

THE INTRINSIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BELIEF AND ATTITUDE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY WITH SOME BRAZILIAN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

A INTRÍNSECA RELAÇÃO ENTRE ATITUDE E CRENÇA: UM ESTUDO QUALITATIVO COM ALGUNS ESTUDANTES UNIVERSITÁRIOS BRASILEIROS DE INGLÊS

LA RELACIÓN INTRÍNSECA ENTRE LA ACTITUD Y LA CREENCIA: UN ESTUDIO CUALITATIVO CON ALGUNOS ESTUDIANTES UNIVERSITARIOS DE INGLÉS DE BRASIL

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ABSTRACT: This paper is about some Brazilian undergraduate students' attitudes and beliefs. Thus, it presents some data of a qualitative study, whose objective was to verify the existence of a relationship between 'attitude' and 'belief'. The data emerged from a questionnaire applied with 91 undergraduate students, from a Brazilian university, who studied English compulsorily. To support the study, some categories of analysis were elaborated: 1. Attitudes hold or integrate beliefs and 2. Beliefs emerge as a justification of an attitude. The data analysis pointed the existence of an intrinsic relationship between attitude and belief. The relevance of this study lies in the need to understand this issue even more, since as far as one is concerned, until now, only few researches have proposed to reflect on this relationship as well as the understanding of this relationship can contribute to the improvement of the teaching/learning of English.

KEYWORDS: Belief. Attitude. Learner. English language.

RESUMO: Este artigo é sobre as atitudes e crenças de alguns estudantes universitários brasileiros. Assim, apresenta dados de um estudo qualitativo, cujo objetivo foi verificar a existência de uma relação entre atitude e crença. Os dados emergiram de um questionário aplicado com 91 estudantes universitários, de uma universidade brasileira, que estudavam inglês compulsoriamente. Para subsidiar o estudo, foram elaboradas categorias de análise: 1. Atitudes sustentam ou integram as crenças e 2. As crenças emergem como uma justificativa das atitudes. A análise dos dados apontou a existência de uma intrínseca relação entre atitude e crença. A relevância deste estudo reside na necessidade de entender ainda mais esta questão, já que, pelo que se sabe, até agora, apenas poucas pesquisas têm proposto refletir sobre essa relação assim como a compreensão dessa relação pode contribuir para a melhoria do ensino e da aprendizagem da língua inglesa.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES: Crença. Atitude. Aprendiz. Língua inglesa.

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RESUMEN: *Este artículo trata sobre las actitudes y creencias de algunos estudiantes universitarios brasileños. Así, presenta datos de un estudio cualitativo, cuyo objetivo era verificar la existencia de una relación entre actitud y creencia. Los datos surgieron de un cuestionario aplicado a 91 estudiantes universitarios, de una universidad brasileña, que obligatoriamente estudiaban inglés. Para apoyar el estudio, se desarrollaron categorías de análisis: 1. Las actitudes apoyan o integran creencias y 2. Las creencias emergen como una justificación para las actitudes. El análisis de datos señaló la existencia de una relación intrínseca entre actitud y creencia. La relevancia de este estudio reside en la necesidad de comprender esta pregunta aún más, ya que, hasta donde sabemos, hasta ahora, solo unas pocas investigaciones han propuesto reflexionar sobre esta relación, así como la comprensión de esta relación puede contribuir a la mejora de la enseñanza y el aprendizaje. del idioma inglés.*

PALABRAS-CLAVE: *Creencia. Actitud. Aprendiz. Idioma inglés.*

Introduction

In the last decades, more intensively, applied research has given support to the educational field. Researchers have figured out more accurately the educational setting, mainly based on what students and teachers thinking and believe about the environment they are involved to learn a subject. In this context, the understanding of attitudes and beliefs have shed light as well to problems concerning the teaching/learning process. Thus, the way students and teachers react and perceive reality is an alternative to improve the educational process.

In this line of thought, this paper is about learners' attitudes and beliefs in the English language classroom. It aims at showing the intrinsic relationship between both. Therefore, this paper is based on a research conducted with some Brazilian undergraduate students, from a public university, who studied English compulsorily. Thus, it was used a questionnaire to collect the data, which proved the hypothesis of the existence of a relationship between attitude and belief.

The relevance of this study lies in the need to understand even more this issue, joining to other researches which reflect on this relationship (SCHEYERL, 2019, PAJARES, 1992; BORG, 2002; MARSH; WALLACE, 2004). The understanding of this relationship can contribute to the improvement of the teaching/learning of English, because the researches might offer different perspectives of the scenarios teachers and students are in. The next lines, before presenting the data, I briefly reflect on some conceptions of beliefs and attitudes I found in the current literature, which support this study.

Figuring out beliefs and attitudes

The main purpose of this paper is to evidence the intrinsic relationship between belief and attitude. There are many works in this perspective. Many of them treating these elements separately. To figure out beliefs and attitudes, I think it is proper to start by sharing some concepts of them. First, I share concepts concerning beliefs and later on attitudes.

Thus, Barcelos (2006) argues that it is difficult to define ‘belief’, since several terms have also been used to refer to it, such as ‘learner representation’, ‘metacognitive knowledge’, ‘cultural beliefs’ and ‘learning culture’. In this regard, although M. Borg (2001) believes there is not a consensus on the concept of ‘beliefs’, she thinks this concept can become clear when taking into account some features on the nature of ‘beliefs’. This researcher highlights that a ‘belief’ is a mental state which has as its content a proposition that is accepted as true by the individual who holds it. To sum up, she says that ‘belief’ is a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held. M. Borg (2001) acknowledges the relevance of ‘beliefs’ for the teaching/learning process, since, according to her, they are involved in supporting individuals to make sense of the world, influencing how new information is perceived, and whether it is accepted.

Pajares (1992) questions how to best define ‘beliefs’ and she highlights that what distinguishes ‘belief’ from other factors, such as knowledge, is the fact of having an evaluation, a judgment as base. This, somehow or other, aligns with my hypothesis that ‘beliefs’ have a relationship with ‘attitudes’, since ‘attitudes’ are, thus, defined, about what I am going to discuss later.

Concerning specifically beliefs about language learning, Barcelos (2001) puts that they can be defined as opinions and ideas learners and teachers have toward the learning process. She mentions some examples, such as: a. one should only learn a foreign language in the countries this language is spoken; b. it is possible to learn a foreign language in a short period of time, etc. Barcelos (2006) also puts that ‘beliefs’ have both a cognitive and a social dimension, since they emerge from our interaction in society. She also says that beliefs are defined as a form of thought, that embraces things we do not know yet, but that we accept as certainly true.

In this perspective, Garbuio (2006) understands ‘beliefs’ as constructs of truths to which we adhere or not and they are elaborated based on the individual’s history and interaction in society. For her, in the educational setting, ‘beliefs’ are formed based on the encounters with teachers, students, parents and even on the contact with the institutions where one works.

For Kumaravadivelu (2012), beliefs shape the educational setting. He assures that beliefs are a kind of driving force behind what people do in their lives, which governs their thoughts, words and actions. He says:

Beliefs are views, propositions, and convictions one dearly holds, consciously or unconsciously, about the truth value of something. They are mostly acquired through such disparate means or personal experiences, family's ties, educational encounters, cultural transmission or public propagation (KUMARAVADIVELU, 2012, p. 60).

Spawa and Hassan (2013) put that 'belief' is what influences teachers' pedagogical practices. 'Beliefs' are the way they think they should act in classroom based on what they believe. They also say 'beliefs' affect behaviors and also the teaching/learning outcomes for both teachers and students.

For Connors and Halligan (2015), 'beliefs' regard unquestioned ontological representations of the world. For them, 'beliefs' make possible to interpret and appraise our ongoing experience, with a significant emotional consequence. They say 'beliefs' provide the basis to figure out the world, through a mental scaffolding for appraising the environment, constructing a meaning of the world.

At last, but not least, I want to share my own conception of 'belief', which is a perception one might have of the reality, of the facts, of the things, of someone else. This perception is only possible because of the ability one might have to receive, process and understand, in a personal perspective, things that surround us. Applying this concept to the English language classroom, 'beliefs' are perceptions on the teacher, on the language, on the book and on everything related with the teaching/learning process. I suspect this perception may work as a kind of reason, a justification to evaluate a referent, what is an attitude, that is why I also think there is a relationship between 'attitude' and 'belief'.

Concerning 'attitudes', Allport (1954) is, in fact, the pioneer in studying them. He defines 'attitudes' as a neural and mental state of readiness, structured by experiences one might have, which influence dynamically the answers this individual might have on the objects and situations he might face.

However, I regard as a seminal work, the one of Gardner (1985), who defines 'attitudes' as an evaluative reaction towards a referent, based on the beliefs one might develop. Thus, he provides a clue of the relationship I have drawn attention, when he mentions both terms. Gardner (1985) says 'attitudes' are formed by three elements: 1. the cognitive, 2. the affective and 3. the conative. The cognitive regards a structure of beliefs an individual might have. Thus,

this researcher thinks that ‘attitude’ is a complex formed by psychological states, in which an individual has a proposition, a premise for a truth or conviction well structured. As an example, I could mention that if someone says “I avoid going to the English class, because I will not progress”, the second part of this sentence expresses a belief, since it is a conviction, a truth for that person. It was in this perspective that Gardner (1985) researched about ‘attitudes’.

In this line of thought, Mackenzie (2010) highlights that ‘attitudes’ can be understood through two perspectives: the behaviorist and the mentalist. In a nutshell, the behaviorist is anchored in the tenet that ‘attitudes’ might be inferred from the individuals’ answers in a certain context. And the mentalist, understands ‘attitudes’ as an inner readiness state, that, when activated, by some kind of stimulus, affects the individuals’ answers.

For Eagly and Chaicken (1993), ‘attitudes’ are psychological tendencies materialized when one evaluates a particular referent, with certain level of approval or disapproval. That is to say, for them, ‘attitudes’ work as a judgment, based on tenets of rejection or assent.

Once again, I want to share here my own conception, now of ‘attitude’. For me, ‘attitudes’ are an excessively favorable or unfavorable position towards something or somebody, which can be applied to the educational setting. Concerning this, students might evaluate, judge the teacher, the book, the language they are learning and everything related to this setting.

These arguments support this study. However, I could not finish this section without saying some few words about the intrinsic relationship between ‘attitude’ and ‘belief’, since my intent with this study was to verify the existence of a relationship between them. Initially, I assume that an ‘attitude’ holds a ‘belief’ or the former is part of the latter, that is to say beliefs might have an evaluative component. I want to show the evidence of my assumption with some answers of the participants of the research I conducted. Besides that, I suspect that a belief might emerge as a justification for a certain attitude and an attitude is held by a belief. Initially, I was not sure about these assumptions, but I was quite interested in investigating them to validate or discard them.

Regarding the relationship between ‘attitude’ and ‘belief’, for Pajares (1992), the concept of a belief system involves the understanding that this system is composed of beliefs to one another and to other cognitive/affective structure, complex, signaling, this way, the existence of a relationship with attitudes. Actually, Pajares (1992) gives a very superficial clue, when this researcher says that when a set of beliefs are organized around an object or situation and predisposed to action, this holistic organization becomes an attitude. In the same line of

thought, Gardner (1985) mentions the term ‘belief’, when he defined ‘attitude’ as a reaction based on beliefs one might have.

Regarding this, M. Borg (2001) puts that many definitions recognize an evaluative aspect to the concept of ‘beliefs’, though she does not present any evidence of this feature in this work, at least. She says as well that ‘beliefs’ color memories with their evaluation and judgment and serve to structure our view of events. But, in practice, how does it happen?

Connor and Halligan (2015) mention the fact that for many philosophers, a ‘belief’ is a ‘propositional attitude’, opening space to understand the relationship between both. But it was only an assumption. It has not gone beyond that. The fact is that none of them explain clearly this relationship.

I finish here this section. Next, I briefly describe the method and the instrument of data collection and, then, I present the data.

Methodological choice and the instrument of data collection

For this research, I used the tenets of a qualitative study, which made it possible to immerse in the phenomenon I was interested in. A fundamental tenet was based on the interpretation of the events. First, by using a questionnaire, I intended to investigate the occurrence of learners’ attitudes. Later, as I was interested in investigating ‘beliefs’ as well, I started analyzing the data looking for both ‘attitudes’ and ‘beliefs’. In fact, these data are part of my PhD thesis, at Bahia Federal University, Brazil.

With the objective quite clear in my mind, I analyzed the answers students provided me with, based on the categories of analysis. I was looking for answers which could meet these categories, to validate them or not. In fact, I was interested in interpreting the environment I was in, by observing and analyzing the answers to questions that raise the emergence of attitudes and beliefs on the part of the participants of this research.

Thus, through a questionnaire, with twenty questions, I tried to identify the ‘attitudes’ and ‘beliefs’ of a group of 91 undergraduate students, from Federal University of Recôncavo da Bahia. All of them were students of the Interdisciplinary Bachelorship in Health, who studied English from the second to the fourth semester.

This study followed the formal requirements to conduct a research in Brazil, and, thus, it was protocolled at Plataforma Brasil, where a commission gave its assent. This research is registered at Federal University of Bahia (UFBA), which number of certification is (CAAE)

59915516.7.0000.5531. The proceedings adopted in this research obey the ethic criteria concerning research with human beings, according to the resolution CNS N° 466 de 2012.

The analysis of the data

I proposed to share the analysis based on the data collected from the questionnaire. Therefore, I took as basis three research questions: 1. Is there, in fact, a relationship between belief and attitude? 2. How might beliefs and attitudes together explain the teaching and learning process on the part of the students? And 3. What do learners' beliefs and attitudes express on the teaching and learning process?

Besides that, I elaborated some categories of analysis, so that I could better meet the objective of this study, of verifying the existence of a relationship between 'belief' and 'attitude'. They are: 1. Attitudes hold or/and integrate beliefs and 2. Beliefs emerge as a justification of an attitude.

With this in mind, I started the analysis, which the results I share from now on. To a better understanding, as I came to the conclusion that behind beliefs might be a teaching/learning logistic factor, which is related with positive or negative attitudes toward learning English, the data are shared according to them. Let us start with the negative attitudes and beliefs they had. Thus, one of the questions was: **do you feel yourself motivated to learn English?**

Logistic factor: heterogeneity of the group

A25: No [I do not feel myself motivated to learn English]. I can't follow the group, because I'm part of a heterogeneous group with respect to the fluency of the English language.

A73: No, I don't, this far. The heterogeneity of the group made the professor follow an approach which can support students from the basic level. This fact made the classes, for those with some knowledge, a bit tedious.

It is possible to say, based on these answers, that both A25 and A73 have negative attitudes toward the learning process. And their attitudes are justified by the belief that the heterogeneity of the group, they were part of, made them feel demotivated to learn English. This way, I may say as well that behind their beliefs it is a logistic factor (the heterogeneity of the group) and that their beliefs emerged as a justification of an attitude, what allows me to frame their answers in the category 2.

Logistic factor: Teaching method

A31: No, I don't. Because the university doesn't have as goal the teaching of English to embrace learners' difficulties. Besides that, it teaches a mechanic English, boring, which doesn't stimulate the students to go deeper in the knowledge.

A39: No, I don't. I believe that the university doesn't use attractive methods so that students can have access to English.

Both A31 and A39 have negative attitudes toward the learning/teaching process. This attitude is justified based on the perception (belief) that the method applied by the teacher was not suitable. Concerning A31's answer, I may say that it is related with categories 1 and 2, because when he reveals not to feel motivated to learn English (negative attitude), this attitude is held by the belief that the classes are 'mechanic', 'boring'. At the same time, when he complements saying that the university teaches a 'mechanic English, boring', ('mechanic' and 'boring' are evaluative reactions, which now hold and integrate a belief). A39 as well reveals not to feel himself motivated to learn English, which is an evaluative reaction (attitude), and he justifies his attitude with the belief that there are not attractive methods. Once again, it was possible to verify that behind the belief was a logistic factor: the teaching method. Thus, I ratify the notion that 'belief,' as an opinion an individual has, influences his attitude to learn as well.

Another question used was: **Does the way the professor teaches English motivate you to learn it? Why?**

Logistic factor: Teaching method

A64: No. I realize that she doesn't teach the basic level. The teaching is for those who already have notion of the language.

A81: Generally, it doesn't, because it is unattractive and decontextualized.

A64 says he does not feel himself motivated to learn English (attitude) and he ascribes this reaction to the way the professor teaches (belief). Thus, it is possible to realize that his answer is related with category 2, only because the fact of believing that the professor does not teach for students from the basic level is a justification not to feel motivated. And A81 says that the way the professor teaches, generally, does not motivate him to learn English (attitude) and this is related with the fact that the classes are 'unattractive' and 'decontextualized' (belief). Thus, first, the belief emerges to justify his attitude, however, when he uses the qualifiers 'unattractive' and 'decontextualized', what denotes an evaluative reaction (attitude), this allows me to say that these attitudes hold and integrate his belief as well.

Logistic factor: reduced class load

A13: No, I don't. The difficult is associated with the short time the university offer the English language.

A68: No, I don't. The class load is insufficient.

At the university where this research took place, the English language, as a subject, is offered with a load of 1 (one) hour per week. Taking this fact into consideration, these participants do not feel themselves motivated to learn English either. They ascribe their attitudes to the reduced class load with which the English language is offered, what denotes their beliefs, which influenced their negative attitudes toward the learning/teaching process.

Next, I present some answers related with positive attitudes and beliefs.

Question used: **do you feel yourself motivated to learn English?**

Logistic factor: Teaching method

A2: Yes! The classes turned up interesting and dynamic.

A4: In this semester I feel myself motivated to learn English, the classes are dynamic [...] I believe when the teacher believes in what he does and he does because he likes it, students reflect this showing interest in learning.

Both A2 and A3 have positive attitudes toward learning English at the university. Their attitudes are related with the belief that the teaching method works well. A2's answer allows me to say that it is related with both the categories 1 and 2. It is related with category 1, because the qualifiers 'interesting' and 'dynamic' are evaluative reactions (that is to say, an attitude) toward the teaching method, which holds or integrate A2's belief (she is motivated to learn English because the teaching method is interesting and dynamic). At the same time, A2 justifies her attitude, of being motivated to learn English, upon classifying the English classes as 'interesting' and 'dynamic'. Thus, her belief, concerning the fact of the English classes be 'interesting' and 'dynamic', justifies her attitude, therefore related with category 2 as well.

Regarding A3's answer, it allows me to say that it is related with categories 1 and 2 as well, because whereas he assures to feel himself motivated to learn English (attitude), he complements by saying that the classes are 'dynamic', what is an evaluative reaction too (attitude), which forms his belief (the classes are dynamic), but also a justification of his attitude of feeling himself motivated to learn English.

Question used: **Does the way the professor teaches English motivate you to learn it?**

Why?

Logistic factor: Teaching method

A25: Yes, the classes are dynamic, they inspire me to learn more the language.

A53: Sure! Teaching through the repetition of sentences makes students learn grammar intuitively just like the way we learn our language.

These participants said to feel themselves motivated to learn English. A25 ascribes his attitude (to feel motivated) to the fact of the classes be 'dynamic'. Thus, this is related with category 2, beliefs emerge as a justification of an attitude. Besides that, when he states "the classes are dynamic", 'dynamic' is also an evaluative reaction (attitude), which holds and integrates his beliefs, that the classes are dynamic, ratifying again my hypothesis that attitudes hold and integrate beliefs (category 1). A53 also feels himself motivated to learn English and justifies this attitude due to the teaching method used (sentence repetition) by the professor (belief), what allows me to state that his answer is related with category 2, since it is a justification of his attitude.

Other occurrences of attitudes and beliefs

Another questioned used was: **How do you feel when you see other people speaking English?**

A12: Unable, I feel myself damaged, I have never dedicated myself so much, but I've never had the opportunity to study it.

A24: Illiterate, of a language extremely used, which is part of our everyday life and sad not to have learned it yet.

Both participants had negative attitudes toward this question. When A12 says to feel himself 'unable' and 'damaged', this is his attitude about himself. He ascribes this attitude to the fact that he has not had an opportunity for that (belief), which is a justification for his attitude (category 2). And A24 said to feel himself 'illiterate', what is an evaluative reaction and a self-perception as well, since the use of the qualifier 'illiterate', allows me to state that this attitude both holds and integrates his belief (category 1). Also, when A24 uses "sad", this denotes his attitude that holds and integrates his belief for not have learned English yet.

Question used: **Do you feel yourself motivated to learn English?**

A29: Not too much! Generally, I don't like much the methodology and I get worried about the evaluation, since it is a subject I have difficult with and it can, in a way, damage me, unfortunately.

A90: I don't feel myself motivated, because I know almost nothing of English, I studied for short periods in the elementary and high school.

A29 reveals a certain instability concerning her motivation to learn English. This self-evaluation (attitude) is related with her belief that she does not like the method used by the teacher, what allows me to state that her attitude is justified by her belief (therefore, category 2). And A90 was straightforward, saying that he does not feel himself motivated to learn English and he ascribes this reaction to the fact that he knows just a little of English. It worth

noticing the use of the word ‘because’, working as a link of the justification of his attitude (category 2).

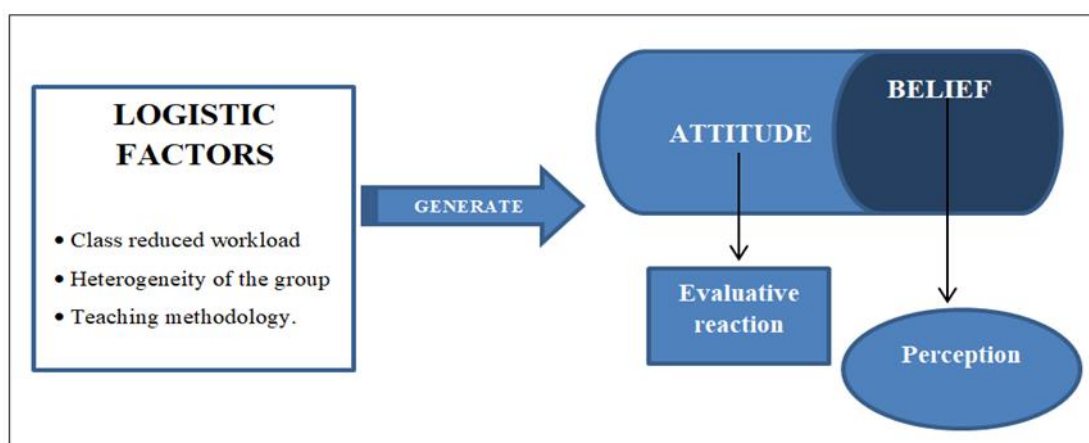
I finish here the data analysis and next I present some final words for now.

Final remarks

This study is anchored in the three research questions, which guided the development of the two categories of analysis. Concerning the research questions, I may say, after analyzing the data, that there is, in fact, a relationship between ‘attitudes’ and ‘beliefs’: the former holding and integrating the latter or the latter emerging to justify the former. Regarding the second research question², in a nutshell, I may state that, together, ‘beliefs’ and ‘attitudes’ could explain how the participants of this research evaluated and realized the English language teaching/learning process, expressing positive and negative reactions toward it. Thus, I got to answer the questions I proposed for this study as well as ratifying the categories listed for it. That is also why I can say that the objective of this study was fulfilled, since I explained the intrinsic relationship between ‘attitudes’ and ‘beliefs’.

I have to say as well that from the data analysis, I came to the conclusion that behind attitudes and beliefs there are logistic factors, which are part of the educational setting, such as the reduced class load, the heterogeneity of the group and the teaching methodology. Next, I share Figure 1, which represents this relationship:

Figure 1 - The relationship between belief and attitude



Source: devised by the author

² How might beliefs and attitudes together explain the teaching and learning process on the part of the students?

Another information, I cannot help saying, is that it can be difficult to understand the threshold between ‘attitudes’ and ‘beliefs’, what only with a detailed analysis it is possible to identify and to distinguish them from one another. This difficult might occur exactly because attitudes might hold and integrate a belief, what might provoke a confusion.

The first impression one may have is that, first, an individual develop an attitude and later a belief emerges, which justifies the attitude. However, it seems reasonable to say that a belief emerges first and that it justifies the attitude emergence. This seems to happen because attitudes might appear first in our speech and beliefs come immediately after. For example, when someone says “I feel myself motivated to learn English because the methodology is dynamic”, the first part of this sentence (I feel myself motivated) is an attitude, and the second part (the methodology is dynamic) is a belief, but inside this belief there is an attitude as well (dynamic), that is why I assume that an attitude holds and integrates a belief, ratifying my hypothesis.

Thus, among other things, what this research can offer, through the lens of attitudes and beliefs, is the need to rethink the English teaching/learning process in contexts such as the one I investigated, since the participants signaled that their negative attitudes and beliefs were related with some improper logistic factors, such as reduced class load, improper teaching method, the heterogeneity of the group etc. With these data in hands, it is possible to plan strategies to interfere in the educational setting, in order to change a scenario where, for some reason, learning is not occurring as it should, what, automatically, justifies researches on attitudes and beliefs.

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