

**Ministry of Education and Training
University of Technology and Education**

INVESTIGATION OF ENGLISH MAJORED STUDENTS' BELIEFS ABOUT LANGUAGE LEARNING

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August, 2016**

ABSTRACT

Learners' performance in a language program is influenced by a number of factors, among which beliefs about language learning, especially about English as Foreign Language (EFL) are often addressed as a key to their success. Other factors are their awareness, attitude towards learning, learning strategies and of course environmental policies, to name a few. Learners' beliefs and their commitment in learning are useful and essential in shaping an appropriate methods and strategy for effective and efficient learning. This paper reports on a small-scale study at Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Technology and Education, HoChiMinh City in which the researcher investigated the beliefs about language learning of 40 students of English major, aiming at exploring and finding their beliefs about learning EFL. The study also intended to identify if their held beliefs changed during the program. For such aims, the data were collected using a 34-item Likert-type scale (Horwitz's BALLI - Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory), with some modification to suit the current situation of teaching and learning English at UTE. The collected data were then descriptively analyzed and tabulated in five normally used headings recommended by Horwitz (1987). The results of this study demonstrated that UTE's students of English major hold a range of beliefs both similar to and different from those reported in other research peculiar to Asian students of EFL.

Beliefs about language learning: What are they?

A complex set of variables based on attitudes, experiences, and expectations about language learning, naturally related to cultural and situational differences.

“Opinion on a variety of issues and controversies related to language learning” (Horwitz, 1987:120)

Beliefs about language learning consist of “general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning and about the nature of language teaching” (Victori & Lockhart, 1995: 224)

Beliefs about language learning: What are they?

- + Learner beliefs are a multifaceted concept due to complexities of the human mind.

Differences between insightful beliefs and limited beliefs:

...if students develop or maintain misconceptions about their own learning, if they attribute undue importance to factors that are external to their own action, they are not likely to adopt a responsible and active attitude in their approach to learning and may never become autonomous (Victori & Lockhart, 1995: 225).

III. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

+ to identify:

- the learners' beliefs about language learning**
- factors influencing their beliefs**
- whether it is influenced by their old practice**
- whether these beliefs are subject to change**

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Participants: a cohort of 40 students of English major from Foreign Languages, University of Technology and Education, HoChiMinh City

B. Data Collection Instrument: The BALLI, a 34-item inventory on beliefs about language learning was used to collect data from the learners.

The BALLI consists of 34 items and aims to assess the learners' beliefs in 5 major areas:

- (1) difficulty of language learning;**
- (2) foreign language aptitude;**
- (3) the nature of language learning;**
- (4) learning and communication; and**
- (5) motivations and expectations**

C. Data Analysis: The data gathered from the BALLI questionnaires for this study was analyzed employing SPSS 15.0 package program. Data was analyzed descriptively

Table 1: Foreign Language Aptitude

Item #	Item	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1	It's easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language	4.34	1.19	9	-	5	22	64
2	Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages	4.31	1.04	5	5	-	59	31
6	People from Vietnam are good at learning foreign languages	2.82	1.05	14	18	45	18	5
10	It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one	3.40	0.96	5	14	23	55	5
11	People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages	2.13	1.16	32	41	18	-	9
16	I have a special ability for learning foreign languages	3.13	0.83	9	-	59	32	-
19	Women are better than men at learning languages	2.40	0.95	18	36	32	14	-
30	People who speak more than one language are very intelligent	3.59	1.01	-	14	36	27	23
33	Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language	4.18	0.79	-	5	9	50	36

Table 2: Difficulty of Language Learning

Item #	Item	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
3	Some languages are easier than others are	3.59	1.26	9	9	23	32	27
4	English is: 1= a very difficult language; 2= a difficult language; 3= language of medium difficulty; 4= an easy language; 5= a very easy language	2.95	0.65	5	18	41	23	13
15	If someone spent 1 hour a day learning a foreign language, how would it take then to speak the 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 1 hour per day	2.59	1.15	14	41	18	-	27
25	It is easier to speak than to understand it	3.09	0.86		27	41	27	5
34	It is easier to read and write than to speak and understand it	2.5	0.96	9	50	18	23	-

Table 3: The Nature of Language Learning

Item #	Item	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
8	It's necessary to know about English speaking cultures to speak English	3.63	0.78	-	14	14	68	5
12	It is best to learn English in an English speaking country	4.04	1.04	5	5	9	45	36
17	The most important part of learning English is new words	4.18	0.66	-	-	14	55	32
23	The most important part of learning English is learning grammar	3.00	1.19	9	27	18	36	9
27	Learning English is different than learning other academic subjects	3.27	0.82	-	18	41	36	5
28	The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from my own language	2.27	1.07	14	55	5	23	5

Table 4: Learning and Communication Strategies

Item #	Item	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
7	It's important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation	4.13	0.99	-	9	14	32	45
9	You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly	1.81	0.47	68	32	-	-	-
13	In enjoy practicing English with the native speakers I meet	4.22	0.61	-	-	9	59	32
14	It is OK to guess if you don't know a word in English	3.86	1.12	5	-	14	41	32
18	It is important to repeat and practice a lot	4.40	0.66	-	-	9	41	50
21	I feel shy speaking English with other people	2.81	0.90	5	36	32	27	
22	If beginning students are allowed to make mistakes in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on	2.27	1.07	18	55	18		9
26	It's important to practice with cassettes/tapes	3.68	0.94	-	14	23	45	18
35	Language learning involves a lot of memorization	4.09	0.68	5	5	68	23	-

Table 5: Motivations and Expectations

Item #	Item	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
5	I believe I will learn to speak English very well	3.91	0.75	-	-	23	59	18
20	I believe in my country feel that it is important to speak English	3.72	1.03	5	14	14	55	18
24	I would like to learn English so that I can understand naïve speakers of English better	3.59	1.18	9	9	14	50	18
29	If I learn English very well, I will have better job opportunities	4.40	0.59	-	-	5	50	45
31	I want to learn to speak English well	4.82	0.39	-	-	-	18	82

Qualitative findings

- Students in high schools get what teachers write on board
- They learn by heart what they write on their notebooks
- Learning method in universities is more difficult
- When I entered university, I got confused b/c of the teaching and learning methods
- I do not rely much on my instructors. I have to search other things by myself.



Qualitative findings

- At high school, the teacher controls the time very strictly and imposes strict discipline, if you are late.
- At schools, teachers take care of us. At university, we are treated as adults.
- The difference in university is the learning environment.
- Students are more active and can make questions, show their opinions.
- Apparently, the change in roles of students and teachers at high school and university.



Discussion

- are not confident enough about one's ability
- not taking risks in learning English
- very highly motivated (Cat 5)



Pedagogical Implications

- ❖ Helping students with right beliefs about language learning
- ❖ Raising students' awareness – university study guide
- ❖ Making them understand about investment in learning English
- ❖ Establishing, maintaining good rapport between teachers and students

Suggestions for Further Research

- + Other variables: gender, social class, proficiency,...

Limitations

- + small scale

Conclusion

Teachers: good knowledge about learners' beliefs about language learning: teaching styles, tasks, expectations



Q & A

Thank you!

