

A Study of Language Learning Beliefs and their Effects on the Language Learning Performance of ESL Learners

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Abstract:

Although in the field of ESL, learner centered approaches are advocated substantially, but on ground when we observe that every learner walks into the language classroom with his own beliefs about English language learning, the implication of this approach does not seem applicable. It seems to be an uphill task that students be made the centre of the class, especially in the Pakistani scenario. This is so because our education system is divided into two sectors i.e. private and public or government. This divide is not only an educational one, but also a social, psychological and economical one. Keeping the same in view, this study is aimed at identifying the beliefs of these learners about English language learning and then conducting a comparative analysis of the two tiers. For this purpose, an inventory BALLI by Horwitz (2013) was used, followed by an English language test. As a result, the students from private schools showed a strong 'Language Learning Aptitude' while those from public schools were seen to have more 'Motivations and Expectations'. Contrary to both these trends, the

public school students did not perform well in the written test, whereas, the private school students despite showing lesser degree of Language Learning Aptitude, scored better than their counterparts.

Key words: Beliefs, BALLI, English Language Learning in Pakistan, Foreign language learning beliefs, Individual differences

INTRODUCTION

During the last two decades, considerable research conducted in FL (foreign language) learning has been dedicated to foreign language learning beliefs of students. The initiator of this study is Horwitz (2013) from the University of Texas, Austin. She developed an instrument to assess learners' opinions about the problems faced before and during the process of foreign language learning. The name of the instrument was coined as "BALLI"; Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (Horwitz, 1988; Bernat, E. & Gvozdenko, I., 2005; Nikitina & Furuka, 2006; Atlan, 2006). On the other hand, in Pakistan, no considerable research has yet been conducted in the area of learners' beliefs about foreign language learning and the effects of these beliefs on the learners' learning outcomes. Keeping the same in view, the present study aims at the identification of learners' beliefs and the impact of these beliefs on foreign (English) learning outcomes.

Stevik (1980) was of the view that success in learning a language does not depend upon the material or techniques used with the learner. He further posited that there is something inside the learner, which enables him to check on the nature and progression of the language learning process, the intensity of language's complexity, the efficacy of the course of action and his own ability to learn a language. Hosenfeld (1978) calls this something, "mini-theories". Beliefs are formed and held in a psychological way rather than a logical one, Rokeach (1968).

Some of these beliefs are more central than others are, and hence more interrelated to other beliefs.

In the light of these definitions of beliefs, one can posit that beliefs are the abstract property of the human brain about what is right and what is wrong. These beliefs can affect the language learning abilities of a learner; they either augment them or act as an impediment in the language learning process. As Barcelos (2000) is of the view that “beliefs cannot be separated from our identities, actions and social experiences”. Our beliefs are always influenced by our past experiences or our personality. When we talk about beliefs about learning a foreign language, they can also have an influence of family, social or cultural background as well.

Pakistan being a multilingual and multicultural society, offers vast experiences and social encounters, which in turn affect the beliefs of people about learning a new language along with other beliefs. Every individual here is known to be at least a bilingual, whereas a student until reaching secondary level of education can speak even three languages. For studying individuals’ beliefs about language learning, this provides a very feasible multi-lingual and multi-cultural environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES (IDs)

Individual differences (IDs) has become a separate branch of psychology (Dornyei, 2005). He is further of the view that social sciences and natural sciences vary only on the basis of IDs, as in humans, even identical twins will have different responses to a stimulus. The researchers of foreign language acquisition (FLA) might conclude that working for a collective group of learners is easier as compared to working for individuals. Findings based on “IDs” always contain a “Yes but---” element

in them, as there will always be individuals that might be exempted from the said findings (Dornyei, 2005).

(Dornyei, 2005) gives some of the principle learner variables which are, ability/aptitude, personality and inspiration to begin with. Traditionally, he addresses learning styles and language learning strategies as primary IDs in language learning.

He further classifies IDs into five core variables, namely; “self esteem”, “creativity”, “willingness to communicate (WTC)”, “anxiety” and “learner beliefs”. Thus, we know that learners’ beliefs fall under the umbrella of individual differences and although they can be confused with anxiety or aptitude or ideologies, but still beliefs maintain their own place.

LEARNER BELIEFS

Elaine K. Horwitz (1985, 1987, 1988) was the pioneer in introducing beliefs into L2 acquisition. She gathered these beliefs from American learners of German, French, and Spanish languages. She came up with the idea that the belief systems are almost common and consistent among different learner groups.

This consistency in the language learning beliefs can make them appropriate variables/ components of IDs. BALLI, Dr. Horwitz’s questionnaire is used to assess beliefs of language learners. The latest version of questionnaire BALLI, ESL version 2.0 will be used (shared by Dr, Elaine, K. Horwitz herself through email). This inventory has 44 items in all that deal with the following vital aspects of learning a second language; Foreign language aptitude, Difficulty of language learning, The nature of language learning, Learning and communication strategies, and Motivation and expectations. Further areas/facts can be added to the taxonomy because (Horwitz, 1999) herself posited, “The beliefs I reported were

merely example of the kinds of beliefs that teachers might encounter in their own classroom.”

Dr. Horwitz herself has not yet given a functional definition of beliefs and refers to them as “preconceptions (1985), preconceived ideas (1987) or preconceived notions (1988)”. We have not yet been given a precise version of the term. Researchers have posited that since beliefs are preconceived, they cannot only influence the learners’ understanding of the language but also their reaction to new information. People’s behaviours are governed and guided by their beliefs as Puchta (1999) put it that our views are the “guiding principles” of our public attitude towards a foreign language. According to him, beliefs channel people about how to act in this world. Our beliefs make us see logic around us and in everything in this world. Therefore, it is vital to know learners’ beliefs as these preconceived ideas are what help society construe new sets of information and respond towards it.

Borg (2001), Liao (2007), Lucas & Wright (2009) call belief a “mental state”; while Newberg (2006) holds that belief is a “perception, cognition or emotion”.

Dornyei however, transforms Horwitz’s term of “Beliefs” into a more less-scientific sounding word- “View”. This ‘view’, as said earlier deals with the psychological aspect of a learner- and thus is a part of his ID.

Foreign language learning concepts and beliefs are found to take the influence of the following:

No.	Influence on Beliefs	Researched by
1	Classroom/ social peers	(Arnold, 1990)
2	Cultural background	(Alexander & Dochy, 1995)
3	Interpretations of prior repetitive experiences	(Little, Singleton & Slivius, 1984; Gaoyin & Alyermann, 1995; Roberts, 1992)
4	Individual differences such as personality	(Furnham, Johnston & Rawles, 1985; Langston & Sykes, 1997)
5	Individual differences like gender	(Siebert, 2003)
6	Family and home background	(Dias, 2000; Schommer, 1990, 1994)

Moreover, the intensity of language coaching, the characteristics of the language studied and the sort of school the learner goes to, were also found to have an impact on learners' beliefs (Rifkin's, 2000).

BELIEFS AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Generally, students agree with the existence of English language ability (Hong, 2006) but disparage their own English language aptitude (Chang & Shen, 2006). Similarly, local secondary school students are not exempted from such a perception (Hui, 2012). Huang (2003) rationalize such a scenario with students' unsuccessful English learning experiences. Besides, students hold various opinions toward their countrymen's English language aptitude. In this aspect, local secondary students think highly of the English learning ability of Malaysians due to their apparent bilingual capability (Hui, 2012).

Although most students disagree with the association of intelligence with being good at languages, local secondary school students in Hui's (2012) study expressed agreement. Lightbown & Spada (2008) state that while intelligence may be a strong factor when it comes to learning which involves language analysis and rule deducting, it may be less important in a communicative classroom. Thus, students' response to this area may reflect the methodologies used in their contexts, and how those methodologies influence their beliefs.

In recent years it has become obvious to view the language learner as an active participant in the foreign language learning experience. Language teachers now consider the learners' strategies and motivations as vital fundamentals in the design and implementation of efficient language teaching. In this way, teachers have come to view language learners as individuals approaching foreign language learning in their own distinctive way. As this issue reflects, one of the

important areas of existing curiosity about language learners is their beliefs about language learning. Learner beliefs have the potential to influence both their experiences and actions as foreign language learners.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present research was a survey, with a descriptive design, using the quantitative research method. The data collected was analyzed quantitatively.

Population

The population of this study comprised of secondary level students. These students were from private and public schools of Lahore.

Sample

The study is limited to eight secondary schools inside Lahore cantonment. Four of these schools were of the private sector and four were of public sector respectively. Two boys' and two girls' schools were focused on from each sector. Therefore, almost 400 students were included in the study, approximately 50 from each school. The sample was determined through applying purposive sampling technique.

Data Collection Tools

Questionnaire as data Collection Tool

Latest version 2.0 of BALLI (Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory) Horwitz's Inventory (2013) was administered to the sample for the collection of beliefs of English language learners. As per Dr. Horwitz's suggestion, item 44a from the 44th item was included whereas 44b was omitted. The instrument

employed a 5-point Likert scale set-up and the participants had to pick one from among the five choices provided. The choices were: 1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Undecided 4. Agree 5. Strongly agree.

BALLI is a 44-item instrument, with statements covering the following aspects of foreign language learning; The Difficulty of Learning, Foreign Language Aptitude, The Nature of Language Learning, Learning and Communication Strategies and Motivation and Expectations.

The data was analyzed in the light of these five key belief areas. Dr. Horwitz, the author of the inventory herself, pointed out these areas. She puts forth the idea of not averaging the replies of the respondents and rather taking them as individual responses. There are no right or wrong answers to BALLI; it just focuses on learners' independent beliefs. Dr. Horwitz in her EFL 2.0 version of the BALLI posits that, "Each item on the BALLI asks about a specific belief that a person might have about language learning. The BALLI is not a single scale so the items should not be added together or averaged."

Test as data Collection Tool

A written test was conducted in the second phase of the research, with the same sample that was used to collect the data through the questionnaire. This test was conducted in order to gauge if there was any relationship between the beliefs of students about learning a foreign language and their proficiency in the same language. Five paragraph-writing topics were selected from the grammar book of the same secondary level students, also keeping in view the familiarity of the students with those topics. Instructions were shared with the students to write at the most 150 words in which they would be checked for their vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

After a comparative analysis of the beliefs of students from private schools and those from public schools, it was observed in the area of foreign language aptitude that boys from private schools believe that children can learn a foreign language better than the adults can. They are of a strong belief that very few people are born with a special ability to learn a foreign language. Very few of them believe in the statement that only a person, who knows a foreign language already, can learn English easily. This result shows that boys from private schools portray strong beliefs when it comes to their language learning aptitude.

Whereas, when we look at the results gathered from responses of public school boys, they show a stronger tendency towards foreign language learning aptitude. Most of their responses depict that they are keen on learning from the internet, or from a non-native teacher. Most of them believe that children can learn a foreign language better than adults can, which portrays their willingness to learn while they are young.

The girls from private schools, on the other hand believe that they can neither learn a lot from non-native English teachers nor is spoken English required to be exercised in the classroom at all times by the teachers or the students. A considerable number of girls from private schools agreed on finding useful material on the internet just like their counterparts from public schools.

After looking at the responses of the public school girls, two beliefs regarding aptitude are very strong which are that it is easier for children to learn a foreign language just like the boys from public schools thought and secondly, they believe that a lot of useful material regarding foreign language learning can be retrieved from the internet.

Boys from public schools seem apprehensive regarding having an edge in learning a foreign language while a few of them are also of the view that overall people in the country are not good at learning a foreign language. This is a very strong belief, which can create a big hindrance in the foreign language learning process. All of the public schools boys want to speak English well as they believe that it will help them get good jobs, whereas, a few of the boys from private schools also disagree with this statement. This might indicate that, may be by looking around in the country or through the company of friends, this belief of getting a good job only if you know how to speak well has developed in the minds of our public school boys. A good indication is that only a quarter of the students from both the groups agree that the target culture is necessary for learning a foreign language. It will not be wrong to assess that a majority of both the groups of boys believes that a foreign language can also be learned while staying in one's own country. On the other hand, a majority of the participants believe that they can learn a lot from classroom group activities. Public school girls on the contrary think that English culture should be observed in order to speak better English and they show a trend towards speaking English well.

Boys from both the groups agree to the belief that one must have good English speaking skills but on the other hand, as compared to the public school boys, the private school boys seem reluctant in practicing speaking with people they meet or the ones who are also leaning English with them. More of the boys from public schools were found to believe that one must think in English in order to speak well in English. Both the group participants deem vocabulary important for learning a foreign language whereas, public school boys seemed more confident in practicing speaking the language they were learning as compared to the boys from private schools.

A majority of the private school girls seem to agree to the idea of speaking English in a good accent, while both the groups think practicing English is good. Only the girls from public schools think that it is better to think in English while speaking in English, while both agree on the statement that they should have native English speaking teachers for teaching English language. A minority of both the groups think that errors in foreign language must be corrected at the earliest stage in order to be able to speak correctly later, while most of them think otherwise. A trend is seen in the private school girls that they believe in trial and error.

The trend shows that, as against, private school boys are not interested in speaking English, are confident about speaking incorrect English, and seem to believe in trial and error just like the private school girls but unlike the public school girls who are more conscious about speaking the language, but that too, only correctly. The boys and that too of public schools show strong belief in learning and communication strategies.

Concluding all the observed beliefs of the participants, the following assumptions can be made; in the area of Foreign Language Aptitude, boys from public schools possess stronger beliefs than the boys from public schools. Likewise, among girls, those from public schools hold very strong beliefs regarding foreign language aptitude as compared to the girls from the private schools.

In the belief area of Difficulty in language learning, boys from public schools have more strong beliefs than those of private school boys. As for girls, almost equally strong beliefs are found in both the groups of participants.

When it comes to the area of Nature of Language Learning, boys from public schools hold much stronger beliefs than the other group of boys. Similarly, girls from public

schools display stronger beliefs about the nature of language learning.

In the area of Learning and Communication Strategies, it was again observed that boys from public schools have stronger beliefs than those of private schools. Likewise, among girls the public school girls possess stronger beliefs.

Boys from public schools displayed stronger beliefs in the area of Motivations and Expectations, whereas, among girls, both the groups showed a strong trend in the same area.

CONCLUSION

The target of this research was to identify the beliefs of secondary level students about learning English as a foreign language. The research questions put forth concerned the identification of beliefs, the difference between the beliefs of boys and girls, the difference between the beliefs of public and private schools' students and finally the effect of beliefs on the foreign language learning process. These four questions have been dealt with and discussed during the course of the research and few observations were made. Among these observations the ones that are worth mentioning are that the private students were found to have the strongest beliefs in the area of Foreign Language Aptitude while their test scores did not corroborate with their aptitude level. The public schools boys also strongly believe that they have better job opportunities if they are good at speaking English, which seems to be a belief formed on mere hearsay. It might be said that it is also not necessary that if a learner has an aptitude for learning a foreign language, he or she will definitely be good at learning that language as well or be proficient at it. There seems to be many factors that affect the language learning process itself, as well. Where beliefs were said to influence the foreign language learning process, it was observed that it might not be the only factor that affects this

process, other allied factors might be involved in making the learning process a success. The proficiency and language expertise of the teacher, the classroom environment, the teaching strategies, level of the school, the nature of the schooling and many more also come under consideration. These factors affecting the language learning process can be researched further in order to make the classroom environment more student-friendly and student-centered.

On the other hand, it was observed that the students from private schools showed a higher trend from the public schools students and that too, only in the belief area of Motivations and Expectations. The higher test scores of the private schools students might be because of their reading habits or, may be, because of (most of) their home (English speaking) environments, or their educated parents, viewing of a lot of audio visual content in the target language, a competent teacher or an interaction with a foreign return peer or friend. These assumptions are made based on the beliefs of the students, which they shared earlier. Their beliefs like, they can learn a language without a language teacher and a classroom, or, multimedia can help them learn a foreign language better, or, that they can find a lot of language learning material on the internet, or, they believe they will learn English very well, or that, native English teachers can be better teachers of English language than non native ones can be; all point towards the above assumptions.

As for the identification of beliefs about learning a foreign language (of secondary level boys and girls), are concerned, that has been concluded. In the next step, a few recommendations, if pursued, would surely help in taking Foreign Language Learning Beliefs to an altogether new level of understanding and application.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. It is recommended that education researchers and policy makers take this study to the next level and test the four language skills of the learners separately and then compare them with the beliefs of the same students, so individual and more focused attention could be given to skill building.
2. Extensive research is required in the area of identifying English language teachers' beliefs about teaching English as a second language. The same research should encompass the cultural and educational backgrounds of the teachers and their own learning experiences, the type of schools they went to, the level of education they received as students or the type of beliefs their teachers displayed in front of them.
3. A study can also be conducted to compare the beliefs of language teachers to the beliefs of the students in order to know if the beliefs of teachers have an influence on the beliefs of their students respectively.
4. Research can be conducted between learners' beliefs vs. learning strategies using BALLI (Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory) and SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning), respectively. In this way, a learner with a set of specific beliefs can use a proper learning strategy.
5. Yet another study may be conducted for identification of similarities between the social setups of students studying in private and public schools separately, and then a comparison to be made between similar aspects in order to reach any common factors influencing their foreign language learning beliefs, performance and proficiency.

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