

The Beliefs of Iranian ESP Students about Language Learning

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Abstract This study investigated Iranian ESP learners' beliefs about language learning. It also aimed at finding the effect of gender on learners' beliefs about language learning. To this end, the Persian version of Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) was administered among 40 male and 40 female students majoring in medicine, environmental health, and radiology at Shiraz University of Medical Sciences. The findings revealed that the highest mean average among the five components of beliefs about language learning is belief of motivations and expectations ($M=3.1208$), followed by belief of learning and communication strategies ($M=3.0150$), and belief of difficulty of language learning ($M=2.5828$). The two components with the lowest scores were belief of the nature of language ($M=2.3479$) and belief of foreign language aptitude ($M=2.1917$). Moreover, there was a significant difference between learners' beliefs and gender.

Key words: Beliefs about language learning; BALLI; Motivation; Learner beliefs; English for Specific Purposes

1. Introduction

In the past two decades, there has been an exponential growth in studying beliefs that language learners hold about language learning (Horwitz, 1999) and language educators have reached to this conclusion that beliefs play a major role in learner's language success (Dörnyei, 2005; Ryan 1984; Weinert & Kluwe 1987; Schommer 1990; Sakui & Gaies 1999). Horwitz (1987a, as cited in Diab, 2006) also highlights the importance of understanding language learning beliefs and states that such study is essential at least for two reasons: a) these beliefs may affect the expectations that learners have for learning the target language, and b) compared with cognitive style variables or affective variables such as attitude and motivation, such beliefs may be more easily led to change.

Leading work in examining language learner beliefs about learning a new language was carried out by Horwitz (1987; 1988). In order to gather these beliefs systematically, she constructed an instrument and called it "The Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)". Her subjects were students learning German, French, and Spanish at Austin's University of Texas. The BALLI has been widely used in different contexts and cultures to evaluate EFL/ESL students' beliefs. For example in China (Zhang and Cui, 2010), Hong Kong (Peacock, 2001), Hungary (Rieger, 2009), Korean (Park, 1995; Truitt, 1995), Lebanon (Diab, 2006), Malaysia (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2006), Thailand (Fujiwara, 2011) Turkey (Ariogul, Unal & Onursal, 2009), Vietnam (Bernat, 2004).

Bernat (2004) investigated beliefs about language learning among 20 adult Vietnamese ESL learners. To this end, Horwitz's (1987) BALLI questionnaire was used as an analytical tool. Bernat's results revealed that the learners' motivation stayed high, in spite of the participants' reported dearth of language learning aptitude, and the beliefs in the supremacy of child's second language acquisition. Atlan (2006) investigated 248 foreign language major students' language learning beliefs at five universities in Turkey. The participants were in the departments of English, German, French, Japanese, and Arabic, and they were all going to be the teachers of the language they were learning. Horwitz's BALLI questionnaire was administered among the participants. The finding showed that subjects held a range of beliefs. For instance, "some people were born with a special ability to learn a foreign language", or "it is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language" with varying degrees of validity. Bernat (2006) also used Horwitz's (1987) BALLI to study beliefs of 262 English for academic purposes (EAP) language learners at an Australian University. The findings

were later compared with Siebert's (2003) study which was carried out at institutions of higher education in the Northwest region of the U.S. among 156 EAP learners. The results indicated that beliefs about language learning reported by both study groups were similar in all categories. Bernat regarded this concept that beliefs about language learning differ by contextual setting as a premature conclusion. Rieger (2009) examined beliefs of 109 English and German major freshmen about language learning in Budapest. The instrument employed in the study was a modified Hungarian version of Horwitz's (1987) BALLI. Regarding the analysis of language aptitude, difficulty, approaches, importance of practicing with authentic materials and motivation, the findings indicated significant differences that can be linked to gender and the language studies by the respondents. Zhang and Cui (2010) examined learning beliefs of 90 distance learners in a 3-year undergraduate English program in China. For gathering data, two instruments were used; Cotterall's (1995, 1999) questionnaire and Horwitz's (1987) BALLI. The results showed that the major difficulty in distance learning for most participants was the paucity of communication with teachers and peers. The study also revealed that anxiety and frustration in the distance language learners lessened as they considered more advantages in the autonomous method of learning. Fujiwara (2011) examined Thai EFL university students (N =542) using the 34-statement BALLI questionnaire to measure their language learning beliefs. A five-factor structure was identified for the language learning beliefs held by Thai university students learning EFL through a factor analysis of their responses to the BALLI questionnaire. The five factors were labeled as follows: (a) Factor 1: learning and communication strategies (8 items); (b) Factor 2: important aspects of language learning (6 items); (c) Factor 3: expectations and difficulty of learning English (6 items); (d) Factor 4: nature and aptitude of language learning (9 items); and (e) Factor 5: difficulty and ability of language learning (6 items). Although a substantial body of research has investigated beliefs about language learning of different groups of EFL learners from different cultural backgrounds, to the best knowledge of the researchers, no study has investigated Iranian ESP students' beliefs about language learning. The present study is a response to a recommendation by Horwitz (Personal communication, 2011) that there is a need for carrying out research, in different contexts and cultures, to determine whether beliefs about learning a foreign language that exist in a particular linguistic setting are unique to that setting or common to all linguistic and cultural context. Hence, the present study investigates Iranian ESP students' beliefs about language learning. It also explores the effect of gender on students' beliefs about learning a foreign language as Bernat (2006) states that "there is still paucity in literature on the relationship between language learner beliefs and stable individual differences, such as gender" (p. 80). To fill such gaps, the present study addresses the two following questions:

1. What beliefs do ESP students in Iran hold about English language learning?
2. Is there any relationship between gender of Iranian ESP students and their beliefs about language learning?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The setting of the current study was Shiraz University of Medical Sciences in Shiraz. The participants of the study were 80 second-year students majoring in medicine, environmental health, and radiology in the second semester of Iranian academic year 2010/2011. Among all the respondents, 40 were females and 40 were males. Students ranged in age from 19 to 25, with an average of 21.15. All participants were non-native English speakers. The participants were conveniently sampled as going through randomization was not practical. The consent forms of the subjects were obtained before the study began.

2.2. Instrumentation

The study used Horwitz's (1987) Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) as a research tool in order to examine the subjects' beliefs about English language learning (See Appendix A). The BALLI evaluates beliefs about five language learning areas: (1) Foreign language aptitude, (2) the difficulty of language learning, (3) the nature of language learning, (4) learning and communication strategies and (5) motivations and expectations. The BALLI has 34 items. Thirty two of them offer 5-point Likert-type responses, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree": Strongly agree (SA) = 5; Agree=4; Neither agree nor disagree (N) =3; Disagree (D) =2; Strongly disagree=1. The other two items; 4 and 14, are related to learners' rating of the difficulty level of English, ranging from very difficult, difficult, medium, easy, and very easy, and the amount of time needed to learn English very well. Considering this fact that the major of the participants was not English, the Persian version of the instrument was distributed among the participants. The Persian translation

was developed through the process of translation and back translation: one of the researchers translated the questionnaire into Persian; the questionnaire was then translated back into English by three M.A. students majoring in EFL at Shiraz Azad University.

2.3. Procedure and Data analysis

Prior to the initiation of the study, the subjects were asked to read the consent form and fill out. Before administering the questionnaire, the researcher guaranteed that he will use pseudonyms to keep the participants' privacy and explained the aim and the nature of the study briefly and instructed the participants on how to respond to the questionnaire. Then, the questionnaire was distributed among the participants after getting permission from the participants' teachers. In order to complete the questionnaire, 30 minutes was allotted. The Cronbach alpha of the Persian version of BALLI administered in this study was 0.85, which was within the acceptable range of reliability. The analyses that were employed for each research question were descriptive statistics and t-test. The analytical procedures employed to explore the research questions were computed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 16.0.

3. Results

Research question 1: What are the students' beliefs about learning English language as a foreign language at Shiraz University of Medical Sciences?

Table 1. Mean Scores, Standard Deviation of the Five Beliefs about Language Learning

Components	Mean	Standard deviation
1. Belief of motivation and expectation	3.1208	.42804
2. Belief of learning and communication strategies	3.0105	.56099
3. Belief of difficulty of language learning	2.5828	.41764
4. Belief of the nature of language	2.3479	.59663
5. Belief of foreign language aptitude	2.1917	.65555

As can be seen in Table 1, the highest mean average among the five components of beliefs about language learning was the belief of motivation and expectations ($M= 3.1208$), followed by belief of learning and communication strategies ($M= 3.0105$), and belief of the difficulty of foreign language ($M= 2.5828$). The two components with the lowest scores were belief of the nature of language ($M=2.3479$) and belief of foreign language aptitude ($M=2.1917$)

Research question 2: Is there any relationship between gender of Iranian ESP students and their beliefs about language learning?

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and T-Test Results Combined

Group	N	Mean	SD	t	df	sig
Male	40	2.4787	.16797	-9.111	78	.000
Female	40	2.8779	.22045			

As far as the impact of gender on BALLI scores is concerned, the results of Table 2 showed statistically significant difference between the male and female participants language learning beliefs ($t= -9.111$, $p<.05$). That is, female participants were more likely than their male counterparts to agree that certain approaches were important in language learning. The results also indicated that female participants had more overall optimistic beliefs about language learning.

4. Discussion

In this section, the research questions presented in this article are dealt with one by one. Each question will be answered based on the findings of the study.

First, regarding the five components of beliefs about language learning, the results revealed that students have the

strongest belief in motivation and expectations, followed by learning and communication strategies and the nature of language learning. The weakest two factors were belief of the nature of language and belief of foreign language aptitude. This result is consistent with outcomes reported by other researchers who examined language learners' beliefs about language learning in different contexts. For example, Shen (2006) studied junior high school students' beliefs about language learning. Shen reported that belief of motivation and expectations ranked first, while belief of foreign language aptitude ranked last. Lan (2010) studied Taiwanese 7th grades foreign language anxiety, beliefs about language learning and its relationship with their English achievements, the strongest of the five factors affecting language learning beliefs was the belief of motivation and expectations. Sioson (2011) investigated language learning strategies, beliefs about learning English as foreign language, and language anxiety among Philippine EFL students. With regard to beliefs about language learning, participants had a general positive belief about learning the language. Specifically, they had the most positive belief about their motivations and expectations. Gardner and MacIntyre (1991) claims that motivated students are more active in language classes and tasks and are less likely to drop out of language study in the following years. In addition, Gardner (1985) showed that motivation encouraged greater overall effort and results in greater success in terms of language proficiency and achievement. So, for the participants of this study, belief of motivation and expectations played an important role in learning English. Participants also revealed their strong beliefs of learning and communication strategies. Oxford (1990) pointed out that "language learning strategies encourage greater overall self-direction" (p. 10). Oxford (1990) also stated that "self-directed students gradually gain greater confidence, involvement, and proficiency" (p. 10).

Second, regarding the effects of gender on learners' beliefs about language learning, the results of the present study indicated that gender affect students' belief about learning language. The results revealed that female students were more likely than their male peers to agree that certain approaches were important in language learning. Generally speaking, the finding of the present study is in line with some research that has been carried out in this area. For example, In Bacon and Finnemann's (1992) study females were more motivated and more open to authentic input, they also showed more positive attitude towards target language speakers. Siber (2003) used Horwitz's (1987) BALLI as the tool. The study found significant differences in the beliefs of male and female students. Rieger (2009) also found the existence of gender effect on a number of beliefs factors that were statistically significant. However, this finding contrasts with the results of some other studies in which no significant relation between language learners' beliefs and gender was observed. For example, Tercanlioglu (2005) found no significant difference between male and female participants' language learning beliefs in Turkey. Also, Bernat and Llyod (2007) used BALLI instrument as an analytical tool to investigate the relationship between beliefs about foreign language learning and gender among 155 female and 107 male EFL students. The findings showed that male and female students held similar beliefs about language learning.

5. Conclusion

The present study aimed at investigating Iranian ESP students' beliefs towards English language learning and examining whether or not gender affects students' belief about language learning. The scores of belief of the foreign language aptitude, belief of the difficulty of foreign language, belief of the nature of language learning, belief of learning and communication strategies, and belief of motivation and expectations were 2.1917, 2.5828, 2.3479, 3.0105, and 3.1208 respectively. The highest score was belief of motivation and expectations and the two categories with the lowest scores were belief of the nature of language and belief of foreign language aptitude. Findings also showed that female learners were more likely in agreement about certain approaches that were important in language learning in comparison with male participants. With respect to the results of the present study, a number of pedagogical implications can be provided which might prove useful for language instructors, especially helping them to increase students' level of motivation in English language classrooms. For example, EFL teachers can set goals for students in learning English, provide students knowledge regarding language learning, and inspire students to learn. These techniques may help students to like learning English and improve their English grades. Educators and language teachers may gain further insights in students' English learning situations with the understanding of participants' beliefs about language learning, as Horwitz (1988) suggests that better understanding of students' beliefs of language learning may allow language teachers to better understand students' expectations and satisfactions with their language class. Once students are able to face their beliefs, they may understand their weakness and try to solve the problem. Policy makers may design courses that arouse students' interests, and create curriculum in which students needs and goals are satisfied. By cultivating students' language learning beliefs in class, English language teachers can help students to eliminate their bias toward learning English. Teachers can give opportunities to students to share their own beliefs with peers, discuss language learning beliefs in class, and encourage the positive language learning beliefs. The results of the study may provide English

language learners a better understanding of their beliefs about language learning. Students may share their beliefs about language learning with parents that could enable parents to have a deeper understanding of their children's language learning beliefs, and help them to improve their language learning.

The present study contains a few limitations. First of all, the number of the participants in this study is relatively small (N=80) for the findings to be generalized to the whole population of ESP students in Iran. Only ESP students from one university participated in this study.

Secondly, the present study just used survey approach to elicit students' beliefs, by taking into account the complexity of beliefs about language learning, the combination of multiple sources of data such as interview and observation could increase the validity of the data.

Last but not least, the present study used the Persian version of original BALLI questionnaire of Horwitz's (1987). Researchers who are interested in employing the BALLI should make a revision of some items. A number of BALLI items are decontextualized and drawing conclusions from them can be difficult. For instance, the items regarding the importance of cultural knowledge, grammar, vocabulary, and translation do not specify the context of learning clearly. The respondents from different learning contexts, EFL and ESL for example, may interpret these items based on different contexts, and thus confound the results.

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Appendix A

The Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)

Directions: For each item, indicate whether you (1) strongly agree (2) agree (3) neither agree nor disagree (4) disagree or (5) strongly disagree. For questions 4 and 14, select the number that most closely corresponds to your opinion.

1. It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.
2. Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages.
3. Some languages are easier to learn than others.
4. English is:
 1. a very difficult language.
 2. a difficult language.
 3. a language of medium difficulty.
 4. an easy language.
 5. a very easy language.
5. People from my country are good at learning foreign languages.
6. I believe that I will learn to speak English very well.
7. It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.
8. It is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures in order to speak English.
9. You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly.
10. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.
11. It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country.
12. I enjoy practicing English with the Americans I meet.
13. It's o.k. to guess if you don't know a word in English.
14. If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it for them to learn that language very well?
 1. less than a year.
 2. 1-2 years.
 3. 3-5 years.
 4. 5-10 years.
 5. You can't learn a language in one hour a day.
15. I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.

16. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary words.
17. It is important to repeat and practice a lot.
18. I feel timid speaking English with other people.
19. If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on.
20. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar.
21. It is important to practice with cassettes or tapes.
22. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.
23. I want to speak English well.
24. It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language.
25. Learning a foreign language is different from learning other academic subjects.
26. The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from my native language.
27. If I learn to speak English very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job.
28. It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.
29. People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages.
30. People in my country feel that it is important to speak English.
31. I would like to have American friends.
32. People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.
33. I would like to learn English so that I can get to know Americans.
34. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.

