a thorough review of both educational and the SLL/FLL literature, suggested that teachers' own educational backgrounds (including schooling and professional education), teaching practice and their teaching contexts are interacting and influencing factors in shaping teachers' beliefs about teaching. To sum up, Borg (2003a) considered the following three main factors to have an impact on teachers' belief formation: 1) prior language learning experience; 2) teacher education; 3) classroom practice.

Contrasting Aspects of L2 teacher Beliefs

Teacher beliefs are considered to be personal and social/cultural; implicit and explicit; practical and theoretical; dynamic and resistant; complex and systematic entities involving many facets.

L2 Teacher beliefs are personal and social

Many educationalists viewed teacher beliefs as both personal and social/cultural entities (e.g. Cabaroglu & Roberts, 2000; Chacón, 2005; Clandinin, 1989; Flores & Day, 2006). In general, the fact that teacher beliefs are both personal and social is commonly accepted; however, different scholars have put different degrees of emphasis on personal, contextual and social aspects of teacher beliefs.

It is stated that teachers' beliefs are mostly personal entities because each teacher's understanding of his/her situation is unique (e.g. Borg, 2003; Chacón, 2005; Kagan, 1992a, 1992b; Mok, 1994; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Williams & Burden, 1997). Williams and Burden (1997) asserted that what individuals understand and know, differ from individual to individual, because individuals' construction of their beliefs is mainly the result of their personal life experiences. Borg (1999a) defined teacher cognition (i.e. beliefs) as a set of personally defined understandings of teaching practice.

Although many specialists studying teacher beliefs have viewed these unique experiences as mainly being personal, many specialists and researchers in the field have pointed to the influence of social, cultural and contextual environments in shaping teachers' beliefs about L2 teaching. It is assumed that teachers' beliefs, like all other beliefs in general, also have a cultural aspect. Thus, beliefs are considered to be formed early in life and culturally bound. It has been widely stated that teachers' pedagogical knowledge (i.e. ensemble of theoretical and practical beliefs) is the result of the interaction between the teachers' past and present experiences within their social/cultural environments. That is, teachers past schooling experiences; their present teaching contexts, and the theoretical professional education they have received directly influence their approaches to teaching (Borg, 2003; Freeman, 2002; Hall, 2005; Mok, 1994). Miller (2005) argued that teachers' beliefs and practices are explicitly linked to their interactions and experiences with diverse individuals and contexts, which have diverse influence on teachers' beliefs. Ainscough (1997) considered teacher beliefs to be both equally personal and social artifacts by pointing to the role of 'apprenticeship observation' in shaping teacher beliefs. She claimed that future teachers internalize the teaching models they have been observing as learners. She highlighted the importance

of prior observations as social learning artifacts: "…the activation of this latent culture during formal training and later school experience is a major influence on shaping teachers' conceptions of the teaching role and performance." (Ainscough, 1997: 573).
Chacón (2005) viewed teaching context as of primary importance and stated that within the complex process of teaching teachers' actions are mainly the function of the interplay between their beliefs (e.g. perspectives, perceptions, and assumptions) and their contexts of teaching. Flores and Day's longitudinal research (2006) revealed how the interplay between contextual and cultural factors influenced the teachers' thinking. Similarly, Cabaroglu and Roberts (2000) emphasized both personal and social aspect of teacher beliefs by stating that teacher beliefs are developed through non-stop interactions between personal meaning-making and social validation and invalidation of these meanings.

Teacher beliefs are practical and theoretical

Teacher beliefs are considered both practical and theoretical entities. However, many L2 teacher belief researchers viewed teachers' pedagogical beliefs neither merely practical nor purely theoretical reflections of their professional education. Clandinin (1985) claimed that teachers develop and use a special kind of knowledge (e.g. a kind of belief/image) repertoire, which is a combination of both personal and theoretical reflections. He called this knowledge 'personal practical knowledge'. He asserted that this knowledge is neither merely theoretical, as regards theories of learning, teaching, and curriculum, nor it is merely practical but composed of both kinds of knowledge, blended by the personal background and characteristics of the teacher (Clandinin, 1989). Biggs (1994) claimed that teachers, influenced by their beliefs, interpret and modify the official theory (i.e. official curriculum, theories of teaching/ learning etc) to adjust it to their beliefs. Smith (2001) noted that theory in-use (i.e. a blend of theoretical and practical knowledge) draws mainly on implicit knowledge and many people are not aware of the gap between these two theories.
Williams and Burden (1997) asserted that teachers' previously acquired deep-rooted beliefs about language learning infuse into their classroom performances more than a particular methodology they have learnt during their teacher education programs. Woods & Cakir (2011) viewed teachers' theoretical knowledge and teacher beliefs (i.e. practical knowledge) as interconnected and inseparable concepts. In their study, they developed a framework to look into the personal-impersonal and theoretical-practical dimensions of teacher belief system. Their study suggested a dynamic interaction between the teachers' theoretical and practical knowledge.

Teacher beliefs are implicit and explicit

The literature on teacher beliefs provides us with evidence indicating that teacher beliefs can be both implicit and explicit (see Ainscough, 1997; Borg, 2003; Breen, 1991; Freeman, 1993). Ainscough (1997) argued that teachers' beliefs form their 'subconscious schema'. Kagan (1992b) defined teacher beliefs as being mostly tacit and often unconsciously held assumptions about teaching, students, learning and learning materials and so forth. Similarly, Clandinin's study (1989) indicated that teachers' personal practical knowledge is partly in the form of non-propositional images that cannot be expressed explicitly by relating them directly to rules or principles, and that they have experiential origins and moral and emotional dimensions.
However, some other research done in the field pointed out that some teacher beliefs are more explicit than others are, and that such beliefs are more easily expressed. Different individuals' diverse personal experiences are also claimed to have different effects on

how explicitly they hold certain beliefs. M. Ellis (2006) based her research principles on the idea that 'teachers' prior personal experiences as foreign language learners strengthen their understanding of second language teaching. Her study suggested that non-native L2 teachers could express their understanding of their teaching practices more explicitly than native monolingual L2 teachers could. She claimed that teachers who have already experienced L2 learning would certainly have different beliefs about L2 learning than a native speaker who has never had such an experience. Her research findings asserted that foreign language learning experience builds in powerful insights, which interact with formal professional knowledge, and beliefs gained through informal sources and life experiences.

Teacher beliefs are dynamic and resistant

The issue 'whether teacher beliefs are stable or dynamic' has long been a controversial topic in belief studies. Although, it is commonly stated that teachers' thinking is influenced by experience and is ever changing, the results obtained via different research studies presented often contradictory conclusions concerning teacher belief change. Ainscough (1997) claimed that teacher beliefs (i.e. teachers' personal theories) "...are subject to an ongoing reappraisal of the teaching context in which they are engaged…teachers vary in the degree to which they introspect on experience…" (Ainscough 1997: 574). This on-going professional experience which is challenged via interactions with different learning-teaching contexts (e.g. learners, teaching materials, teaching, school traditions and so on) leads teachers to assess and fine-tune their beliefs and their personal theories about teaching. Several research studies conducted on teacher beliefs have supported the view on this dynamic nature of teacher beliefs.

The studies done by Clandinin (1989), and Cabaroglu and Roberts (2000) indicated that pre-service teachers' beliefs are developmental, dynamic and not stable. Similarly, Flores and Day's longitudinal study (2006) illustrated an example of how new teachers' beliefs were shaped and reshaped over time. Flores & Day's (2006) study indicated that teachers' personal and professional histories, pre-service training and school culture have mediating influences determining stability or dynamism in teachers' pedagogical beliefs. They noted that stability and dynamism of beliefs are determined by the degree of impact individuals' personal experiences have on them. Kagan's study, which was based on a historical record of one teacher's beliefs (1992b), illustrated an example of how a teacher's pedagogical beliefs could evolve over a year time. Milner's research results (2005) suggested that teachers' beliefs and practices develop and change through their interactions and experiences with different individuals. Freeman's study (1993) also provided some evidence on the dynamic aspect of teacher beliefs. His study demonstrated how a group of foreign language teachers incorporated new ideas in their thinking. Freeman's study (1993) investigated the ways the teachers reconstructed their classroom practice through assigning new/different meanings to their actions. He noted that during the belief change process the teachers used specific mechanisms to construct new understandings of their teachings.

However, we also know that some teacher beliefs (especially key beliefs or core beliefs) can also be resistant to change. Peacock's longitudinal study which investigated a group of trainee L2 teachers' beliefs (2001a), provided evidence of stability in some key beliefs about language learning (e.g. beliefs about the importance of learning a lot of vocabulary and grammar rules; and the belief that people who speak more than one language are very intelligent etc.). Kagan (1992b) stated that there is not enough substantial direct evidence regarding the processes that influence change in teacher beliefs. Kagan (1992a) stated that teachers use the theoretical information given in

teacher education programs to confirm their pre-existing beliefs. She expressed her views as follows:

"…personal beliefs and images that preservice candidates bring to programs of teacher education usually remain inflexible. Candidates tend to use the information provided in coursework to confirm rather than to confront and correct their pre-existing beliefs. Thus, a candidate's personal beliefs and images determine how much knowledge the candidate acquires from a preservice program and how it is interpreted." (Kagan, 1992: 154).

Hall (2005) claimed that it is more difficult to change beliefs that have been held for a long time (see also Macaro, 2001). She explained that teacher beliefs which were formed by the influence of their previous experiences as former learners are comparatively more difficult to change than newly formed ones that are still developing. However, she acknowledged that it is never impossible to change teachers' knowledge and belief systems if these are challenged in a more creative way.

Teacher beliefs are complex and systematic

Research on teacher beliefs has primarily focused on relationships among teachers' beliefs and their teaching practice. The results obtained, in general, have revealed a strong relationship between teachers' beliefs and their practices asserting the idea that teachers' actions are linked to their belief systems and that teachers' beliefs are organized in some way. O'Loughlin (1989) stated that teachers' cognitive structures are organized in some form of a system, network, or pattern that teachers use to guide their actions. He explained that teachers who believe teaching to be a didactic and authoritarian activity appear to teach in a way quite consistent with this belief system, and teachers who believe learning takes place in a student-directed-activity organize their teaching around appropriate learning activities and encourage student participation. Some research studies also studied possible correlations between different belief factors. Many of these studies illustrated that teachers' beliefs are mainly clustered around themes and that there is a correlation between these themes and teachers' beliefs and therefore the way they teach (e.g. Tercanlioglu, 2005; Peacock, 2001a).

Freeman's longitudinal study (1991) examined teacher thinking and perceptions focusing on how the teachers modified and improved what they did through formal education. He stated that the use of shared professional discourse in this formal education program contributed to the increase of the complexity of the teachers' thinking about their teaching. Basturkmen, Loewen, & R. Ellis's study (2004) indicated a weak relationship between the teachers' practices and stated beliefs regarding focus-on-form during learners' performances of communicative tasks. In the same vein, Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver, & Thwaite's study (2001) discovered a very complex relationship between the teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices.

Flores and Day (2006) stated that to become an effective teacher is a long and complex process and emphasized the multi-dimensional, idiosyncratic and context-specific nature of teaching and the complex interplay between different (sometimes) conflicting teacher perceptions, beliefs and practices. Similarly, Freeman (1993) stated that teachers use specific mechanisms to construct new meanings and asserted that this complex mechanism has not yet been well understood. Phipps and Borg (2009) maintained that teachers' have complex belief systems. They claimed that not all beliefs have the same effect on teachers' actions. They argued that that the teachers' core beliefs were most influential in shaping teachers' instructional decisions than their peripheral beliefs about

language learning. However, they did not provide a scheme to help differentiate between these beliefs.

L2 Teacher Beliefs viewed from Moscovi's Social Representations Theory

In the aforementioned review of the literature, L2 teacher beliefs are regarded as having contradictory aspects. These contradictory aspects of L2 teacher beliefs (e.g. teacher beliefs being personal and social, practical and theoretical, implicit and explicit, dynamic and resistant, systemic and complex) could be better comprehended when they are viewed from the belief appropriation process and the central kernel theory, which are explained under the framework of Moscovi's (1984) social representations theory. In this section, I will attempt to shed light on differing characteristics of teacher beliefs by drawing upon the belief appropriation process and the central kernel theory, which constitute a part in Moscovici's social representations theory. This theory provides a theoretical foundation to explain the L2-teacher-belief-formation process and to understand differing facets of the L2 teacher's beliefs.

Moscovi's belief appropriation process and Abric's central kernel theory

Moscovi's theory of social representations is concerned with the process through which knowledge (e.g. beliefs, images, ideas etc.) is produced, transformed, and transmitted into the social world (Duveen 2000). Moscovici (1984) maintained that when individuals are confronted with a new idea they perceive it as a threat to the sense of continuity, and this fear forces individuals to make the unfamiliar explicit. Moscovici explained that the conflict between the familiar and the unfamiliar is always resolved in favor of the familiar. In other words the unfamiliar, after having been enhanced and transformed, is always absorbed into an already known category (see Figure 1). Moscovici called this process the 'appropriation process'. According to Moscovici this process is composed of two complementary and interdependent mechanisms, which are called 'anchoring', and 'objectification'.

Anchoring: The first mechanism aims to anchor the unknown to a familiar category. In other words anchoring is a process whereby the unfamiliar is absorbed into a known category, which is familiar to individuals who are members of the same society/group (Duveen and Llyod 1990).

Objectification: The aim of the second mechanism is to objectify the unknown, that is, to turn something abstract into something almost concrete, which the individual already knows (Moscovici, 1984). In other words, it is a process whereby the individual transforms the unfamiliar into a more significant and easily comprehensible image. Moscovici (1984) maintained that such a process reassures and comforts individuals and re-establishes a sense of continuity.

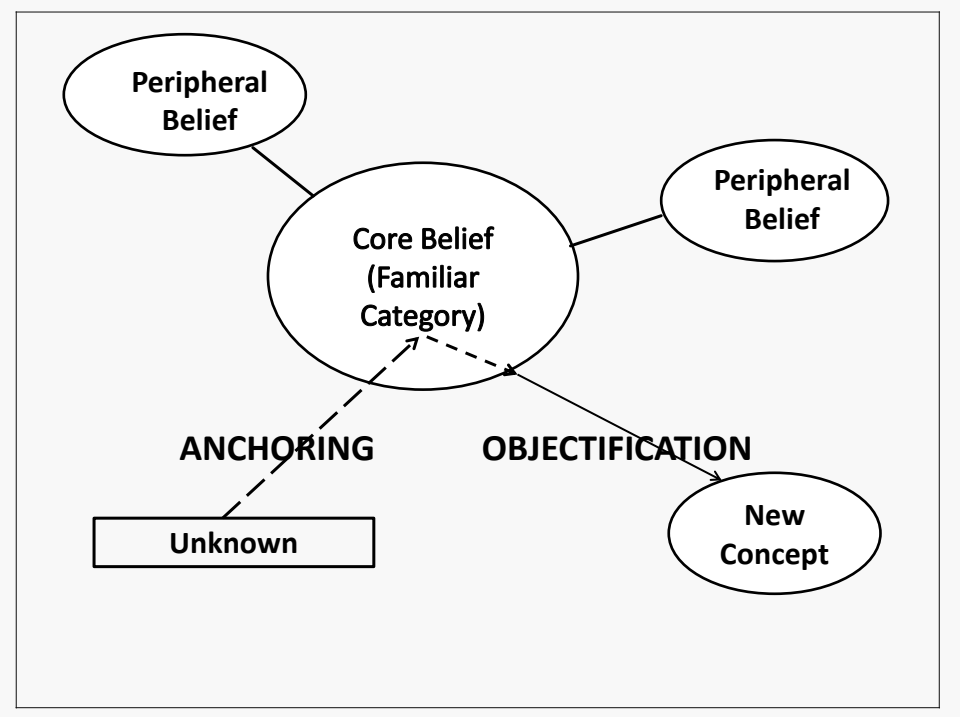


Figure 1: Schematic representation of Moscovici's appropriation process

Moscovici (1998) stressed that anything unknown is always anchored to an already existing concept and this new idea is modified during the course of anchoring and objectification process. However, he argued that in the course of this process the familiar always remains unchanged. Moscovici (1984) explained that networks of beliefs (e.g. ideas, metaphors, images etc.) are connected to one another around a core belief (i.e. a central kernel, a prototype that represents a class). He maintained that although beliefs take different shapes with different values there is always a 'core belief', which connects them all to one another (See Figure 2.). According to Abric's central kernel theory each belief is composed of 'stable schemes' and peripheral schemes are formed around these central kernels [the concept of core beliefs was elaborated by Moscovici but the central kernel theory developed it into a sub-theory under social representations theory by Abric (1984, 1989)].

Moscovici and Vignaux (1994) explained that the stable elements dominate the meaning of the peripheral elements, and that the core beliefs (i.e. central kernels) have a stronger resistance to change than the newly formed peripheral schemes. According to Moscovici these central kernels are social representations (i.e. social/cultural beliefs) which are created within society by members of that society. Moscovici and Vignaux (1994) stated that core beliefs express the permanence and uniformity of the social while the peripheral schemes express variability and diversity.

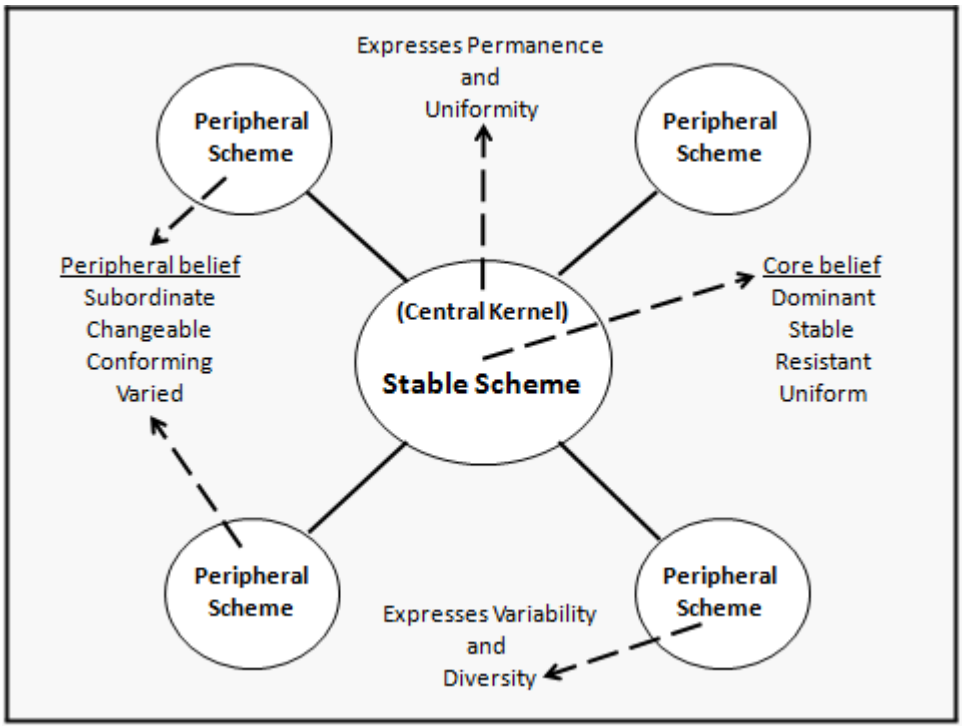


Figure 2: Schematic representation of the central kernel theory

Contrasting aspects of L2 teacher beliefs explained

The researcher views L2-teacher-belief-formation as a dynamic progressive process through anchoring and objectification. This standpoint suggests that the L2 teacher's beliefs are constructed in diverse contexts (e.g. as a learner and L2 learner at school, as a member of a social group, as a student teacher, and as an L2 teacher) through interactions with others. The L2 teacher's beliefs are constructed, reconstructed and appropriated each time s/he is confronted with a new concept in his/her social environment. As the L2 teacher gains experiences in diverse contexts, new beliefs are formed and these new peripheral beliefs are anchored to the core beliefs that already exist in the teacher's belief repertoire. The core beliefs the L2 teacher possesses bear the social benchmarks of the society and dominate his/her peripheral L2 beliefs. The L2 teacher's core beliefs are uniform and well-organized schemes, which can be easily understood and expressed by the teacher. Peripheral beliefs on the other hand are less systematic and more difficult for the individual to retrieve and express explicitly. The L2 teacher's peripheral beliefs are more personal in nature and they are less resistant to change, therefore, they can be mediated (see Figure 3).

The L2 teacher's belief about teaching are constructed at school as a student, as a language learner and later in his/her professional contexts. The L2 teacher's theoretical-pedagogical beliefs are constructed much later in life during his/her professional education via interactions with other student teachers and teacher educators. Beliefs, which are formed earlier life, are the prototypes that serve as a kind of reference when L2 teachers are constructing their beliefs about their professions. In other words, these prototypes which constitute the L2 teacher's core beliefs reflect views of the society and form a kind of base on which the L2 teacher constructs other beliefs (e.g. theoretical-pedagogical or practical-pedagogical beliefs). These core beliefs often precede the L2 teacher's experience in his/her profession. At times, the peripheral beliefs and the core beliefs the L2 teacher possesses on a topic might bear some inconsistent elements that are unclear even for the teacher herself/himself.

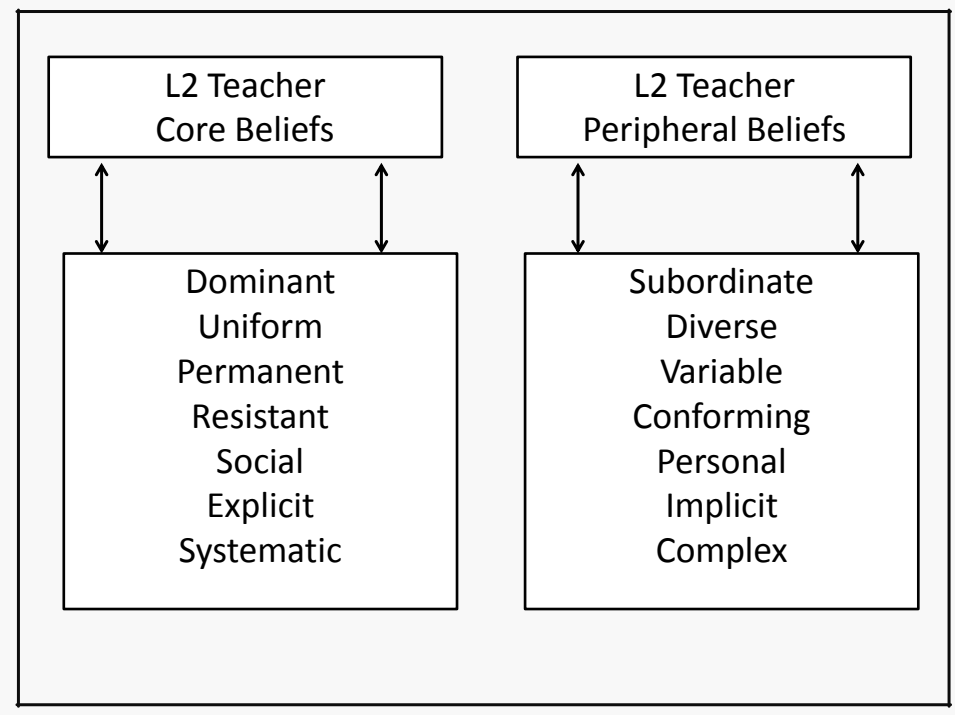


Figure 3: L2 Teacher core beliefs and peripheral beliefs from the perspective of central kernel theory.

Conclusion

Briefly, the differing facets and complex implicit elements in L2 teacher beliefs can be attributed to the peripheral and core belief distinctions. Research into L2 teacher beliefs need to focus on L2 teacher peripheral and core belief distinctions in order to be able to understand conflicting elements in L2 teacher beliefs.

It is important to have a clear vision of what constitutes L2 teachers' core and peripheral beliefs, and how teachers' value and use these beliefs in their professions and which of these beliefs are functional/dysfunctional. I, therefore, recommend further research to investigate distinctions between L2 teachers' core and peripheral beliefs.

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