INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING: THE DYNAMICS OF BELIEFS ABOUT L2 WRITING

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ABSTRACT. *This study investigated the dynamics of 15 university EFL learners' beliefs about L2 writing, as well as the influence of the instruction received on the changes observed. A self-report questionnaire that tapped 5 dimensions of beliefs about writing (person, task, strategy, teacher, and feedback) was administered at two points during an eight-month EAP course. These data were triangulated with those from (i) a retrospective questionnaire completed by the participants, (ii) a retrospective narrative written by the teacher in charge of the EAP course, and (iii) an interview with the same teacher. Results indicate that the instruction received had an effect on the students' beliefs, especially their self-efficacy beliefs, as well as their beliefs about the nature of writing, and about the role of the writing teacher. Adopting a psycholinguistic approach, these findings are discussed with respect to the conditions of the learning context under study, and implications for research and pedagogy are drawn.*

KEY WORDS. *Individual differences, L2 writing, beliefs, second language acquisition, self-efficacy, cognitive conflict, EAP, questionnaires.*

RESUMEN. *En este trabajo se investigó la evolución de las creencias sobre escritura en L2 de un grupo de estudiantes universitarios de inglés como lengua extranjera, así como la influencia del contexto educativo en dicha evolución. Los informantes contestaron un cuestionario sobre 5 dimensiones de la escritura (persona, tarea, estrategias, profesor y respuesta al escrito) en dos momentos distintos de un curso académico en el que realizaban un curso en inglés para fines académicos. Estos datos se triangularon con los procedentes de (i) un cuestionario retrospectivo que contestaron los alumnos; (ii) un recuento retrospectivo escrito por la profesora a cargo del curso de inglés para fines académicos; y (iii) una entrevista con la misma profesora. Los resultados del estudio muestran que la intervención educativa influyó en las creencias de los alumnos, especialmente en lo que respecta a las creencias sobre la auto-eficacia, sobre la tarea de la escritura y sobre el papel de la profesora de escritura. Estos datos se discutirán desde una perspectiva psicolingüística profundizando en la posible influencia del contexto educativo, y se extraerán conclusiones para futuras investigaciones en el campo.*

PALABRAS CLAVE. *Diferencias individuales, escritura en L2, creencias, adquisición de segunda lengua, auto eficacia, conflicto cognitivo, curso de inglés para fines académicos, cuestionarios.*

1. Introduction

A central tenet in current approaches to the study of second language acquisition (SLA) is that research in the field entails the exploration of both the second language (L2) learner's behaviour (*what* L2 learners do), as well as the antecedents and motives behind the learner's engagement in language learning actions (*why* they do what they do). In this context, the study of learner beliefs (see Cotterall, 1999; Kalaja and Barcelos, 2006; Mori, 1999a, 1999b, for reviews) becomes an important area of inquiry given that beliefs are thought to "play a central role in learning experience and achievement" (Cotterall, 1999: 494), and it is assumed that they play a greater role than "knowledge in determining how individuals organize and define tasks and problems and are stronger predictors of behavior" (Nespor, 1987: 311, quoted in Sato and Kleinasser, 2004). This is why in her review of research in the field Barcelos (2006) argues that "understanding students' beliefs means understanding their world and their identity" (p. 8). This inner world and identity encompass the L2 learners' ideas, assumptions, opinions, expectations, values and representations about/of language and language learning (see review of definitions in Barcelos, 2000, 2006).

Despite the relevance of learner beliefs in SLA processes, research in the field is scarce as compared with the scholarly attention paid to other individual differences in SLA (see Dörnyei, 2005, for a recent comprehensive review). Nevertheless, we now have an important body of empirical findings that, collectively considered, have shed light on the set of beliefs L2 learners hold, on the nature of their sets of beliefs, and, very importantly, on the individual and social factors and influences that appear to constrain the formation and development of learner beliefs.

These empirical findings derive from studies that have been framed in various theoretical and methodological frameworks, recently summarized by Barcelos (2000, 2006) as the "normative", "metacognitive", and "contextual" approach, respectively. Echoing disciplinary discussions in educational psychology (cf. Hofer and Pintrich, 2004), these approaches to the study of beliefs in SLA vary in terms of the concept of beliefs that guides research (a key difference being whether beliefs are considered stable or dynamic, on the one hand, and individual or contextual, on the other), and on the purported relationship between beliefs and learner actions, the latter including both general approaches to learning and specific actions operationalized in terms of strategies. Thus, the normative and metacognitive approaches posit a cause-effect relationship, whereas the contextual approach simply suggests that beliefs and actions are interconnected.

The general consensus (see Benson and Lor, 1999) is that language learning actions are conditioned by a higher-order set of mental representations or conceptions which together form the "language learner's mental model" (cf. Devine, Railey, and Boshoff, 1993). These models vary in sophistication and, for instance, in the case of L2 writing, they would range from mono-dimensional mental models (which involve simplistic assumptions about the nature and functions of writing) to multi-dimensional ones (according to which writing is a complex task in which success requires the writer to attend

to various higher- and lower-level concerns). As mentioned earlier, one of the aims of research in the field has been to identify the set of beliefs that guide L2 learners's actions, this being the central focus of studies carried out within the normative approach (cf. Coterall, 1995; Horwitz, 1987, 1988, 1995, 1999; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Yang, 1999; Wen and Johnson, 1997). Another aim of research in the field has been to explore the relationship between beliefs and various cognitive and behavioural learning processes, particularly the relationship between beliefs and strategies (cf. Abraham and Vann, 1987; Elbaum, Berg, and Dodd, 1993; Ely, 1989; Mori, 1999b; Riley, 1997; Wen and Johnson, 1999, Yang, 1999; Victori and Lockart, 1999), as done in the metacognitive approach.

Most of this research has focused on L2 learning (cf. Coterall, 1999; Horwitz, 1987, 1995, 1999; Kalaja and Ferreiro-Barcelos, 2006; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Mori, 1999a, 1999b; Sakui and Gaies, 1999; Wen and Johnson, 1997; Yang, 1999), hence the scarce attention paid to beliefs in relation to L2 use. The study to be presented in this article is an attempt to fill this gap given its focus on writing beliefs. Extending the available research to the field of writing is theoretically and pedagogically relevant: if it is accepted that beliefs change by academic domains (see Buehl, Alexander, and Murphy, 2002), it would seem appropriate to study beliefs in the domain of L2 writing if only because of the importance attached to writing in instructed learning contexts, in general, and in instructed L2 settings, in particular (in terms of both learning to write, and writing to learn the language. See Manchón, forthcoming; Manchón and Roca, 2007).

In addition to identifying the beliefs learners hold, more recent research has also provided empirical evidence for the changing nature of L2 learner beliefs. Rather than seeing them as "stable mental representations that are fixed a-priori constructs" (Kalaja and Ferreiro-Barcelos, 2006, p. 2), learners's beliefs systems are thought to be dynamic in nature (see Alanen, 2006; Barcelos, 2000; Dufva, 2006; Hosenfeld, 2006; Kalaja, 1995; Miler and Ginsberg, 1995; Riley, 1994; Woods, 2006), which is in agreement with the developmental character of a person's belief system posited in educational psychology (cf. Hofer and Pintrich, 2004; Hofer, 2004; Schommer, 1994a, 1994b). However, as recently noted by Barcelos (2006), the way in which "beliefs about SLA develop and evolve" (pag. 28) is still an empirical question and more longitudinal studies are needed. Bearing this in mind, the study to be reported, although not truly longitudinal in nature on methodological grounds, attempted to capture development, in our case focusing on an unexplored dimension of SLA, L2 writing: we sought to document possible changes in the students' beliefs system about the key elements of the act of writing in an instructional setting, i.e. themselves as writers, the very task of writing, and the writing teacher.

Closely related to dynamism that characterizes the formation of belief systems, another main finding of this research is that beliefs are culturally and socially mediated (Chan and Elliot, 2002; Li, 2004, 2005). Of special interest is the empirical evidence on the impact that educational experiences exert on the formation of beliefs (Alanen, 2006; Elbaum, Berg, and Dodd, 1993; Gan, 2004; Sakui and Gaies, 1999; Woods, 2006). For instance, research into the effects of training students in the use of writing strategies (cf. Cresswell 2000; Ching, 2002; Sengupta 2000) found a positive influence of the

instructional intervention, not only on how confident and autonomous the students became, but also on how their beliefs about writing changed in the direction of developing more multi-dimensional mental models & writing. These more sophisticated beliefs, in turn, were found to affect their strategy deployment while writing. Similarly, the editors of what is perhaps the most recent collection of empirical papers on L2 learner beliefs (Kalaja and Barcelos, 2006) summarize the main contribution of the publication by stating that a common message emerging from the book is that:

> beliefs about SLA are shaped by students' and (teachers') cultural backgrounds and social contexts. They are socially constructed and variable rather than stable in nature. Therefore, it is important to understand what beliefs students (and teachers) hold and what they make of them in their specific contexts of learning (or teaching) a second/foreign language (Kalaja and Barcelos, 2006: 2).

Following this line of thinking, I decided to investigate EFL students's evolving beliefs about L2 writing in a context that showed its own idiosyncrasy, i.e. a context in which learning to write was a requirement for the students' successful completion of their degree studies, while at the same time the learners' writing experience and instruction was aimed at helping them develop their L2 competences. Therefore, and in contrast to most research on L2 writing (basically covering suly learning-to-write contexts), in the setting investigated both learning-to-write and writing-to-learn (both language and content knowledge) purposes were present, and this made this acquisitional context worth investigating.

Summarizing, the study to be reported is exploratory in nature and its ultimate aim was to explore the dynamics of 15 university EFL learners' beliefs about various dimensions of L2 writing as a function of the conditions in their learning context with a view to contribute to the existing empirical data on the nature and evolution of L2 learner beliefs. This research focus is in line with the main research traditions in the study of beliefs in social cognitive psychology (for reviews see Conley, Pintrich, Vekiri, and Harrison, 2004; Hofer and Pintrich, 2004) and of the "metacognitive approach" to the study of beliefs in SLA (Barcelos, 2006). Thus, I operationalized beliefs in terms of metacognitive knowledge (see Method section below) and we made use of the research instruments characteristic of this approach (i.e. interviews, questionnaires, and verbal reports). However, I departed from a pure metacognitive approach in two important ways. First, I did not look into the relationship between beliefs and learners actions, particularly strategies, which is central to the metacognitive approach (we did, however, explore this relationship in the larger project of which the study to be reported here is a part. See Manchón, Murphy and Roca, 2007). Second, accepting the contextual, dynamic and socially-mediated nature of learner beliefs, the study was also in line with the "contextual approach" both conceptually and methodologically. Thus, beliefs were studied as "embedded in students' contexts" (Barcelos, 2006: 19) of learning and "as part of students' experiences and interrelated with their environment" (p. 21).

Methodologically, were triangulated various data sources from the students and their teacher.

Given its exploratory nature, and as mentioned earlier, the study was guided by two main aims. First, I attempted to investigate the dynamics of our participants' beliefs about various dimensions of L2 writing. Second, I aimed at documenting possible changes in the students' beliefs system as a function of the conditions in the instructional setting in which they wrote and learned to write.

2. METHOD

2.1. *Participants and setting*

The study was conduced in a university setting. The group of *student writers* consisted of 15 students taking 4th year courses during a five-year English degree at the University of Murcia. They included 4 men and 11 women, all of whom were native speakers of Spanish except for one Ukrainian. Data on the following was collected via written questionnaires: background information about the participants' English proficiency, years of L2 study, time spent in English-speaking countries, English language tuition, and writing courses. According to their answers, the number of years they had been studying English ranged from a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 16 years, the average being 12.4 years. All but three of these students had been to an English speaking country at some stage in their studies for lengths of time varying from 3 weeks to 12 months ($\bar{x} = 4.7$ months). As for training in writing, nine out of the fifteen informants had taken an optional introductory course on writing in their first semester at the university (i.e. three years previously) where they had been taught the basics of composition. In addition, all the participants had previously taken three compulsory annual courses in English language covering the four skills and grammar teaching, which were designed to take them from pre-intermediate to proficiency level.

The students were at all times informed of our research purposes (although not of the specific focus of the study), they participated on a voluntary basis, and they all signed an informed consent form.

The *teacher* in charge of the EAP course had more than 25 years' experience of EFL teaching and 4 years' experience of teaching the EAP at the time o data collection. She is a native speaker of English and her professional training and expertise included: (i) a degree in French; (ii) an MA in Applied Linguistics; (iii) disciplinary knowledge about and experience of lecturing on second language acquisition and second language teaching methodology; and (iv) more than ten years of continuous involvement in different research projects on L2 writing.

The *EAP course* is a fourth-year compulsory unit in the participants' degree programme in English Studies. According to the official curricular information as well as the teacher's own account, the main aim of the EAP course was to help students

develop more advanced and integrated academic reading and writing skills. The pedagogical intervention was based on the students' independent study and the work done in class during contact hours (3 hours per week over a period of 30 weeks). The scaffolding provided included (i) making students aware of the different dimensions of the process of text construction; (ii) modelling and practising the use of different writing strategies; (iii) analytic reading of academic texts, and (iv) receiving and providing feedback. The course was built around three major assignments, undertaken in this order: (i) a personal statement to support a (fictitious) application to a postgraduate course in the UK or USA; (ii) a synthesis of a group of pre-assigned texts, mainly from newspapers; and (iii) a report of a survey designed and carried out by students themselves on a topic of interest to them. Each of the texts for the assignments was produced in three drafts with feedback between each, provided by peers (after the first draft) and the teacher (after the second draft). The process-oriented nature of the EAP course, as well as the amount of writing required from students represented innovative elements in the students' learning/writing experience.

2.2. *Design of the study, instruments and procedures*

Given the study's aim to capture development in the participants' belief systems, it spread over a period of eight months and included three stages (see Table 1). Expanding the categories of longitudinal studies established in Ortega and Isberri-Shea (2005), we would characterise this research (which I am well aware was not fully longitudinal in nature) as "descriptive qualitative-quantitative", and intended to chart development in one specific aspect of the acquisition of academic literacy by looking at both the causes and effects of the instruction the students received.

Time	Data source
Time 1 (October)	Beliefs and strategy questionnaires
Time 2 (March)	Beliefs and strategy questionnaires Interview with teacher
Time 3 (May)	Students' retrospective questionnaire Teacher's retrospective narrative

Table 1. *Chronology of the research and data sources*

I opted for a mixed method approach in which quantitative data on our participants' beliefs obtained via a written self-report questionnaire (the Writing Beliefs Questionnaire, WBQ henceforth) administered at Time 1 and Time 2 were supplemented with qualitative data gained from both the students and the Teacher. At Time 2, the Teacher was interviewed about various aspects of the EAP course and of her teaching and pedagogical decision making. At Time 3, the students completed retrospective questionnaires, and the Teacher

completed a retrospective narrative in which she reflected on various dimensions of the EAP programme. The reader should note that these qualitative data sources were designed for the general research project and not just for the study on beliefs reported here.

2.2.1. The Writing Beliefs Questionnaire

A questionnaire was used as the pre-test/post-test and the main quantitative data source on the assumption that individuals' perceptions and interpretations of their own experiences can provide explanations of behaviour (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). This is especially the case regarding beliefs as "beliefs cannot be directly observed or measured but must be inferred from what people say, intend, and do" (Pajares, 1992: 314, quoted in Sato and Kleinasser, 2004). In addition, the actual design of the study entailed collecting data in the shortest possible time period (at Times 1 and 2) and therefore questionnaires were considered a cost-effective means of collecting the data required.

Questionnaire items had to be developed for two reasons. First, manual and computer searches of the relevant empirical literature (in the SLA field and in social cognitive psychology) we did not find any questionnaires on beliefs about either L1 or L2 writing[1]. Second, as mentioned in the Introduction, most of the research in the area has focused on beliefs about learning and the nature of knowledge and learning (or "epistemological beliefs"; see Hofer and Pintrich, 2004 for a comprehensive account, and Barcelos, 2006; Mori 1999a, 1999b, for an application in the field of L2 learning). Given that our aim was to have a questionnaire to target beliefs about variables implicated in L2 writing, we did not consider it valid to employ the instruments used to measure beliefs about learning.

According to empirically supported models of beliefs (cf. Cotterall, 1995; Hofer and Pintrich, 2004; Horwitz, 1987; Mori, 1999a, 1999b; Schommer, 1990, 1994a, 1994b) a person's belief system is multi-dimensional. Therefore, the first task was to develop an inventory of statements capable of tapping various theoretical and pedagogical relevant dimensions of beliefs about L2 writing. As mentioned earlier, Wenden's framework (Wenden, 1998, 1999) in which the concept of metacognitive knowledge is equated with that of learner beliefs[2] was adopted. As a result, the questionnaire included items about the three components of metacognitive knowledge (i.e. person, task, and strategy), to which two further dimensions were added on account of their possible pedagogical interest: beliefs about the writing teacher, on the one hand, and about the nature, uses and forms of feedback, on the other[3].

The questionnaire was written in English (given the participants' L2 proficiency level) and was administered during class time. It consisted of 5 open-ended statements worded as "The role of the teacher is …", together with 45 Likert-type items. Participants rated agreement or disagreement with each item on a 5-point scale, with 5 representing strong agreement, and 1 strong disagreement. I was aware of the problems associated with rating scales as "the meaning and importance of particular numbers varies across informants and across questions" (Block, 1998: 424). The reliability

estimates (Cronbach's α) were .66 for the first administration and .74 for the second administration. These moderate estimates are similar to those obtained in other studies in the field (see Mori, 1999b; Wen and Johnson, 1997).

2.2.2. The retrospective questionnaire

It has been suggested that questionnaire data should be complemented with "naturalistic discourse data" (Kajala, 1995, quoted in Cotterall, 1999), interviews being especially useful in both revealing beliefs which are not tapped in the questionnaire itself and providing additional information on the sources and outcomes of beliefs (Sakui and Gaies, 1999). Bearing these arguments in mind, a written retrospective questionnaire was used in this research as a more parsimonious and less time-consuming alternative to oral interview-based assessment procedures. It is obvious that this decision clearly limited the richness of the data regarding the students' own perceptions of their learning experience.

The retrospective questionnaire was administered at the end of the instructional programme (i.e. 8 months after the first data collection wave) and it consisted of 15 questions that asked students about the more and the less positive aspects of the course, as well as their perceptions of (i) what they had learned from the course (5 open-ended statements); (ii) how much they had improved their ability to express themselves in English (5-point Likert scale), and (iii) how much the EAP course had helped them become more proficient users of English (5-point Likert scale). In addition, students were also asked three questions about how the EAP course had changed their beliefs about writing and their writing strategy implementation (worded as "the manner in which you approach and complete writing tasks"), together with one question about whether or not what they had learnt in the EAP course could help them with writing in other courses and, if so, how.

2.2.3. The interview with the teacher

Six months after the first data collection wave, a research assistant conducted a detailed interview with the Teacher in which she answered open questions on the aims and organisation of the course, her views on her students (their abilities, difficulties, degree of confidence, progress made, etc.), her own assessment of the course and her satisfaction with her role as instructor of the EAP course.

2.2.4. The teacher's retrospective narrative

This narrative was intended to inform our analysis of the quantitative data gathered via the WBQ, and also to complement the official information on the EAP course, as well as the data provided by the Teacher during the Interview. The Teacher was sent an e-mail by the present author stating the following:

XXX,

Imagine that our AAAL/BAAL[4] audience asked us what exactly your EAP course with the 4th year students consists of. More precisely, they want to know what you have been doing with the students from the beginning of the year to the time we collected the second set of data. Please try and explain this in a succinct and clear way. If possible, account for the what and the why. For instance, if you are talking about the journals, explain what these are, their aim, how often the students write them, who chooses the topic, etc. But add also information on the WHY of the decisions taken: for instance, why whoever reads them provides/does not provide feedback on content/language ... Something quite important is for you to reflect on whether or not whatever you have been doing with the students this year has/has not been influenced by our research and, if so, in what way.

She took around 10 days to complete the narrative and provided us with a highly revealing and informative 4.610 word narrative account of the EAP course, the students' work and assignments, peer review and feedback issues, and a section entitled "strategies".

2.3. *Data analysis*

Based on the participants' responses to the WBQ at Time 1 and Time 2, percentages, means, and standard deviations were computed. In addition, we conducted Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test on the WBQ data to help us examine changes in the students' beliefs from Time 1 to Time 2. This is a non-parametric alternative to Student **t**-test and, like the latter, applies to two-sample designs involving repeated measures, matched pairs, or "before" and "after" measures, as was our case.

Content analysis (Bryman, 2001) was applied to the qualitative data obtained from the 5 open-ended questions in the WBQ and the students' Retrospective Narrative. I analysed the data in order to discern coding categories (inductive approach) and statements associated with the different categories were grouped and tallied. I re-analysed the data several times in order to enhance the reliability of the data analysis. However, no inter- or intra-rater reliability estimates were calculated and this is acknowledged as a limitation of the study.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study was set up to document the dynamics of the L2 student writers' belief systems as a function of the instruction received. Although various changes occurred from Time 1 to Time 2, only in a few cases were the differences statistically significant (see Table 2). These applied to the participants' beliefs about themselves as writers, about the nature of L2 writing, and about the role of the teacher.

Ítems	Time 1		Time 2		p value	Percentages				
	M	SD	M	SD		1	2	3	4	5
➜ I will learn how to write complex academic texts this year (nº 1)	4	0.534	4.33	.617	p ≤ 0.05	T1 / T2	T1 / T2	T1: 13.3% T2: 6.7%	T1: 73.3% T2: 53.3%	T1: 13.3% T2: 40%
✎ I must practise regularly if I want to do my writing assignments successfully this year (nº 9)	4.53	.743	3.93	1.245	p ≤ 0.05	T1 / T2	T2: 20%	T1: 13.3% T2: 6.7%	T1: 20% T2: 60%	T1: 66.7% T2: 20%
➜ Being able to express oneself successfully in writing in English is hard and it takes a long time (nº 13)	3.2	1.082	3.73	1.032	p = 0.02	T1: 6.7% T2: 6.7%	T1: 26.7% T2: 6.7%	T1: 6.7% T2: 6.7%	T1: 60% T2: 66.7%	T2: 13.3%
✎ My teachers pay more attention to how I write than to what I write (nº 33)	3.46	1.060	2.8	1.082	p = 0.03	T1: 6.7%	T1: 20% T2: 53.3%	T1: 33.3% T2: 26.7%	T1: 26.7% T2: 6.7%	T1: 20% T2: 13.3%

Table 2. *Results.*

Notes:
1. Means for all variables reflect the 5 points of the Likert-type scale.
2. Percentages reflect the percentage of students who chose each option of the Likert-type scale at Time 1 (T1) and Time 2 (T2).

In what follows we shall limit our analysis to these three dimensions of beliefs (a general account of the changes in the students' beliefs and strategies appears in Manchón, Murphy and Roca, 2007). The analysis of results will be approached from the dual perspective of the quantitative data from the participants' responses to the WBQ, and the qualitative data provided by both the students and their teacher.

3.1. *Self-efficacy beliefs*

Self-efficacy beliefs have been defined as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1977: 3, studied here via Usher and Pajares, 2006). According to the WBQ data, our student writers started off with a fairly strong sense of self-efficacy, as illustrated by the fact that at Time 1 86.6% of the respondents reported either agreement or strong agreement with the statement "I will learn how to write complex academic texts this year" ($M = 4$; $SD = .534$), 93.4% with the statement "I will be able to find an effective way to improve my writing skills in English during this academic year" ($M = 4.6$; $SD = .632$), and 86.7% with the item "I have the ability to complete successfully the writing assignments I will be asked to submit this year" ($M = 4.06$; $SD = .593$). This high level of confidence in their own capabilities was maintained during the EAP programme, and even increased significantly in the case of Item 1 in the WBQ ("I will learn to write complex academic texts this year"; M: T1 = 4 / T2 = 4.33; SD: T1 = .534 / T2 = .617; $p \leq 0.05$).

In order to interpret these findings, we shall refer to three important sources of self-efficacy discussed in social cognitive psychology (Bandura, 1997), namely, *mastery experience,* the *vicarious experience of observing others,* and *social persuasion.*

Mastery experience refers to the positive assessment or interpretation of one's own previous attainment in tasks related to the one at hand. Three components of the EAP course may have been crucial in facilitating the students' development of a "sense of achievement": (i) the journals the students were asked to complete (3 per week during the first 20 weeks of the course); (ii) the freedom to choose topics for writing; and (iii) the evaluation of the students' work undertaken collaboratively during tutorials.

The role of journals and topics in fostering mastery experience is illustrated in excerpt [1], in which the Teacher makes explicit reference to the connection between these two elements of the EAP course and the development of the students' self-confidence:

[1] *In the **journals** they are not focusing on form, we are not giving them or we are not emphasizing feedback on the actual form of the language. I hope that this will help them to **develop their confidence** in actually putting their ideas down in writing, so that's one way. And another way is to get them to write on **topics** that they are interested in, so that they can begin to have this idea that they can say something important and meaningful in their writing.*

Further evidence of the role attributed to the journals in enhancing students' self-confidence came from the Teacher's Retrospective Narrative, as captured in excerpt [2].

What is more, as we learn in [3], at times these journals were attributed a metacognitive evaluation function that, I would suggest, contributed positively to the participants' mastery experience:

> **[2]** *I want to **build up their confidence** as writers by writing for an audience -and an audience that is more interested in <u>what</u> they have to say rather than <u>how</u> they are saying it. They have to interact with another human being other than the teacher.*

> **[3]** *I also want them at times to **reflect on aspects of the course** to help me to understand what they think about particular issues e.g. peer review in class, the difficulties involved in a particular assignment and how they overcame them, etc. These are directed journal activities and exist for my benefit as well as having **a metacognitive function for them as they critically reflect** on what they have done or felt.*

Another component of the EAP course that we would hypothesise as helping to increase the participants' self-confidence via mastery experience was represented by the tutorials and individual meetings, in which the assessment and interpretation of the students' attainments was a joint endeavour between the Teacher and her students:

> **[4]** *We discuss their abilities, difficulties and weaknesses. I offer to support them in doing this and to point out what I see as their strengths and weaknesses and then make suggestions about things that they can do.*

The support mentioned in [4] can be linked to the second factor thought to contribute to the development of self-efficacy, i.e. "the *social persuasion* that individuals receive from significant others […] supportive messages and encouragement can serve to bolster students effort and self-confidence, particularly when accompanied by conditions and instruction that help bring about success" (Usher and Pajares, 2006: 127. Emphasis added). Again, these conditions were present in the situation under study on account of the amount and type of feedback the students received (see below) which, as we learn in excerpt [5], even included teacher's feedback on the students' peer review comments:

> **[5]** *I have also found that students who may have problems of expression in language may still be excellent critics of other people's work and in those cases I try to give them positive public feedback about their peer response as I feel it is important for their **self-esteem**, which may be low as a result of their weaker English skills.*

A third source of self-efficacy is "the *vicarious experience of observing the actions of others*. It is for this reason that models can play a powerful role in the development of self-efficacy" (Usher and Pajares 2006: 126). In the literacy experience we are analysing

the Teacher took well-founded decisions (based on both her own teaching experience and her assessment of the culture of practice of which she was a part) on the type of models to be provided to her students, as is evident in the following excerpt from the Interview:

[6] *More and more what I use are models by other students, previous students in previous years […] I move away, if you like, from using native speakers' writing as models. I think excellent proficient foreign language writers' texts can be just so good and present more attainable models in some ways, […] After having more and more students and teaching the course more and more years I realised that the materials that had been produced by students were actually a great source of models for students who came after them.*

The texts written by other students were perhaps perceived as more attainable models and, as a result, this pedagogical decision may have had a positive influence on the development of the students' self-efficacy beliefs. As noted by Usher and Pajares (2006), "watching a similarly perceived classmate succeed at a challenging academic task may convince uncertain students that they also can succeed" (Usher and Pajares, 2006: 127).

In short, interpreted in this light, it may be concluded that the contribution of the EAP course to both maintaining and increasing the participants' self-efficacy beliefs was possible because this literacy experience afforded optimal conditions for the students to (i) engage in the interpretation of their own progress, which could have led to the development of their sense of achievement, (ii) have access to attainable models, and (iii) receive useful and supportive feedback from various sources.

3.2. Beliefs about the nature of writing

At the start of the instructional intervention, the students overwhelmingly disagreed with the idea that writing in English was practically the same as writing in their native language, with more students favouring this option at Time 2 (60% at T1 and 80% at T2). The same increase was observed with respect to the item "Writing in English will help me develop my confidence as a user of English", a statement with which 80% of the students agreed or strongly agreed at Time 1, a figure which increased to 100% of the participants at Time 2 (*M*: T1: 4.4 / T2: 4.66; *SD*: T1: .828 / T2: .487).

Perhaps the change most worthy of comment refers to item 19 in the WBQ, which stated "Being able to express oneself successfully in English is hard and takes a long time", a view with which 80% of the students agreed or strongly agreed at Time 1 (*M*: 3.2; *SD*: 1.082) and 100% at Time 2. What is interesting to note is that this view of writing as a problem-solving task was actually reinforced during the EAP course, as shown by both the statistically significant value obtained (*M*: 3.73; *SD*: 1.032; *p*=0.02), and the students' views expressed in the Retrospective Questionnaire, as shown in excerpts [7] to [10]:

[7] *Writing is more complex than it may seem at first sight (2)*

[8] *I thought that writing was easier than it is actually (4)*

[9] *Writing in English is not as easy as I believed it was (3)*

[10] *Writing in English is a task that requires a lot of time (10)*

These data can be interpreted as pointing to a change in the direction of a more complex, multi-dimensional mental model of writing. Our students had probably seen writing as focusing on forms and structures of language since their three prior language courses had tended to approach writing as an important instrument for developing language skills. Logically, then, one of the most prominent beliefs expressed in the Retrospective Questionnaires was that writing played an instrumental role in their language learning experience. However, the EAP course contributed to the participants realization that the previous stress on language needed to be balanced with other dimensions, content concerns being particularly important, as seen in excerpts [11] and [12]:

[11] *I have learnt content is as important as the way a text is written (7)*

[12] *I used to be more concerned with language rather than content or structure (7)*

Evidence for the gradual development of a more multi-dimensional mental model of writing was also provided in the participants' answers to the question of whether they felt that the knowledge and skills they had developed on the EAP course would help them in writing for other courses in their degree. They unanimously provided a positive answer and, when asked to specify what particular elements they felt they could transfer to other contexts, they referred to a variety of elements which tended to fall into clusters around various dimensions characteristic of a multi-dimensional mental model of writing. Two are particularly important. First, *ideational concerns:* the students saw structuring ideas, connecting ideas or selecting ideas for relevance to a text as abilities that were transferable to other situations and texts. Second, *audience concerns:* they stated that the ability to take account of the audience for their text was something that could also help them in writing for other courses.

In trying to account for these findings, it is pertinent to remember that "different cultures of practice shape learners' beliefs about the nature of the task" (Elbaum *et al.*,1993:332). I would speculate that, in the instructional context under study, the shaping of beliefs about the nature of the task of L2 writing may have been the result of the student writers being guided towards "conceptual change" (Limón, 2001). A common way of promoting conceptual change is "cognitive conflict", an instructional strategy intended to promote the students' recognition of the similarities and differences between their own beliefs and knowledge and the new information being presented. In our case, conceptual change would have come about when students confronted their own views on what L2 writing entails with new ideas on the issue. As pointed out by Caravita (2001), "the main challenge to teachers' competence is how to design learning environments that afford a range of conditions favourable for mobilizing students' ideas

and triggering dynamics of change". It would seem that in the learning environment under discussion various conditions triggered dynamics of change. First, actual writing, i.e. the journals were used at times as thinking tools to reflect on one's own ideas, as mentioned in earlier sections. Second, there are numerous references in the Interview and Retrospective Narrative to the existence of very explicit teaching in the form of knowledge-building activities, as seen in extract [13] with regards to audience concerns:

> **[13]** *[…] we devote time to doing it in class and we talk about […] what audience it has been designed for, what the purpose of the text is, and then I insist that it should also be clear in their own texts. So we look at other people's texts and when they give feedback to each other as well as in peer response, they are supposed to tell each other whether the purpose of the text is clear and the audience is clear.*

Finally, as we learn in [14] and [15], these activities were supplemented with work with their own texts (via feedback) or with somebody else's texts (via group discussions), two more elements of the EAP course that may have favoured conceptual change:

> **[14]** *I explicitly tell them that there are certain requirements in texts[…] So I speak in general about the structure of the texts and we look at different kinds of texts. We look at research articles and personal statements and so on, argumentative essays, and so on… but then, I work on the text that they actually produce. So it's through the feedback that I give them. […] so both presentation techniques in class and also feedback techniques.*

> **[15]** *In groups after a presentation about the elements of a good introduction students had to read these [texts], analyse them, decide which are better, discuss the reasons for these decisions, establish criteria for judging this, etc. which then sensitised them to the factors involved in writing their own. The same things were done with conclusions, transitions, etc.*

The collaborative discussions mentioned in [18] are considered beneficial in the promotion of cognitive conflict because they afford motivating contexts to reconsider or reorganize one's own views or knowledge, to value peers'viewpoints and to consider new or conflicting information (Limón, 2001; Mason, 2001). However, the students cannot be left to their own devices, and these sessions need the "presence of the teacher as designer, planner, organizer, model, challenger during reasoning with complex questions" (Caravita, 2001: 427), as was the case in the literacy experience student writers participated in.

In her review of the literature on conceptual change and cognitive conflict, Limón (2001) synthesises those variables thought to contribute to bringing about cognitive conflict into three groups: those related to the students, the teachers, and the social context in which the learning takes place. In its application to the literacy experience

under analysis, and regarding the students, I would mention as further contributing factors, first, the students' self-efficacy beliefs, and, second, the fact that they possessed ample previous learning experience to reflect on. Regarding the learning context, I would hypothesise that the duration of the course (3 weekly contact hours plus tutorials over a period of 30 weeks) afforded sufficient time to bring about changes, given that, as contended by Limón (2001), no radical change can be expected in a short instructional intervention. Finally, regarding the teacher, all the variables mentioned by Limón (2001: 374) apply to the context under study: the Teacher possessed domain-specific subject-matter knowledge, motivation and interest, as well as well-grounded epistemological beliefs about learning and teaching, and about the subject matter taught. In addition, her values and attitudes towards learning and teaching (as seen in the Retrospective Narrative), her teaching strategies, and her level of teacher training may have all contributed to this culture of practice affording favourable conditions for conceptual change to occur.

3.3. *Beliefs about the teacher*

A statistically significant difference was observed regarding the students' beliefs about their teachers: at the end of the instructional intervention fewer students agreed with the statement "My teachers pay more attention to how I write than to what I write" (M: T1=3.46/T2=2.8; SD: T1=1.060/T2=1.082; *p*=0.03), a change that may have been brought about by the feedback received during the EAP course. The sources and forms of this feedback are summarised in excerpt [16]:

> **[16]** *The students received different forms of feedback from different people at different times, e.g. from the lector (feedback on the content of the journals); from classmates (feedback on higher order concerns -content and organisation- on the first draft); from the teacher (feedback on lower order concerns but also on higher order concerns where necessary) on the second draft. Feedback was also provided in tutorial sessions and students could (and did) make an appointment to see the teacher at any time about particular problems at whatever level.*

The students' beliefs on the role of the teacher were also expressed in their responses to the five open-ended items in the WBQ in which they were asked to complete the statement "The role of the teacher is …". The participants' responses can be grouped under three main headings: (a) the teacher as a provider of norms or advice; (b) the role of the teacher in responding to students' writing; and (c) the supporting role of the teacher in the students' acquisition of literacy skills. There were also some responses at Time 2 under the category of "Miscellaneous" that included statements about the teacher making lessons enjoyable, giving students freedom to choose topics for their writing, being close to students and even being "a model to imitate".

As could be expected, around 60% of all the participants' statements about the role of the teacher at Time 1 and Time 2 focused on the first two roles mentioned above, i.e. those of providing norms and responding to student's writing (T1: 45%/23%; T2: 30%/30%, respectively). However, important qualitative and quantitative changes occurred within these two categories. With respect to the *teacher's response to students' writing*, a shift was observed *from "correction" to "feedback",* which is in line with the quantitative data analysed earlier. Thus, at Time 1, 60% of the participants' statements in this category focused on error correction, 15% mentioned feedback, and the other 25% referred to the role of the teacher as that of evaluating students' progress. At Time 2, in contrast, the statements on error correction amounted to only 30%; those on feedback increased to 40%; 15% of the statements referred to the teacher's evaluation of the student's progress, and another 15% mentioned that a role of the teacher was to evaluate the student's effort.

With respect to the statements related to the teacher's role as a "provider of norms", as a *shift from product to process* was observed: at the beginning of the EAP course, 30% of the students' statements in this category were related to the role of the teacher as that of providing advice on how to write different types of text and how to structure information, these statements representing just 5% of the data at Time 2. In addition, 20% of the participants' statements referred to strategies at Time 1, whereas at Time 2, 30% of the participants' statements explicitly referred to the provision of writing strategies, whereas another 40% made reference to strategy-related issues such as providing advice on what and how to write, advice on how to solve writing problems, or providing the "necessary tools to write well in English".

Finally, it is worth noting that the students' beliefs about the role of the teacher that we have been recounting tied in well with the teacher's own beliefs about her role, as we discover in excerpt [17]:

> **[17]** *I think that there are several roles involved in it as there is in any teaching of any subject. One is to present ideas and models explicit of writing and explicit writing techniques and strategies. Another is to give them feedback about their writing and about their language. Another is to motivate them and develop other sides of their learning if you like, to do with interpersonal relationships, develop critical ability, and develop things that are outside language and writing itself. I think those are the main roles.*

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study lends support to the claims that the acquisition of writing competence (in our case, beliefs about writing) must be understood within the social and educational context within which the writer's abilities have developed. Seen from this perspective, the data obtained offer further empirical evidence for the impact that educational

experiences can have on students' beliefs (Elbaum et al., 1993; Gan, 2004; Mori, 1999a; Sakui and Gaies, 1999). In the context under study different variables pertaining to the Teacher, on the one hand, and the instructional programme, on the other, appear to have played a significant role in shaping the students' beliefs.

Regarding the *Teacher*, it is worth noting that the person in charge of the EAP course was a very experienced teacher-researcher. This leads to the conclusion that if writing teachers are expected to devise and implement enabling and sensitive pedagogical practices, they need help and training in the first place, an issue that may not have been sufficiently emphasized in previous research, at least not in discussions of teacher preparation in foreign language (FL) contexts (but see Casanave, 2009; Leki, 2001), one in which the lack of teacher preparation to teach writing is the norm (see Leki, 2000).

Regarding the *instructional programme*, its length and intensity may have contributed to the shaping of students' beliefs because, as suggested by Mori (1999a), "beliefs cannot be easily or quickly modified because they are formed over a long period" (p. 409). According to our data, beliefs about the three main agents in the learning-teaching process (the teacher, the students, and the writing tasks) are modifiable through instruction providing certain conditions are given. Thus, some components of the EAP course may have been particularly useful in the dynamics of the students' self-efficacy beliefs, a set of beliefs deemed essential for learning success: this learning experience appear to have afforded optimal conditions for the students to (i) engage in the interpretation of their own progress (which could have contributed to their sense of achievement); (ii) have access to attainable models; and (iii) receive useful and supportive feedback from various sources, these being conditions that are not always present in Spanish university contexts but that, nevertheless, will have to become more of a norm under the new Bolonia learning-teaching framework. In addition, the student writers in this study appear to have ended their learning experience with a more multi-dimensional model of writing, a change that came about (I have hypothesized) as a result of having participated in a learning environment that afforded a range of conditions that prompted conceptual change via cognitive conflict instructional strategies. These results are not totally innovative; yet they add further empirical evidence to previous studies as they come from a study (i) conducted in an instructional setting under-represented in the research on both beliefs and writing; and (ii) focused on an aspect of L2 learning (writing) unexplored in previous research on individual differences in SLA, in general, and beliefs, in particular.

Some conclusions at the level of research methodology are also pertinent. Cotterall (1999:497) pleads for studies on beliefs to aim at the greatest possible conceptual, methodological and psychometric rigor, constraints that we certainly tried to bear in mind when designing our research. Thus, ethical issues as well as general requirements concerning length, instructions to respondents, and the nature and wording of questionnaire items were taken into account in the construction of the questionnaire (Block, 1998; Bryman, 2001; Dörnyei, 2003; Oppenheim, 1992; Peterson, 2000). Care

was also taken to construct a questionnaire with theoretically and pedagogically valid categories, which also had to be context sensitive given that beliefs develop through a process of socialization in a particular context. Therefore, items in the questionnaire should be relevant in the context under study, which, in turn, helps to increase its face validity (Petric and Czarl, 2003).

However, some limitations regarding data sources and research instruments must be mentioned. First, the lack of real longitudinal data to document development: data were collected just at two time points. Second, the moderate reliability estimates obtained for the WBQ, as well as the need to further validate the questionnaire. Third, the limitations of using questionnaires as data sources in the study of beliefs because, as noted by Sakui and Gaies (1999: 486), "questionnaires consisting of closed items allow respondents only to state their beliefs –and then only the beliefs which are included in the questionnaire". Along the same lines, Kajala (1995) also questions the value of questionnaires to measure beliefs on the grounds that these "only measure beliefs in theory and not on actual occasions of talk or writing" (p. 197). Further, as mentioned earlier, it was not possible to paint the whole picture regarding the learning experience under discussion on account of the data collection methods used in this research, particularly regarding the students' data and the lack of classroom observation. As suggested by Atkinson (2002), if the aim is to study real humans in real human contexts and interactions, we need to employ "methodologies that do not denature phenomena by removing them from their natural environments and breaking then down into countable component parts" (p. 539).

Despite these limitations, this study should be seen as a further attempt both to investigate beliefs in the general field of SLA studies, and to open new research paths in two domains. One is the study of beliefs in second language use, a neglected area of inquiry despite the importance attached to "language use" in current pedagogical practices in instructed language contexts, and despite the crucial role that beliefs are thought to play in shaping the L2 learner's engagement in language learning actions. The other is the study of individual differences in writing. Regarding this, in his recent account of L2 writing scholarship Hedgcock (2005) argues that "the field unquestionably needs extensive, in-depth research on writers, their strategies, their processes, their perceptions of discourse communities, and the influences of writing instruction" (p. 602). And then he adds that this "should entail promoting a deeper, broader appreciation of the complex, multilayered relationships among the variables that drive L2 writers, L2 teachers, literate communities, and education institutions" (p. 603). The study reported in this article was planned as an attempt in this direction and it is hoped it has contributed to our understanding of both the mediating role of educational experiences in shaping students' beliefs about essential elements of the learning-teaching process, and the close connection between L2 learners' beliefs and their approach to and engagement with language learning actions.

NOTES

1. With the exception of White and Bruning (2004) in the case of L1 writing. However, we did not make use of the questionnaire in this study because the researchers do not include the whole questionnaire in the text of their paper, and their research orientation was quite different from ours in that the researchers investigated just two specific dimensions of beliefs about writing: transmissional and transactional beliefs.

2. The author is, however, careful to point out that knowledge refers to factual, objective information, whereas beliefs are more a question of "individual subjective understandings, idiosyncratic truths, which are often value related" (1998:517). Therefore, what distinguishes beliefs from metacognitive knowledge is "their value-relatedness and idiosyncratic nature, suggesting that beliefs would be more tenacious than knowledge" (Wenden, 1998:517).

3. Cotterall (1999:510) concludes her study of learner beliefs by stating: "Learners' beliefs about the role that feedback plays in language learning represent [an] important area for further study".

4. Our global research materialised in two papers presented at AAAL and BAAL conferences.

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