Perceptions and Beliefs about English Learning in the Community Outreach Unit of a Colombian University[1]

Bernal Sierra, Eliana[2] ⓘ
Coronado-Rodríguez, Claudia Camila[3] ⓘ
Morello Vargas, Ma. Mónica[4] ⓘ
Tiuso Hernández, Alba Juliana[5] ⓘ

Contributor roles: Eliana Bernal: Formal Analysis, Methodology, Validation. **Claudia Coronado-Rodriguez**: Software, Writing – Review & Editing, Writing – Original Draft. **Ma. Mónica Morello**: Investigation, Data Curation. **Alba Tiuso Hernández**: Investigation, Conceptualization, Project administration, Resources.

Abstract

This paper reports the results of a case study on students' perceptions and beliefs about language learning at the Community Outreach Unit of Universidad Santo Tomás in Villavicencio, Colombia. The main aim of the study was to analyze the perceptions and beliefs of a group of 17 students regarding English language learning. Data collected through surveys and focus groups was analyzed using the content analysis approach. Results showed that the participants' beliefs about language learning were linked to effects on their motivation and performance. Additionally, factors such as the demands of globalization and academic requirements were found to play a crucial role in shaping the learners' affective responses toward the learning experience. Finally, the paper presents the implications from an emotional engagement perspective about the learners' needs in language learning.

Keywords: beliefs, community outreach, English learning, perceptions

Percepciones y creencias sobre el aprendizaje del inglés en la unidad de proyección social de una universidad Colombiana

Resumen

Este artículo reporta los resultados de un estudio de caso sobre las percepciones y creencias de los estudiantes en torno al aprendizaje del inglés en la Unidad de Proyección Social de la Universidad Santo Tomás en Villavicencio, Colombia. El objetivo principal de este estudio fue analizar las percepciones y creencias de un grupo de 17 estudiantes sobre el aprendizaje del inglés. Los datos obtenidos de encuestas y grupos focales se analizaron mediante la metodología de Análisis de Contenido. Los resultados evidenciaron que las creencias de los participantes acerca del aprendizaje de una lengua se relacionan con el impacto en la motivación y rendimiento académico. También se encontró que factores tales como las demandas de la globalización y las exigencias escolares fueron cruciales en las respuestas afectivas de los estudiantes en el proceso de aprendizaje. Finalmente, implicaciones acerca de las necesidades de los estudiantes en el proceso de aprendizaje desde una perspectiva de involucramiento emocional son presentadas.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje del inglés, creencias, percepciones, proyección social

Introduction

Nowadays, language teaching has adopted methodologies crafted according to theories regarding learners and the learning process, rather than on grammar or even the communicative function of the language (Richards & Rodgers 2014). This shift has led to the emergence of a new movement in English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) known as the learner-centered approach. This approach pays particular attention to the learner, considering a learner-centered view of language and language learning (Nunan, 2012).

Learner-centered approaches emphasize adapting the teachers' strategies to meet their students' needs, ensuring that teachers know their students and respond to their needs and preferences in language learning (Benson, 2012). Moreover, Eaton (2010) claims that the students' needs, hopes, and aspirations are central to language learning and education, allowing for their participation in developing learning outcomes. This focus on the learner's differences has led to research on students' perceptions and beliefs in the field of language education. According to Ellis and Shintani (2014), beliefs are the experiences the students are exposed to when learning a new language. In contrast, Schunk and Meece (2012) define perceptions as students' behaviors in the classroom.

In the Colombian context, the Ministry of National Education (MNE) continues to focus on developing the students' communicative skills through various bilingualism programs and resources, such as *Basic Standards of Competence in Foreign Languages: English* (2006), *Bunny Bonita Handbook* (2008), *Basic Learning Rights* (2016), *Way to go Booklet, English Please* (2016), and *Eco Web 2.0* (2021).

The emphasis on communicative competence has not led to improvements in the students' performance, as reflected in the results of the Prueba Saber 11 test, administered by the Instituto Colombiano para la Evaluación de la Educación (ICFES). According to ICFES (n.d.), the results of the English language section of Prueba Saber 11 were as follows: 51 points in 2017, a one-point increase in 2018, a two-point decrease in 2019, and 48 points in 2020. Considering that the highest possible score is 100, these results suggest that students are not achieving the language proficiency level established by the MNE.

Guerrero (2008) argues that the low English proficiency among students is due to the fact that "not all children enjoy the same opportunities or access to education, especially in a society like the Colombian one afflicted by so many social and economic problems" (p. 36). In this regard, García *et al*. (2018) point out that not all schools meet the established standards because they lack the resources necessary to facilitate the teaching and learning processes that foster the development of communicative competence in English.

Considering the above, this paper presents the insights of a research project conducted at Universidad Santo Tomás in Villavicencio, Meta, with a group of 17 beneficiaries who participated in English reinforcement classes at the university's Community Outreach Unit. This initiative is part of a strategy of the Foreign Languages and Cultures International Center (CILCE in Spanish) to facilitate access to education for vulnerable students. The research focuses on analyzing the perceptions and beliefs that influence English language learning, intending to provide future recommendations on teaching a foreign language in the Colombian context.

Literature Review

Understanding the current state of research within a given field is crucial for setting up the foundation of any new study. In this section, we undertake a comprehensive review of the existing literature related to perception and beliefs in language learning. By examining the body of knowledge accumulated in previous studies, we aim to identify key themes, controversies, and gaps in our understanding. This literature review not only provides a historical context for our research but also serves as a critical examination of the methodologies and findings that have shaped the current landscape. As we navigate through earlier works and recent advancements, we seek to draw connections, highlight discrepancies, and lay the groundwork for the novel contributions our study seeks to make in this evolving domain. With this in mind, we present the theoretical conceptualization of the three key constructs for this study: perception, beliefs, and community outreach.

Perception

Robbins and Judge (2024) define perspective as the process "by which individuals organize and interpret their sensory impressions in order to give meaning to their environment" (p. 203). According to the authors, there are three factors shaping perception (see Figure 1). In the context of this study, participants' personal characteristics (factors in the perceiver) influence how they organize and interpret their perceptions of language learning. The characteristics of language learning (factors in the target) are influenced by the context (factors in the situation) where this study takes place: the community outreach of a Colombian university.

Figure 1. *Factors that Influence Perception*
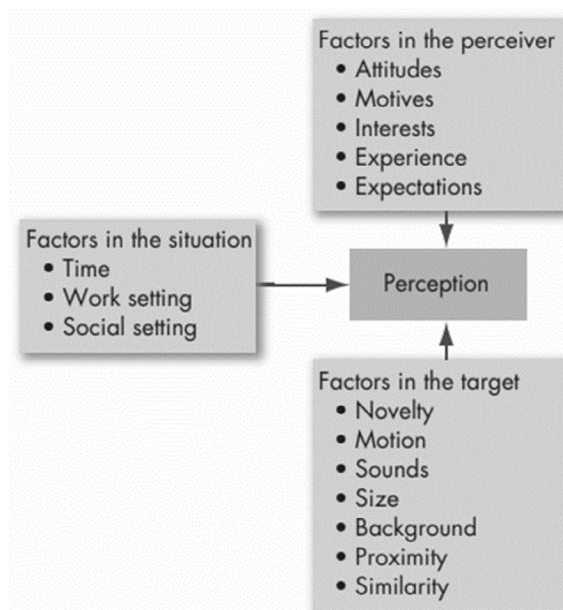
Note. Robbins and Judge (2024).

For this study, the most important factors to highlight are those related to the perceiver, as we aim to identify the perceptions and beliefs that have influenced participants' learning processes through their attitudes, motives, interests, experiences, and expectations.

The concepts of motivation and motives are closely intertwined. Motives are the specific reasons or goals that drive individuals to learn, acting as the foundational 'whys' behind their effort. Motivation, in turn, is the energy or drive that stems from these motives, providing the necessary push to engage in learning activities, practice, and study. When learners have strong and clear motives, they tend to experience higher levels of motivation, which significantly increases their commitment to and success in their learning process (Madg'ofurova & Ismailova, 2023). Thus, in language learning, clear and compelling motives are crucial for sustaining motivation and achieving linguistic proficiency.

In the field of language learning, Wesely (2012) states that understanding English learning processes depends on both observable and unobservable variables. Observable variables correspond to performance, progress in learning processes, and similar, while unobservable variables refer to attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, and other internal factors. The latter is the author's area of research interest.

Wesely (2012) presents a compilation of research on learner's attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs. She found that learners' perceptions have been associated with two aspects: perceptions of themselves and perceptions of the learning situation. The first aspect refers to the perception of students and their understanding of themselves, and their learning process, and the second aspect refers to the perception of the students' learning process focused on how they understand and live their experience in the classroom, with the teacher, among others.

Beliefs

A belief is defined as "the acceptance of the truth, reality, or validity of something…, particularly in the absence of substantiation" (American Psychological Society, 2018). In English language teaching, Ellis and Shintani (2014) state that a belief is a mediating variable that influences the effect that other factors have on learning. The authors argue that learner beliefs consist of what learners hold to be true about language and language learning. Additionally, beliefs can reflect an experiential or analytic approach to learning and a self-assessment of efficiency as language learners.

Following this definition, research on the learners' beliefs focus on how perceive their own efficacy in mastering language learning tasks and how they feel about this process. It also focuses on examining what learners think about the target community. Beliefs encompass opinions and ideas of the learning situation, the target community, language, and culture.

For example, in Colombia, Gómez (2018) conducted a study at El Tecnológico de Antioquia (TdeA) to identify students' beliefs about English learning, intending to improve the institution's language curriculum. The study was also used as a tool for language teachers to acquire a better understanding of the factors that hinder or facilitate foreign language learning, through the analysis of the items established in the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI). The author concluded that beliefs about learning a foreign language in a university context play a significant role, particularly in promoting the development of communicative competence. This study also showed that beliefs are multidimensional and complex, sometimes acting as barriers that hinder language learning, or, conversely, as factors that facilitate it.

Another study in the Colombian context was conducted by Avella and Camargo (2010). The qualitative study explored how learners' beliefs affect their perspective about the foreign language in the classroom activities and their learning process. The study involved fifteen school students and thirteen public university students. Data were collected through observation and a survey. The researchers found the belief that language is a useful tool to acquire new knowledge and improve their academic and professional opportunities. However, this belief did not necessarily mean they liked English or performed well in their English classes. Issues such as low self-confidence, lack of knowledge in pronunciation and vocabulary, and other factors related to the students' self-concept and background affected their classroom participation and language learning process. Another finding of this research was that students' earlier experiences in their learning process played a key role in their motivation and even in their attitude towards the subject.

With students' earlier experiences influence, it is important to extend the concept of belief to "an occasion when an individual reflects on aspects of language learning or teaching, relates these experiences of his or her own or those of others, and assigns these aspects his or her personal meanings" (Kalaja *et al.*, 2016, p. 10). Therefore, holding a belief is an experience shared in time and space, as beliefs are highly context-dependent and dynamic. For instance, in an intervention study carried out by Blackwell *et al.* (2007), a group of children were taught that intelligence is malleable. The results of the study showed that the beliefs of the students changed, and motivation was enhanced, grades improved.

Another research related to how beliefs are highly context-dependent and dynamic was carried out by Han (2017). The author stated that new beliefs may emerge from students' ongoing practices within the learning context, further motivating their learning. The relationship between students' beliefs and their corresponding practices may be disrupted, appearing to be dynamic and subject to additional influences arising from the learning context in which students are placed (Aslan & Thompson, 2021; Han, 2017).

The previous definitions provide insights into the nature of beliefs, helping researchers choose appropriate methodologies and designs when investigating beliefs in language learning. These insights provide the researcher with viability and feasibility. For this reason, Pajares (1992) examines the meaning of belief to provide a consistent definition in the field of education. It also explores the nature of beliefs to present teachers' beliefs. Although this study focuses on teachers' beliefs rather than learners' beliefs, it provides a clear conceptualization of belief and key assumptions that are essential for understanding and investigating belief constructs in education. In this sense, the author highlights the importance of defining what beliefs will mean to the study and how it differs from other constructs.

Considering the mentioned above, Kalaja and Ferreira (2007) state that current studies on beliefs about language learning employ a methodology focused on describing straightforward cause-and-effect relationships with other factors involved through statistical procedures. Most studies focus on quantitative methods of data collection and analysis. For example, the use of questionnaires with Likert scales such as the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory BALLI created by Horwitz in 1985.

Community outreach

Considering that both perception and belief are influenced by the situation or context, this section presents a definition of community outreach where this study took place. A Community Outreach Project (COP) is a project conducted by organizations or groups to transfer their knowledge and skills for the benefit of a deprived community (Van Der Weide & Zlotnikova, 2013). DeTablan and Sanders (2017) define community outreach programs as a mechanism to increase social capital. It means that the networks created among people represent a reciprocal aid in society. Social capital is represented in material and non-material contributions. Within the field of education, these programs contribute to the construction of connections between the community and organizations which may protect the population from school failure and social exclusion. Besides, the programs may empower students to influence their context positively.

Universities and society are deeply intertwined, each influencing the other. The concept of community outreach was first introduced in 1918 in Cordoba, Argentina, during the University Reform, which later had a significant impact across Latin America. Among the reform's key proposals was the social mission of the university. Tünnermann (2010) states that its goal was to create a bridge between society and its issues to promote awareness of the importance of inclusion and the importance of spreading education to everyone.

In Colombia, community outreach was officially established with Law 30 from 1992 (Ley 30 de 1992) to educate professionals with a strong sense of social responsibility, enabling them to address the country's needs. Considering those foundations, the universities in Colombia have incorporated community outreach units from a social perspective in which the institutions impact the society through different practices.

It is crucial to note that this study sought to analyze the perceptions and beliefs of a group of students —children of the security guards, and cleaning staff who work at the Universidad Santo Tomás in Villavicencio—to develop innovative pedagogical solutions in English language teaching.

Within this framework, it is necessary to mention that the Universidad Santo Tomás has sought to positively impact the communities around it. For this purpose, the institution has an autonomous community outreach program unit that "is responsible for planning, managing, articulating, promoting, linking, qualifying and permanently evaluating programs and projects with an impact on its context" (Universidad Santo Tomás Villavicencio, 2021, párr. 4).

Cetina (2019) carried out a study to observe the impact of this program, showing the scope of the activities developed in the community outreach of Universidad Santo Tomás in Villavicencio, Colombia. The community aims to provide educational services to the most vulnerable populations. The activities correspond to two lines of action: community development and continuing education. English teaching is included within the line of community development. Instruction focuses on reinforcing the topics learned at school, which is directly connected to this research.

In 2022, an expansion of the range of action of the community otreach program at Universidad Santo Tomás was proposed. The proposed expansion would include a portion of the community that, until then, had not taken part in social projects within the institution, namely, the children of the security guards and cleaning staff of the Villavicencio campus. This population had not taken part in the academic activities of the institution and, therefore, their background, perceptions, and beliefs about their experience in English learning are unknown.

Beliefs and perceptions

A common construct in the current literature surrounding learner attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs is motivation and anxiety, as defined by Wesely (2012). These concepts guide learners' behavior and help identify learners' individual differences. On one hand, motivation refers to "the affective characteristics of the learner, referring to the direction and magnitude of learning behavior in terms of the learner's choice, intensity, and duration of learning" (Dörnyei, 2009, as cited in Wesely, 2012, p.100). On the other hand, anxiety refers to "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning processes" (Horwitz, 2010, as cited in Wesely, 2012, p.100)

In this regard, Aslan and Thompson (2021) examine the relationship between learner beliefs and language anxiety in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. The participants of their study were university-level EFL learners. The results revealed that fear of ambiguity influenced their classroom performance and produced negative feelings toward English. On the contrary, positive feelings towards language learning reduced their anxiety and boosted their confidence in learning. Self-confident learners do not usually feel anxious about using English.

According to the studies, both perception and belief influence the effect that motivation and anxiety have on learning. They might also have an influence on other factors associated with language learning. For this reason, a distinction between and a justification for the inclusion of perception and belief is necessary in any study. For example, Goldstein (2010) differentiates these concepts from a philosophical point of view. Both perception and belief relate to the various ways individuals understand the world. However, perceptions require a context to verify the correctness of what is being conceptualized. Perceptions depend on where and when people are experiencing them. Beliefs, on the other hand, do not require a context because one needs to master certain concepts to hold beliefs.

Given the above, this study considers both students' perceptions and beliefs to have a better understanding of their English language learning experience in the immediate-context specific learning situation and the underlying previous reflective process. This entails understanding the dynamic interplay between the sensory impressions and the construction and acceptance of certain concepts. For instance, the participants' beliefs (the acceptance of a reality, that is, language and language learning occurring in a reflective process), and their perceptions (the organization and interpretation of the sensory impressions) are influenced by the students' goals, effort, values, and emotions (Schunk & Meece, 2012; Wesley, 2012). Factors highlighted by Welsey (2012) and Kalaja and Ferreira (2007) include motivation and anxiety, and cultural background and social context.

Methodology

To obtain an in-depth understanding of how perceptions and beliefs are constructed, communicated, and influenced by cultural contexts, a qualitative approach for a case study design followed by content analysis was adopted for the study.

Firstly, Pathak et al. (2013) state that the main characteristic of the qualitative approach is to comprehend the attitudes, interactions, behaviors, experiences, and beliefs of individuals. This study focuses on learners' perceptions and beliefs, along with considerations of sociocultural factors, in line with the works of Kalaja et al. (2018). Therefore, the following data collection instruments were implemented: "Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory" (BALLI) inventory, a sociodemographic survey, and a focus group. Together, these illustrated the beliefs and perceptions about English language learning within a specific social context (see Appendix A).

Secondly, the focus on learners' perceptions and beliefs, as a contemporary phenomenon that has prompted researchers to describe it, considering contextual conditions, led to the use of a case study, in line with Yin (2017). A case study is appropriate when studying a contemporary event and when managing a broad variety of evidence that needs to be triangulated. Additionally, case studies benefit from prior theoretical discussion to guide design, data collection, and analysis (Yin, 2017). In sum, case studies provide a complete and detailed portrayal of a phenomenon (Schwandt & Gates, 2018).

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Finally, content analysis was used as it facilitates an understanding of a social reality in a subjective but scientific manner (Zhan & Wildemuth, 2015). This analytical approach illustrates the range of the meanings of the phenomenon of learners' beliefs and perceptions, considering prior theories found in previous studies and the themes that emerge from the data. A triangulation of the findings from the sociodemographic survey, BALLI inventory, and focus group was performed to see how they corroborated or differed from each other before using the content analysis approach. They were compared using an analysis matrix and insights were drawn from the coded data and the analysis matrix (Figure 2).

The validation process occurs in the analysis process wherein data and theory are contrasted (Mayring, 2000, as cited in Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Triangulation of the data collection was used to enhance the credibility and validity of the findings. This involved cross-verifying information from the different data sources and methods.

Figure 2. *The process of triangulation*

Triangulation process

Combining the findings from the three sources to see how they corroborate or differ from each other

Themes comparison	Cross-validate Findings	Theoretical Integration	Interpretation	Insights
STEP 1	STEP 2	STEP 3	STEP 4	STEP 5
Identify common themes across the focus groups and the BallEY survey. Look for areas of agreement and divergence.	Use the sociodemographic data to understand how different backgrounds might influence perceptions and beliefs.	Apply constructivist and socio-cultural theories to interpret the combined findings.	Discuss how students' personal experiences shape their perceptions and beliefs about second language learning. Highlight examples from focus group discussions that illustrate these constructs.	Present a cohesive narrative that integrates the different data sources. Present a cohesive narrative that integrates the different data sources.

Participants

The participants were selected by purposive sampling, which considered whether individuals met the characteristics required by the researchers (Nyimbili & Nyimbili 2024). Requirements included that they took English reinforcement classes offered by the community outreach unit of Universidad Santo Tomás in Villavicencio, Colombia at Aguas Claras campus, and that they were the children of the security guards or cleaning staff working at the university. The total number of participants meeting these criteria were 17 students, of which 11 children from ages 11 to 14 were chosen and 6 adolescents from ages 15 to 18. Participants (P) were labeled from P1 to P17.

The English reinforcement classes are taught by professors of the Foreign Languages and Cultures International Center (CILCE in Spanish) at Universidad Santo Tomás in Villavicencio, Colombia. They are aimed at vulnerable populations of school-age children who live near the campuses of the university. In 2021, the community outreach unit decided to extend the scope of those classes to the children of the security guards and cleaning staff who work at the university. Those children have classes in the Aguas Claras campus of the university on Saturday mornings.

Surveys

Neuman (2013) explains that surveys record answers from different people who have been asked the same questions. Two surveys were used, the first of which was intended to determine the socio-demographic characteristics of all participants and data such as personal information, educational background, household, and leisure activities. The survey, conducted through Google Forms®, was divided into five sections in which 13 questions were asked, 9 out of 13 were multiple choice questions and 4 were open-ended questions. It is necessary to clarify that the socio-demographic survey was intended to collect complementary information. The second survey was adapted from the BALLI inventory created by Elaine K. Horwitz in 1981 (Horwitz, 1985). This instrument assesses the beliefs of teachers and learners about language learning using 27 Likert-scale items. The adapted questionnaire was taken from Gomez (2018), who modified the instrument for the Colombian context. The changes made to this instrument aimed to simplify the vocabulary, especially for the youngest participants who were 11-year-old children. This questionnaire contained 34 Likert-scale items. Both questionnaires used a Likert scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "strongly agree" and 5 being "strongly disagree."

Focus groups

A focus group is a technique used to informally interview a group in a discussion setting. According to Neuman (2013), the researcher gathers six to twelve participants in a room with a moderator to discuss various issues. The purpose of the focus group was to collect information about the participants' perceptions and beliefs about language learning, considering five categories that are related to BALLI items. Horwitz' (1985) categories are the following: attitude toward learning a language, difficulty in learning, learning strategies, motivations and expectations, and perceptions about language learning. Two separate focus groups were conducted. The first group (FGC) consisted of 11 children, while the second group (FGA) was composed of 6 adolescents.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The data analysis procedure and the research categories are presented in this section. This procedure was adapted from the content analysis process outlined by Zhan and Wildemuth (2015). Eight steps were followed: prepare the data, define the units of analysis, develop categories and a coding scheme, test the coding scheme on a sample text, code all the text, assess the coding consistency, draw conclusions from the coded data, and report method and findings.

The information was classified into two categories that responded to the aims of the study: a) the impact on beliefs about students' values and emotions in English classes and b) the effect of perceptions on learning English. The first category is a general outlook between the feelings and emotions of students in their English classes and their implicit beliefs. The second category provides an overview of the different stimuli that underlie the process of learning a foreign language.

It is important to highlight that learners' perceptions of the different stimuli occur during the immediate and context-specific interpretation of their sensory impressions while learning a language. However, perceptions are shaped by the underlying beliefs that have been accepted after a reflective process over time. For this reason, the study of beliefs and perceptions about language learning is necessary because of the continuous interplay that these aspects have on each other. They cannot be separated due to how they shaped and influenced one another. It also provides a comprehensive understanding of the role of learners' perceptions and beliefs in the English language learning process in a particular context.

Category 1: Impact on beliefs about students' values and emotions in English classes

Students from different contexts in Colombia have been exposed to the English language since elementary school, and their learning experiences have shaped their beliefs throughout this process. In this sense, Kalaja *et al*. (2015) state that being a learner is charged with positive or negative experiences and loaded with personal meanings.

The experiences and their attributed meanings create an individual's reflective process in their personal life. Hence, participants from the community outreach unit believed that learning a foreign language was easier and more engaging in their early years of schooling. However, English language classes now focus on skill development, and teachers are stricter. For example, P17 mentioned: "Well, on many occasions, today's classes have become very strict, the teacher gives us more homework" (P17, FGA).

Pekrun (2014) highlights that students experience a great range of emotions that can have profound effects on their learning, personality development, and health. The findings revealed that participants' classroom experiences have fostered feelings of nervousness, stress, and fear. "When we entered [to the English class, he felt] nervous, afraid of getting scolded by the teacher for saying words wrong, mispronouncing them" (P17, FGA). "The same as the others, let's say nerves, let's say that a teacher would ask me a question and I couldn't answer...." (P13, FGA). "I don't like that they (language teachers) make us go to the board and sometimes I feel tense and no... I don't like it" (P4, FGC).

Other students reported that their beliefs were shaped by their teachers' practices.
"Well, the truth is that it [the class] stresses me out. I go to the class, I mean, the teacher comes to the classroom, and I don't feel like being there for the same reason, right? because he doesn't focus on... on helping us learning but simply assign us with too much work" (P1, FGA)
"When, as P1 said, he [the teacher] comes [to class] to grade only, I get stressed, because he just grades the lesson he left and if one has not advanced [in the task], he doesn't grade it, but he [grades] other people. It's very unfair." (P3, FGA)

As evidenced by these excerpts, students' experiences in the classroom— specifically with their teacher—are related to stress and a sense of unfairness. This highlights how they believe a language should not be conducted. They complain about the teacher's practices since their classes are only focused on workshops and grading, The fact that their teacher practices are not considered engaging proves that they associate engagement with positive experiences.

On the other hand, adolescents made a significant contrast between their experiences in elementary school and those in middle or high school. They reported enjoying more their English classes when they were children: "Our teacher's study model was as if we were native English speakers. It was first listening, watching... watching videos and things like that" (P12, FGA). "I liked the classes when they made us paint... and write the words in English according to the color" (P3, FGA). "Today's classes have become very strict" (P17, FGA)

It was also found that although most adolescents have not had positive experiences with language learning, they maintain a positive attitude toward the language and its learning. "I'm not afraid anymore and if I'm worried about something then I ask the teacher, and he explains to me or he explains to the entire course" (P16, FGA). "As time went by, things flowed better, and it became easier to talk and interact with other people" (P12, FGA).

Participants (ages 11-14) shared similar perceptions. Overall, among children they were positive towards their English classes, expressing the value they assign to learning the English language, which is shown in the following excerpt: "It is positive because I would like to learn more English and one day get to do something with that language." (P14, FGC). "It is positive because the truth is that my interest in English is too much, and I like it in all the classes I have had. I always arrive with the best attitude because I like it" (P5, FGC).

Considering the above, it is important to note the contrast between both groups of participants because, despite their differences in age and learning experiences, both children and adolescents share similar beliefs. Although negative experiences have shaped their beliefs negatively, both groups maintain a positive attitude towards the language. Additionally, participants' beliefs regarding teachers' practices are shaped by their experiences in English classes. This evidences that the meaning assigned to their experiences is not fixed; rather, it is continuously influenced by how they perceive others, what they experience throughout their lives, the role they assign to themselves and others, and the expectations and behaviors associated with teaching and learning.

Category 2: The effect of perceptions on learning English

The effect of perceptions on learning English was evident in one key aspect: intrinsic and extrinsic stimuli to learn a foreign language. This is explained below.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Stimuli to Learn a Foreign Language

Learning a second language is a requirement that Colombian students must face, as it is part of the educational curriculum. English is one of the requirements for graduation at both the school and university levels (Law 115 of 1994). However, Guerrero (2010) argues that the reality of the educational sector regarding foreign language acquisition differs from what is outlined in the National Bilingualism Plan. As a result, understanding students' perceptions of language learning and their underlying motivations is crucial to gaining insights into their reality because the way students perceive learning English is directly proportional to their motivation.

Motivation can be either extrinsic or intrinsic. According to Iwaniec and Dunn (2020), extrinsic motivation is driven by external factors, while intrinsic motivation stems from the learners' internal desires; these are the specific reasons or goals they have for learning. As evidenced by the research instruments applied, a contrast can be made in the different motivations and underlying motives of the children and adolescents participating in this study. These underlying motives help explain why some students are more engaged and committed to their learning than others.

Table 1. Comparison of the types of motivation of the participants

Children's motivations	Adolescents' motivation
"Well, I'd say that it is important to learn English because you have more opportunities in life, like in the United States there are more opportunities than here, you learn more things and well... life is easier when you study than when you stop studying" (P6, FGC).	"English due to the fact that we say in some job they need a translator or something like that..." (P3, FGA)
"My motivation ehmm... is for the sports that I like, so I can get a scholarship to go to another country" (P5, FGC).	"I would like to aspire to a scholarship abroad and if I learn English, my chances increase greatly" (P12, FGA).
"Well, my inspiration is... apart from this course I take another English course because my dream is to work in the United States, let's say in a fashion or modeling campaign for people who wear my clothes. So that's my inspiration to learn English" (P18, FGC).	"Well, in school life, the only thing I give great importance is the moment in which I am going to take the ICFES test, since, well, English is already part of this test, so that's why I give it a great importance in school, for the test" (P13, FGA).

Note. Focus group.

Taking into account the previous excerpts, the goals of today's students are to become more knowledgeable, develop their communication abilities, and integrate into the global community (Hromova, 2019). Children are primarily driven by intrinsic motivation, as their desire to pursue personal dreams —such as being a fashion designer or playing a sport— are personal goals they want to fulfill. However, adolescents, who are more aware of their reality, are often motivated by extrinsic factors. For instance, the desire to study or secure a good job abroad may drive them to learn a language. Another external factor is the Prueba Saber 11, a standardized test in Colombia that students must take for admission to higher education institutions. It is also important to highlight that to be admitted to a university abroad, students must demonstrate proficiency in English. This is typically assessed through international tests such as TOEFL or IELTS.

Students perceive learning English as a tool that will help them improve their lives both in the near and distant future, as better academic or professional opportunities often depend on it. Another reason for learning a language is what Hromova (2019) refers to "moving abroad". This is evident in the words of P14 below:

Ehhh well my motivation is to study and also travel the world, ehhh to live in another country, especially since I am between the United States and Canada. And well... I like it a lot because, as I told you, it's something that I think opens many doors and I like communicating with people from abroad. (FGA)

Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are affected by classroom practices that respond to the demands of the curricula, performance pressure, grading requirements, and standardized examinations (Ryan & Deci, 2020). This creates an institutional barrier that prevents teachers from fulfilling their supportive role in addressing students' basic psychological needs for growth and well-being in educational settings. Therefore, a repetitive perception of the teachers' practices as an attempt to control achievement outcomes directly through extrinsic rewards, sanctions, and evaluations (Ryan & Deci, 2020) can lead to the development of a persistent and generalized belief that learning a language is linked to negative values and emotions such as nervousness, stress, and fear.

Nevertheless, globalization plays a crucial role in determining the interplay between the learners' internal and external motivations to learn a language. These motivations might facilitate language learning at the expense of experiencing negative values and emotions due to the institutional obstacles mentioned before. In consequence, and following Ryan and Deci's (2020) ideas, we must question ourselves to what extent acquiring 21st-century skills for a globalized world has impacted students' well-being.

Conclusions and implications

This study contributes to the understanding of how learners' beliefs are constructed from an emotional engagement perspective. This perspective influences the interplay between the learning experiences, the learning environment, and the formation of the learners' beliefs. Consequently, considering the learners' affective responses within a schema of the interplay between the experiences and the environment in the learning process provides valuable insights into the impact of beliefs on the learners' motivation and performance: globalization drives English learning motivation, learners link English proficiency to scholarships and job opportunities, external demands impact learners' motivation strategies, and institutional obstacles undermine learners' health.

Notably, learners' beliefs in motivation and performance in learning English are shaped by continuous exposure to the perception that achieving a reasonable level of English competence is essential for participating in globalization. These motives drive learners to learn English in order to access better opportunities, such as scholarships and job prospects abroad. The interaction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is complex: while learners align their long-term goals with intrinsic motivation, they often respond to external demands with extrinsic motivation. However, institutional obstacles like grading requirements can negatively impact learners' well-being, underscoring the delicate balance between motivation types and external pressures.

This research provides empirical validation of theoretical concepts such as motives, motivation, and anxiety, previously highlighted in the literature review. The empirical evidence aligns with the theoretical definitions, demonstrating how anxiety can hinder performance and how positive motivation can reduce anxiety and boost confidence. This case study provides specific examples of how these external pressures manifest in the classroom. For instance, fear of ambiguity can be seen as an external pressure that creates anxiety, affecting learners' well-being and performance. This is compounded by institutional obstacles that play a significant role in shaping learners' experiences.

Considering the impact on the learners' well-being, educators can create a safe space for learners within the language classroom to express how they have experienced language learning and how it has affected their health. By doing so, teachers will enhance both the learners' well-being and academic performance. This also provides an opportunity to empower students to become active participants in the teaching and learning process, while allowing teachers to respond to their students' needs and preferences. Teachers can achieve this by articulating their beliefs about language learning to their reflections on their own teaching practices, enabling them to use the most suitable strategies to achieve the learning outcomes while fostering a need-supportive learning environment. Furthermore, giving a voice to students encourages equity and inclusion.

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Appendix A

BALLI Survey (adjusted)

Estimado estudiante,

El presente instrumento forma parte del trabajo de investigación titulado Percepciones y creencias sobre el aprendizaje del inglés en la Unidad de Proyección Social de la Universidad Santo Tomás, sede Villavicencio.

Indicaciones: La encuesta es anónima y las respuestas son confidenciales. Seleccione la alternativa que más se ajuste a su opinión. Le agradecemos responder con la mayor sinceridad posible.

Las opciones de respuesta a cada pregunta son:

1: Totalmente de acuerdo
2: De acuerdo
3: Neutral
4: En desacuerdo
5: Totalmente en desacuerdo

Ítem		1	2	3	4	5
1	¿Es más fácil para los niños aprender una lengua extranjera que para los adultos?					
2	¿Algunas personas tienen una habilidad especial para las lenguas extranjeras?					
3	¿Las personas de Colombia son buenas para aprender una lengua extranjera?					
4	¿Es más fácil para una persona que ya habla una lengua extranjera aprender otra?					
5	¿Las personas que son buenas en matemáticas o ciencias no son buenas para aprender una lengua extranjera?					
6	¿Las mujeres son mejores que los hombres para las lenguas extranjeras?					
7	¿Las personas que hablan más de un idioma son muy inteligentes?					
8	¿Todas las personas tienen la habilidad de aprender a hablar una lengua extranjera?					
9	¿Aprender inglés es más fácil que aprender otros idiomas?					
10	¿El inglés es un idioma difícil de aprender?					
11	¿Cuánto tiempo le toma a una persona hablar inglés de manera fluída? 1: 1 año - 2: 2 años - 3:3 años - 4: 4 años - 5: 5 años.					
12	¿Es más fácil hablar, que comprender lo que se escucha en inglés?					
13	¿Es más fácil leer y escribir en inglés que hablarlo y entenderlo?					
14	¿Es necesario aprender sobre las culturas de habla inglesa para aprender a hablar inglés?					
15	¿Es mejor aprender inglés en un país de habla inglesa?					

16	¿La parte más importante del aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera es el vocabulario?					
17	¿La parte más importante del aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera es la gramática?					
18	¿Aprender una lengua extranjera es diferente a aprender una asignatura?					
19	¿La parte más importante del aprendizaje del inglés es aprender a traducir desde el español?					
20	¿La estructura del idioma español es diferente a la del inglés?					
21	¿Es importante hablar inglés con una pronunciación excelente?					
22	¿Usted no debería decir nada en inglés hasta que no pueda decirlo correctamente?					
23	¿Disfruto practicar inglés con otros colombianos?					
24	¿Es adecuado adivinar si usted no sabe una palabra en inglés?					
25	¿Es importante repetir y practicar mucho para aprender inglés?					
26	¿Me da vergüenza hablar en inglés con otras personas?					
27	¿Si a los principiantes se les permite cometer errores en inglés, será difícil para ellos hablar correctamente en un futuro?					
28	¿Es importante practicar con grabaciones o videos?					
29	¿Creo que aprenderé a hablar muy bien en inglés?					
30	¿La gente en Colombia siente que es importante hablar inglés?					
31	¿A mí me gustaría aprender inglés de manera que pueda entender la cultura americana?					
32	¿Si aprendo inglés muy bien, tendré mejores oportunidades laborales?					
33	¿Quiero aprender a hablar en inglés muy bien?					
34	¿Me motiva hablar inglés porque me gustaría tener amigos americanos?					

Versión para niños y niñas

Ítem		1	2	3	4	5
1	¿Es más fácil para los niños aprender una lengua extranjera (por ejemplo, inglés) que para los adultos?					
2	¿Algunos niños o niñas tienen una habilidad especial para aprender lenguas extranjeras (por ejemplo, inglés)?					
3	¿Los niños y niñas de Colombia son buenos para aprender una lengua extranjera (por ejemplo, inglés)?					
4	¿Es más fácil para un niño o niña que ya habla una lengua extranjera (por ejemplo, inglés) aprender otra?					
5	¿Los niños y niñas que son buenos en matemáticas o ciencias no son buenos para aprender una lengua extranjera (por ejemplo, inglés)?					
6	¿Las niñas son mejores que los niños para las lenguas extranjeras (por ejemplo, inglés)?					

7	¿Los niños y niñas que hablan más de una lengua extranjera son muy inteligentes?					
8	¿Todos los niños y niñas tienen la habilidad de aprender a hablar una lengua extranjera (por ejemplo, inglés)?					
9	¿Aprender inglés es más fácil que aprender otros idiomas?					
10	¿El inglés es un idioma difícil de aprender?					
11	¿ Cuánto tiempo le toma a un niño o niña hablar inglés de manera fluída? 1: 1 año - 2: 2 años - 3:3 años - 4: 4 años - 5: 5 años.					
12	¿ Es más fácil hablar, que comprender lo que se escucha en inglés?					
13	¿Es más fácil leer y escribir en inglés que hablarlo y entenderlo?					
14	¿Es necesario aprender sobre las culturas de los países de habla inglesa (por ejemplo, Estados Unidos) para aprender a hablar inglés?					
15	¿Es mejor aprender inglés en un país de habla inglesa (por ejemplo, Estados Unidos)?					
16	¿La parte más importante del aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera (por ejemplo, inglés) es el vocabulario?					
17	¿La parte más importante del aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera (por ejemplo, inglés) es la gramática?					
18	¿Aprender una lengua extranjera (por ejemplo, inglés) es diferente a aprender una asignatura (por ejemplo, matemáticas o ciencias)?					
19	¿La parte más importante del aprendizaje del inglés es aprender a traducir desde el español?					
20	¿La estructura del idioma español es diferente a la del inglés?					
21	¿Es importante hablar inglés con una pronunciación excelente?					
22	¿Usted no debería decir nada en inglés hasta que no pueda decirlo correctamente?					
23	¿Disfruto practicar inglés con otros colombianos?					
24	¿Es adecuado adivinar si usted no sabe una palabra en inglés?					
25	¿Es importante repetir y practicar mucho para aprender inglés?					
26	¿Me da vergüenza hablar en inglés con otros niños y niñas?					
27	¿Si a los niños y niñas que están iniciando a aprender inglés se les permite cometer errores, será difícil para ellos hablar correctamente en un futuro?					
28	¿Es importante practicar con grabaciones o videos?					
29	¿Creo que aprenderé a hablar muy bien en inglés?					
30	¿La gente en Colombia siente que es importante hablar inglés?					
31	¿A mí me gustaría aprender inglés de manera que pueda entender la cultura americana?					
32	¿Si aprendo inglés muy bien, tendré mejores oportunidades laborales?					
33	¿Quiero aprender a hablar en inglés muy bien?					
34	¿Me motiva hablar inglés porque me gustaría tener amigos americanos?					