Exploring Italian High School Students' Metaphors of Language Learning

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This paper reports the results of a survey I carried out on the beliefs and attitudes held by Italian upper-secondary school students about foreign language learning. The survey was prompted by my experience in teacher training courses, where teachers often wondered what factors were responsible for unsatisfactory learning outcomes, even in contexts where teaching strategies and materials seemed to be grounded on sound methodological choices. This led me to consider aspects of learning which lie "below the surface" of students' behaviour, and in particular the role that their beliefs and attitudes play in explaining how a curriculum is perceived, interpreted, and implemented in a school context. In this paper I will first illustrate the cognitive nature of beliefs, their corresponding affective component (i.e., attitudes), and their influence on the learning process. I will then introduce the use of metaphors as a useful tool for probing learners' beliefs and attitudes, and outline how the research was designed to explore students' conceptualisations of both the knowledge of foreign languages and the process of language learning. Results show that students tend to describe language knowledge in terms of motivation, intercultural communicative competence, affective implications, mastery of a system, equivalence of L1 and L2 learning, and similarity with other skills. Language learning is mainly seen in terms of a very demanding task, which is perceived either as a productive experience or as a (nearly) impossible undertaking, but also as "learning from scratch" and as a game and pleasant experience. I conclude by considering ways in which these insights can be used by teachers to address their students' "hidden agenda" and highlighting the role that an increased awareness of beliefs and attitudes can play in the language classroom.

本稿はイタリア人高校生を対象に実施した外国語学習に関するビリーフと態度に関するアンケート調査結果である。本調査は教員養成課程を担当する筆者自身の経験に端を発しているが、確固たる方法論に基づく教授法や教材を用いた学習環境に於いてさえ、望ましくない学習成果を生み出す要因について教員たちは日々考えを巡らせている。そして筆者自身、生徒の行動の「水面下にある」学習に関する側面、特にカリキュラムに対する生徒と教員の認識や解釈とその実施におけるビリーフと態度が及ぼす影響ついて考えるに至った。そこで本稿ではまず、認知的要素に関わるビリーフ、そしてその対である情意（態度）とそれらの学習プロセスへの影響を解説する。次にビリーフと態度の両方を明らかにする効果的なツールである比喩の使用に関して詳説し、外国語の知識と言語学習過程に対する生徒の概念を解明することを目的とした本調査のリサーチデザインを概観する。本調査の結果、生徒たちはモチベーション、異文化間コミュニケーション能力、情意的側面、システムの熟知、第１言語と第２言語の同等性、そしてスポーツなど他のスキルとの類似性の観点から言語学習について述べる傾向が見られた。また、生徒たちは言語学習を非常に苦労するものであると主に捉えているため、言語学習に対する認識が、実り多い学習経験または（ほぼ）不可能なもののどちらかであることが明らかになった。一方で言語学習を「ゼロからの学習」、またゲームや楽しい経験として認識されていることも示された。最後に、本研究で得られた知見から「生徒の隠れたアジェンダ」を明らかにする方法を考察し、語学教室でのビリーフや態度の認識の高まりがもたらす影響も明らかにする。

Keywords

キーワード

This paper reports on the first stage of a survey carried out in Italian upper–secondary schools on the beliefs and attitudes held by students about foreign language learning in a school context. I was prompted to arrange the survey by the frequent dissatisfaction shown by teachers in training courses, when they often complained that students' responses to their strategies and materials were not what they expected. At the same time, teachers were unable to identify factors which would explain the "gap" between their expectations and the actual learning outcomes. To address this issue, I turned my attention to aspects of the "hidden curriculum" which are rarely investigated, such as students' beliefs and their influ–

ence on the learning process. The issue is particularly relevant for Italian secondary school language teachers, who in the past few years have had to face several (often confusing) syllabus changes, on the one hand, and an increasing emphasis on the "products" of learning, in terms of external exams and certifications, on the other. At such a time, I thought that going beyond questions of methodology, and probing what lies behind students' reactions to teachers' demands, would throw some light on the actual learning processes taking place in the classroom. In search of possible instruments to use in the survey, I found metaphors a particularly productive and dynamic tool. In this paper, after briefly recalling why beliefs and attitudes are so important in (language) learning, I will describe the research design of my project, report on some of the most significant results so far, and use the knowledge thus gained to make some concluding remarks on the role that an increased awareness by both students and teachers of beliefs and attitudes can play in the language classroom.

Beliefs and Attitudes and Their Role in Language Learning

Beliefs and attitudes towards language learning, or what teachers and students think and feel when engaged in the task of teaching/learning a foreign language (L2), are an important part of what has been called the "hidden," "covert," or "implicit" curriculum (Margolis, 2001), i.e., factors like learning preferences, aptitudes, beliefs, attitudes, and motivations. Such factors heavily impact the way that the "overt" or "explicit" curriculum, made up of syllabuses, activities, materials, and assessment procedures, is perceived, interpreted, and implemented by all the parties concerned. This view of the curriculum is best appreciated through the "iceberg metaphor" (see Figure 1).
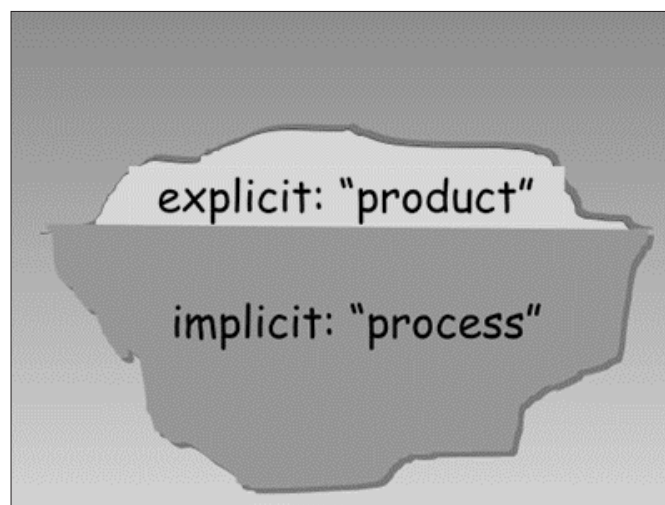

Figure 1. The Importance of the "Hidden" Curriculum.

In contrast to visible and explicit performance, the underlying, invisible competence is heavily influenced by what the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001) calls *existential competence* ("*savoir être*")—the individual differences that affect how knowledge ("*savoir*") is acquired and skills ("*savoir faire*") are developed.

Teachers and students hold quite definite beliefs and attitudes about *what* they teach/learn (the subject matter, in our case *language, communication,* and *culture*), *how* language is best taught/learnt (the *process* of teaching/learning), and *who* is involved in this task (their own selves as teachers and learners, including the *roles* they play in the process). These dimensions are interrelated (see Figure 2) and have a strong influence on the choices and decisions

that people make and, ultimately, on their behaviour in the language teaching/learning task (Mariani, 1999; Barcelos, 2000; Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005; Gabillon, 2005; Huang, 2006; Mercer, 2008).
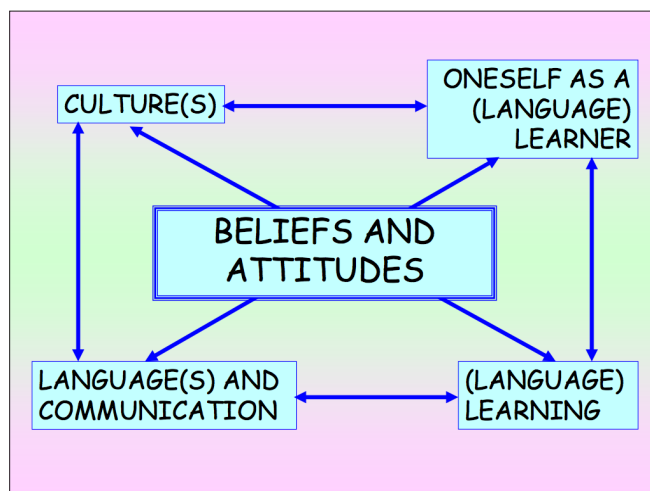

Figure 2. Areas of Beliefs and Attitudes and Their Integration.

For example, if a student thinks that language is essentially made up of words, that learning a language implies memorizing words, and that s/he has a poor memory, all this will inevitably shape her/his view of the learning task and probably impact on the way s/he will react to the teaching activities, especially if her/his teacher holds a different view of the same factors. As a matter of fact, teachers' and students' *conflicting* beliefs and attitudes have proven to affect how aims, objectives, activities, and assessment procedures are interpreted, accepted, or refused in the classroom (Horwitz, 1988; Cotterall, 1995; Nunan, 1995; Peacock, 1998; Wan, Low, & Li, 2011).

To explain the impact of such factors on the learning process, it is crucial to clarify the nature of *beliefs* and their relations to *attitudes*. With teachers in mind, Richards (1994, p. 5) referred to beliefs as "the informational attitudes, values, theories and assumptions about teaching and learning which teachers build up over time and bring with them to the classroom"—but this definition could reasonably be extended to students. Victori and Lockhart (1995, p. 224) identified beliefs as "general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning, and about the nature of language learning and teaching." Thus, to use other metaphors, beliefs could be seen as a filter through which experience is given meaning and value, or to a pair of glasses through which people interpret the world *around* them and *inside* them (Arnold, 1999).

Beliefs can best be seen as a *cognitive* construct, i.e., what a person knows (or *believes* s/he knows), and have also been variously referred to as mini-theories, learning cultures, suppositions, implicit theories, and self-made representational systems (Holec, 1996; Doly, 1997; Barcelos, 2000; Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005). However, the impact of beliefs cannot be fully appreciated without considering how such cognitive structures are accompanied by an *affective* dimension, which is largely responsible for their role in learning. Wenden (1991, p. 52) clarified the relationship between beliefs and attitudes in this way:

> Attitudes have been referred to as "learned motivations", "valued beliefs", "evaluations", "what one believes is acceptable" or "responses oriented towards approaching or avoiding". Implied in these various definitions, are three characteristics of attitudes: 1. attitudes always have an object; 2. they are evaluative; 3. they predispose to certain actions.

The *cognitive, affective*, and *evaluative* components are thus strictly linked to the *behavioural* component: beliefs influence attitudes and these, in turn, affect decisions and behaviour.

The Use of Metaphors to Explore Beliefs and Attitudes

The use of metaphors in exploring aspects of (language) learning and teaching is well documented in the literature (e.g., Elliott, 1984; Munby, 1986; Thornbury, 1991; Scott, 1994; Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; de Guerrero & Villamil, 2002; Berendt, 2008; Gibbs, 2011; Farjami, 2012). Metaphors are not just an alternative to answering questions, providing definitions or taking part in an interview. Prompting a student to complete a definition (e.g., *Learning a language is/means …*) is fundamentally different from asking her/him to write a metaphor (e.g., *Learning a language is like …*), for several different reasons. Firstly, definitions are by their very nature analytical and thus tend to appeal more to systematic, convergent learners, while metaphors allow for more creative insights and more global perceptions, and thus tend to appeal more to intuitive, synthetic, divergent learners. Secondly, metaphors prompt learners to focus more on similarities and analogies than on oppositions and differences. And finally, metaphors lend themselves well to further elicitation and elaboration. Ortony (1993) summarizes the main characteristics of metaphors as *vividness*, *compactness,* and *expressibility.*

However, creating and using metaphors can also have a strong influence on the way one conceives and deals with reality—by giving structure to experience:

> New metaphors have the power to create a new reality. This can begin to happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 145)

For example, referring to teacher *training* by using alternatives such as teacher *education*, teacher *learning*, or teacher *development* points to very different ways of conceptualizing this activity. Thus, "A metaphor can easily be seen as a bridge, etymologically 'carrying over' from one side to another. It links and comprises the known and the unknown, the tangible and the less tangible, the familiar and the new" (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999, p. 149), "a bridge enabling passage from one world to another" (Shiff, 1979, p. 106), "windows" for examining the cognitions and feelings of learners (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005).

Aims and Research Questions

The literature on beliefs and attitudes outlined above, and the use that metaphors have been put to in previous research, helped me to specify in more detail both the kinds of information that I would be investigating and the tools that I would be using in the process. It seemed clear to me that the crucial aspects of language learning at a time of change in secondary schools and with teachers facing increasingly diversified groups of students could be described both in terms of how students make sense of language as the object of learning and in terms of how they approach the process of learning itself. This led me to formulate my two research questions:

1. How do students conceptualize the *knowledge* of a foreign language, i.e., what do they mean by "knowing a foreign language"?

2. How do students conceptualize the *process of learning* a foreign language, i.e., what do they mean by "learning a foreign language" in a school context?

Participants

The participants were 612 students studying foreign languages (English, French, German, and Spanish) as part of their school curriculum in seven academically oriented upper-secondary schools located in small or medium-sized towns in Northern Italy. The survey was carried out across all the five school grades (students' age range 14-19), with language levels starting from a post-elementary level—or Level A2 of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001)—for English, and from a beginner level for all the other languages in Grade 1, and reaching an upper intermediate level—or Level B2/C1 of the *Framework*–for English at Grade 5.

Method

Students were invited to complete two metaphors in writing, in their mother tongue (Italian), by referring to their overall experience of foreign language learning at school:

- *"To know" a foreign language is like …*

- *Learning a foreign language is like …*

Teachers introduced the scope of the survey and how it would be carried out. Students were not given any examples of the actual metaphors they were invited to produce, but in order to make them familiar with the task, teachers elicited a few metaphors on other topics, e.g., *Winning a football match is like …* or *Getting back to school in September is like …*, briefly commenting on the value of metaphors as a way of exploring and sharing our thoughts and feelings about an experience.

The collected metaphors were analysed by the author with the purpose of identifying thematic categories which would help to map out the students' meanings into recurring structures that gradually emerged from the data itself (Cameron & Low, 1999). In some studies such structures are described in terms of concrete images. For example, Ellis (2002) reports and elaborates on five conceptual metaphors for learning: learning as a journey, as a puzzle, as work, as suffering, and as struggle; while Bas and Gezegin (2015) report and elaborate on 10 groups of metaphors for English learning process: task, journey, period of life, progress, competition, enjoyable activity, torture, unending process, engraving process, and nurturing process. In my survey, however, an effort was made to directly link the recurring structures (as emerging from all the students' metaphors) to some basic L2 pedagogical frameworks, i.e.,

- for Research Question 1: motivation; intercultural communicative competence; personal cognitive and affective implications; mastery of a system; equivalence of L2 knowledge and L1 knowledge; equivalence of knowing an L2 and any other school subject; and similarities with other skills or competences;

- for Research Question 2: a very demanding, even dangerous, but productive experience; a very demanding but (nearly) impossible undertaking; a game, a pleasant experience; similarities with other skills and competences; integration of some sort of "language mechanism" within one's mind; and equivalence of learning an L2 and other school subjects.

The main problem experienced in the analysis of the metaphors was the fact that in several students' responses the two questions seemed to overlap, i.e., they tended to equate language *and* language learning. This important issue is reflected in the cross-references between the two questions shown in the *Results* below.

Responses were then used to elaborate on the implications that students' conceptualizations may have on their approach to language learning and on their response to language teaching (see the *Discussion* below). The second phase of this research, which for different reasons was delayed and is therefore still in its early stages, will invite teachers to feed back these findings to their students and to use them for individual and group reflection and discussion. A few early samples of teachers' reactions are provided in *Teachers' Feedback* below.

Results

The major descriptive categories of beliefs identified in this survey are presented in Tables 1 and 2. They are illustrated with representative samples of the students' metaphors and are accompanied by comments on the major entailments for the emerging conceptions of language and language learning. (Notice that the English translations are just approximate versions of the original Italian metaphors and often do not do justice to the highly imaginative language, sometimes heavily loaded with idiomatic expressions and cultural references, used by the students.)

Table 1. *Conceptualizations of the* **Knowledge** *of a Foreign Language*

Descriptive category	Representative samples of metaphors
1. Motivation	1. making an effort to pass my exams 2. doing something useful, because you can use a foreign language ... not like, for instance, maths, which is of no use to me in my free time 3. having a key which can open many doors 4. having a six-speed gearbox on my moped 5. arriving at a new school and already knowing the names of your classmates 6. making a long-term investment 7. belonging to a group of people who communicate through the same language 8. being able to become "a foreigner" and being considered as such 9. changing my nationality, therefore I should know a language perfectly 10. becoming another person, almost changing your personality and way of being; being two people at the same time interpreting roles, becoming a little actor for a moment; changing one's voice and way of thinking (I think like a German, a Frenchman, an Englishman)

The knowledge of a foreign language is seen in terms of the *purposes* which it might serve or the *benefits* it might provide, both at the present time and in the future, and which in turn fuels students with the *will* and *skill* to learn. This corresponds roughly to various kinds of *instrumental motivation.* This broad concept of *instrumental motivation* can also be seen in terms

of its *extrinsic* value. However, different degrees of extrinsic motives can be perceived along the extrinsic *vs* intrinsic continuum: while the most external forms of *regulation* (e.g., punishments and rewards from teachers or parents) are not mentioned, various forms of *interiorization*, *identification* and *integration* clearly are, from passing exams (1) to securing a better future (7), with a general perception of acquiring a powerful tool (3-4) and useful starting opportunities (5).

Within the broad concept of *integrative motivation*, the desire to become part of the culture(s) mediated by the target language(s) (7) can be linked to subtle questions of individual identity, and can imply a change in one's image and perception of one's individual and social self (8). This can imply an unrealistic expectation of the level of competence to be reached to achieve such ambitious results (9). Knowing a language sometimes seems to imply a deeper change in one's personality, almost leading to a "split personality" (10); at other times, the change is perceived as a more "superficial" playing of a role (11).

2. Intercultural communicative competence	12. a passport, a key to be able to interact with other people 13. opening my mind to new realities, being able to compare them 14. having more elements of certainty, i.e. managing to express myself and communicate with people of different languages and cultures 15. adjusting to other people's ways of communicating, respecting their culture, thus indirectly favouring cultural mediation

Students seem to be well aware of the implications of learning a foreign language in terms of acquiring a complex competence, which has both communicative and intercultural connotations. This awareness also implies the realization of the close links between languages and cultures (12-13). This competence can be seen both as relevant in private domains (14) and as a more "public" commitment to contribute to intercultural mediation (15).

3. Personal cognitive and affective implications	16. learning to live in a different way than one usually lives; having a second life to live 17. air: it is something absolutely necessary to life 18. being a butterfly which flies to different places 19. thinking through a different system 20. having a master-key in a hotel, being able to go into any room with no effort at all, adjusting to the type of room I'm going to find 21. proving to myself that nothing is impossible and one can learn everything 22. being able to walk without anybody's help; widening my personal knowledge so as to be more autonomous in the world having a degree of freedom which you can't reach in any other way

Still within the issue of identity, the emphasis in this case is more on the effects that knowing a foreign language *in itself* can have on one's overall personality, without or beyond the desire to integrate into a target community and/or to acquire a tool for personal and intercultural communication. What is stressed is the potential of language to offer opportunities for change, not just in terms of acquiring alternative ways of thinking (19), but also as a way

of experiencing new dimensions of one's personality, like being born again (16).

The implications of learning a foreign language can reach out into the realm of *self-esteem*. This is supported by the perception of developing a new flexible competence *(self-efficacy)* (20-21), the perception of increasing personal autonomy and independence (22) as well as a more general sense of freedom from constraints (23).

4. Mastery of a system	24. knowing many words of a language and knowing how to correctly pronounce them all!
	25. mastering lexis and structures so that you don't give a strong impression of being a foreigner
	26. being a computer with many data in it

Some students stress the mastery of the language system as the key feature of knowing a foreign language (cf. No. 6 in Table 2 below). This can apply to pronunciation, lexis, and grammar (24-25), and can be extended to the metaphor of knowing a language as data-processing by a computer (26). Even in this case, though, "perfect" mastery is seen as necessary in order to conceal one's own identity as a foreigner and thus be taken as a "native speaker" (25), much in the same way as in (9) above.

5. Equivalence of L2 and L1 knowledge	27. being able to express myself as in Italian
	28. studying Italian but in another language with other verb forms
	29. speaking two kinds of Italian because it means speaking it really well
	30. speaking it as well as my mother tongue
	31. knowing it as if I were a mother-tongue speaker

Some students are very explicit in equating the knowledge of a foreign language with the knowledge of their mother tongue (Italian). Especially in the early grades, their reference seems to be "ideal native speakers": little or no consideration is given to different levels of competence and to the idea of progress in learning. This can lead to unrealistic expectations, both in terms of learning outcomes and in terms of the amounts of time and effort required.

6. Equivalence of knowing an L2 and knowing any other school subject	32. "doing" the other school subjects
	33. studying all the other subjects, but speaking in a different way and enjoying myself more
	34. knowing another school subject, but often a more important one
	35. going to school: it may not be enjoyable, but makes life better

Also in the early grades, some students seem to perceive language as a "disciplinary subject," i.e., they do not exhibit any special relationship with language as opposed to any other form of content to be learnt in the curriculum (cf. No. 7 in Table 2 below). This is sometimes associated with a perception of studying a subject which is somehow "different" from the other ones, either because of its "importance" (34) or because it implies more enjoyable activities (33).

7. Similarities with other skills or competences	36. knowing how to play a musical instrument 37. being able to fly 38. cycling with your eyes closed, driving a vehicle, skiing, swimming

Some students compare knowing a foreign language to mastering other skills or sports (cf. No. 5 in Table 2 below).

A widespread belief among students views language learning both in terms of the effort required and in terms of the highly satisfying nature of the task. Interestingly, the emphasis is not so much on how a language is learnt but on how deeply involved one can become in learning it, i.e., on the (positive) affective implications of the task.

What strikes most in these metaphors is the perception of the highly demanding nature of the learning task (40–42). However, the perception of the *value of the task*, together with the *expectancy of success*, seem to provide the relevant personal motivation. This perception is often accompanied by the awareness of the obstacles involved and the need to be patient and persistent. Also, setting a clear target seems to provide the necessary energy (43–44). The learning task itself is conceptualized as a route which calls for flexibility, the ability to learn to manage situations and be resilient in the face of difficulties (45–46); a route which implies a step–by–step approach and a firm foundation at the start (47–48).

Table 2. *Conceptualizations of* **Learning** *a Foreign Language*

Descriptive category	*Representative samples of metaphors*
1. A very demanding, even dangerous, but productive experience	40. climbing the Everest would be easier 41. landing on the moon 42. walking on a long and winding path, which will soon give way to a wonderful place 43. engage in a long-distance race: I will be tired out, I will be thirsty but in the end I will reach the finish line and thus my target 44. crossing a river: I will find some obstacles but when I get to the other bank I will be satisfied 45. seafaring: you need to manage the situations in which you find yourself 46. surfing – at the start you slip on the board but after some hard work you can surf the wave 47. reaching the top of a mountain. You proceed step by step 48. building a house, being careful to lay sound foundations; having built a house little by little, laying every single brick in the right way

2. A very demanding but (nearly) impossible undertaking	49. knowing everything about football, all the players' faces … it's impossible
	50. walking on the water … impossible
	51. learning to play chess with your eyes closed
	52. being under a terrible hail storm with 2 sq cm hail stones which won't allow you to see
	53. running barefoot on stones
	54. playing chess without the chessboard
	55. go on a military campaign with very little probability of winning
	56. having to learn something which has nothing to do with me

Another widespread belief emphasizes the feeling of failure associated with engaging in language learning, i.e., the (negative) affective implications of the task. What is stressed is the actual impossibility of language learning (49-51), with strong emotional implications (52–53). This may imply the perception of lacking the necessary tools (54), a low expectancy of success (55), and can even lead to a feeling of unrelatedness, as if no connection could be established between learning and one's self (56)—a state which is very close to demotivation.

3. A game, a pleasant experience	57. listening to a song; playing an instrument, it's amusing and you do it with extreme pleasure
	58. playing football – absolutely necessary
	59. being on a merry-go-round because after learning something I feel satisfied
	60. going on a trip, because it's enjoyable, amusing, and at the same time interesting
	61. studying the rules of a similar game, which has different rules
	62. playing with a puzzle, where every word corresponds to a piece and the possible combinations are endless; solving a riddle
	63. picking a rose. You have to be careful with thorns, but this is no problem compared with its beauty and scent

This category is the one which most closely approaches the construct of *intrinsic* motivation—or engaging in learning for its own right, for the pleasure it gives, with no particular other purpose (either instrumental or integrative) involved. This is associated with a feeling of self-assurance as a result of the activity (59) and an intrinsic interest in it (60). Learning a language is also often compared to solving a puzzle or a riddle. In this case the focus seems to be more on the cognitive challenge, in which language is seen as a series of elements which can be combined in endless ways (61-62).

Notice that these first three categories of metaphors closely resemble those found in the already mentioned studies by Ellis (2002) and Bas and Gezegin (2015).

4. Learning a language as starting from scratch	64. a child starting primary school, in the sense that when I was in the first grade I learned Italian, now it is as I started again in another country
	65. learning to speak my language again … but, compared with when we were children, it's much more difficult
	66. going back to being a small child who has to learn everything to express herself and make herself understood
	67. when as a child I learned to walk – step by step, with no hurry; growing up a second time

In this case students express the perception that learning a language implies a completely new task, where previous experiences have little or no relevance. There are several important implications in this view of L2 learning. First, there is no distinction between L1 and L2 learning, the only difference being the fact that the latter involves a higher degree of difficulty (65); in other words, natural acquisition of the L1 seems to be perceived as very similar to later (school) learning of the L2. Second, no importance seems to be given to contextual or other factors that may influence learning as a (young) adult. And finally, the L2 learner is seen as a small child who must once again go through all the stages of "growing up" without relying on any previously acquired knowledge or skills (66–67).

5. Similarities with other skills or competences (cf. No. 7 in Table 1 above)	68. learning to play football (I hate football)
	69. swimming – it's tiring but stimulating
	70. learning to play a musical instrument
	71. singing, not everybody can do it …
	72. learning to cycle. At the start it may seem difficult, but one you've grasped how it works, it turns out to be much easier than you thought
	73. knowing how to bake a cake, after learning the procedure and having all the ingredients; cooking: the recipe is not enough
	74. driving your car, knowing its reactions
	75. learning a mathematical formula by heart, but using your reasoning ability; doing a maths exercise, if you know the formulae
	76. growing a plant

Students seem to be aware of the complexity of language learning as a competence, which implies the acquisition of *knowledge* as well as the development of *skills*, as in complex skills such as sports (68–69), playing music or singing (70–71), and driving a car (74). Some students seem to be aware of the *process* involved in learning, like understanding "how it works" (72), learning the "procedure" (73), and knowing the "formulae" (75). On the one hand, you need all the ingredients; on the other, you need a "recipe", which in itself is not enough (73). Also, learning is seen as active mental processing ("reasoning ability") rather than simple memorization (75). Notice that (71), by mentioning the fact that not everybody can be successful, refers to the question of inborn *aptitude*, while (74) highlights the importance of being aware of one's own strengths and weaknesses.

6. Development and integration of some sort of "language mechanism" within one's mind	77. being a dictionary
	78. being a good linguist
	79. doing a sort of a revision of Italian, because if you don't have a sound foundation of Italian grammar you can't hope to know the foreign one
	80. putting a small translating machine into my head

This category has to do with the formal aspects of the language system: vocabulary (77), grammar (79), and translation (80), thus stressing the value of knowing the system and comparing oneself to a training "linguist" (78) (cf. No. 4 in Table 1 above).

7. Equivalence of learning an L2 and learning any other school subject	81. studying all the other subjects, only speaking in a different way and enjoying myself more
	82. studying any other subject, perhaps this is more useful than others
	83. studying any other subject but committing oneself more because you have to concentrate in order to understand the differences between our language and the foreign language

Some students do not seem to be particularly aware of the originality of language learning, although they sometimes seem to find it more enjoyable (81) and more useful (82) than other school subjects. They also realize the complexity and commitment demanded by a contrastive (L1 *vs* L2) view of learning (83) (cf. No. 6 in Table 1 above).

Discussion

I used the results of this survey to elaborate on the implications that students' conceptualizations of "knowing a foreign language" and "learning a foreign language" can have on their approach to learning and on their response to teaching. These implications can be summarised as follows.

1. *Motivational Constructs.*

The meanings that students attach to both the *outcome* of language learning and the *process* of learning itself are clearly linked to motivational issues: *instrumental* vs *integrative* (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Gardner, 1985, 2010), *intrinsic* vs *extrinsic* (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002):

- *instrumental motivation* appears mostly as internal, rather than external, regulation, i.e., not related to rewards or punishments, but more as the perception of the opportunities that knowing a language can offer, especially in the long term;

- *integrative motivation* seems to be quite strong too, with students often wishing to become part of the target language community and even to identify with its speakers, or, more often, with a global community of speakers of a *lingua franca* (Dörnyei, 2010; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2010). This hints at subtle questions of individual and collective identity, since the knowledge of a foreign language often seems to imply personality changes or at least the commitment to "play a role" in intercultural communication. Sometimes this is associated with unrealistic images of the level of competence required to play such a role, i.e., an idealized native speaker level;

- *intrinsic motivation* is revealed by students seeing language learning as an enjoyable game, an interesting puzzle, and a generally pleasant experience.

These strong *cognitive* and *affective implications* underlie other important motivational constructs: the perception of developing a new competence enhances *self-efficacy* and *self-esteem* (Bandura, 1997; Guthrie et al., 1999), and increases a sense of *autonomy* and *independence*, often expressed through a feeling of *freedom from constraints*, which is particularly meaningful and relevant for adolescents and young adults.

2. Challenging Nature of the Learning Task.

Despite showing positive attitudes, students do not underestimate the highly demanding nature of the task involved in language learning. They seem to be well aware of a special, even exceptional, enterprise, which demands an equally extraordinary expenditure of time and effort and a high degree of persistence. Combining the perceived *value* of the task and a high *expectancy of success* provides students with the necessary level of commitment and resilience in the face of difficulties (Pekrun, 1993; Cole, 2002; Schunk, 2003; Brophy, 2004).

However, this is clearly not so for everybody. The challenges inherent in language learning are not always associated with positive feelings of self-efficacy and high expectations. In fact, several students seem to stress not just the difficulty of the task, but even the impossibility of carrying it out. Unclear objectives, associated with low feelings of self-efficacy and expectancy of success, produce correspondingly low levels of motivation to learn.

All in all, the strong emphasis on *personal constructs* underlying the beliefs of these students confirms the importance of the *existential competence* (or "*savoir-être*"), which, as we have already mentioned, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001) recognizes as a fundamental language user/learner's competence affecting communicative competence alongside with knowledge and skills. This also sounds as a reminder to teachers of the impact that *social* and *emotional* learning has on competence development (Payton, Weissberg, Durlak et al., 2008).

3. Language as Communication vs Language as a System.

Most students expressed a view of language as a tool for communication and a bridge to intercultural understanding (Byram, 1997; Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002). Some were also aware of the potential of their developing intercultural communicative competence not only for personal purposes but also as a tool for intercultural mediation. In contrast, some students stressed the view of language as a system of sounds, lexis and grammar and a view of language learning as mastery of such a system. These two contrasting conceptions of language have emerged in other studies (e.g., Kolb, 2007).

4. Relationship Between L1 and L2.

Especially in the early grades, some students tended to equate the knowledge of the L2 with the knowledge of their mother tongue. Their reference seems to be the native speaker, with little or no consideration for possibly different levels of proficiency in different languages or in different skills within the same language, or for the relevant amounts of time and effort required. At the same time, many students (and not just in the early grades) seem to believe that learning a language implies starting from a "zero" level and taking once again the same cognitive and affective route they covered to learn their L1. In other words, there seems to be

no clear perception of the difference between "natural" L1 acquisition and L2 "school" learning, with no role assigned to the contribution that prior knowledge and previous experiences of language learning (including their L1) can make to the development of L2 proficiency. This can pose significant problems to teachers wishing to make students capitalize on the knowledge gained in their previous language learning experiences, at a time when research is proving that acquiring more than two language systems leads to the development of new skills like learning to learn, thus facilitating further language learning (Herdina & Jessner, 2002). Research has also shown that linguistic awareness is both a feature and a powerful aid in multilinguals (Jessner, 2006), so that tertiary language learning (e.g., German after English) can greatly benefit the cause of plurilingualism (Hufeisen & Neuner, 2004).

5. Analogies With Other Learning Experiences.

Different kinds of complex skills were mentioned as a metaphor of language learning (e.g., sports, playing music, driving a car, cooking). Especially interesting is the awareness that language competence does not imply only knowledge (of a system), but also the ability to "orchestrate" that knowledge in terms of communicative skills. Students also stress the importance of mastering the procedure, the "formulae", the "rules": in other words, they seem to be aware that complex skills cannot be acquired by lower-level reasoning (e.g., mechanical repetition, rote memorization) but demand higher cognitive operations (i.e., active mental processing). In contrast with this view, which stresses the specificity of language learning, some students, particularly in the early grades, expressed a sort of "generic" view, i.e., a conception of language learning as the study of any other school subject. This view was sometimes tempered by a recognition that learning a language can be different because it can be more useful and/or more enjoyable, as well as requiring more commitment and concentration.

Teachers' Feedback

As already mentioned, the results of the survey will also be used to draw "profiles" of the beliefs and attitudes held by particular classes. Teachers will then discuss the implications of such class profiles as the first step in feeding the data back to their students to stimulate reflection and discussion in class. Further elaboration of the metaphors by the students will include reasons for choosing a particular metaphor, their intent in using it, and comparing the different meanings that the same metaphor carries for individual students. Also, I will invite teachers to compare the data emerging from the metaphors both with their own knowledge of the classes (often derived from classroom observation), and with the further elaboration and clarification of the metaphors by the students themselves, thus improving data validation through a process of triangulation (Burns, 1999; Murphey & Falout, 2010). Teachers have already suggested possible ways to feed back the data to their classes, e.g.,

- handing out a synthesis or posting it on the school's web site or blog platform;
- leading a whole-class discussion;
- asking groups of students to discuss the data and report and compare their findings in a plenary session;
- leading group interviews or focus groups on specific issues as emerged from the data;
- discussing the teaching/learning implications: this can take the form of ideas and suggestions leading to possible changes in objectives, methodologies, tasks, activities, materials, and assessment procedures.

Some teachers' early comments on the results of feedback to the students are reported as examples of the kind of data that will hopefully emerge from the second stage of this survey:

1. "Since my students are studying different languages, and are therefore exposed to different teaching methods, I would be interested in checking whether their beliefs change according to each language. This does not emerge from their general metaphors."

2. "I think that I need to stress the metacognitive component in my teaching, to make students aware, for example, of how the knowledge of an L2 can be helpful in learning an L3."

3. "The data from my class clearly point to a rather confused idea of what it means to learn a language at a certain level of competence. Students need to have clear, shared objectives right from the start."

4. "A student in my class argued that discussing what students think about learning methods is somehow irrelevant because there is just "one" method ..."

5. "One of my students found the discussion about ways of learning a foreign language a bit useless, since she thinks that at high school all this should be considered as a prerequisite for students coming from middle schools."

6. "I have a feeling that there is a sort of a gap between my beliefs and my students." A considerable number of students said that they start "from scratch" when they first engage in learning a foreign language. I always try to build their skills taking into account what they already know and can do, but that doesn't seem to be perceived by students."

Limitations of the Present Study and Implications for Further Research

The sample of students involved in this survey attend academically-oriented high schools, where foreign languages represent a valued and consistent part of the curriculum, and where language learning plays a major role and has therefore high status. This may in part explain the emerging generally positive beliefs and attitudes, which cannot be expected and indeed were not found in other parts of this research project (which were targeted at vocational schools). More generally, this can point to the need to link students' data with the specific features of each context, taking into account, e.g., different school environments or different languages studied as part of the curriculum.

Other useful projects could involve gathering data from the *same* students at different times of their "learning career," to evaluate the development of beliefs and attitudes over time, or focusing more specifically on single skills/communicative activities like reading or writing, or on particular aspects of competence (e.g., grammar, lexis). It would also be useful to explore correlations between beliefs/attitudes and other factors like age, gender, school grades, and levels of proficiency.

As metaphors are rich, vivid images of the underlying beliefs and attitudes, their ambiguity is at the same time their value and their limitation. As a result, they often need to be disambiguated by asking students to elaborate on what they really meant when using a certain metaphor, thus providing "narrative" clues to the students' intent and scope. This process would best be developed in close sequence, with teachers asking for and providing feedback within a reasonable time sequence. This may require considerable time and energy resources (teachers' busy time schedules and the frequent teacher turnover typical of Italian schools have resulted in serious constraints in the actual implementation of the present survey).

Another interesting development of this survey would be to ask *teachers* to provide *their own* metaphors, which would add a further dimension to the variables involved. A prelim-

inary study of such teachers–students comparisons (Mariani, 2013) has yielded intriguing results and would provide a more balanced view of the "classroom culture" where different, and sometimes conflicting, beliefs and attitudes coexist and where dynamic relationships are continually evolving.

As a general concluding remark, probing the "hidden curriculum" means providing a space (both physical and psychological) for people to share their perceptions, become aware of the real forces that are at work in classroom learning, and perhaps start mediating and negotiating—a way to work towards students' and teachers' awareness and autonomy.

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Review Process

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