

Investigating Foreign Language Learners' Beliefs about Language Learning: a study on Private University Students

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Abstract

The present study aims at identifying the beliefs of undergraduate students of a foreign language who are learning English in a private university in Egypt. It also investigates the relationship between the participant's educational level and their beliefs. The participants are sixty students who are enrolled to study translation from English to Arabic and vice versa. They all have to answer the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory, BALLI. The participants represent both gender, males and females. The researcher uses the analytical descriptive method while applying the questionnaire as a method of data collection. The current study identifies the beliefs of the learners who are studying translation from English to Arabic and vice versa. The findings assure that the learners' beliefs of the three levels, beginners, intermediate and advanced differ from one level to the other. They also show that the beliefs of the learners can affect their learning process and this should be put into consideration.

Key words: Beliefs – Translation – BALLI – Foreign Language – Aptitude-Difficulty of Language Learning

1. Introduction

A crucial element that needs investigation is identifying the beliefs that the learners have. The beliefs of the learners can vary according to many factors and these factors can influence their studying process. The learners' beliefs about language learning, in general, guide their actions and behaviors in the learning process (Cotterall, 1995; Horwitz, 1999). This behavior can be reflected in learners' success or failure in language learning (Cotterall, 1995). There has still been scarcity of empirical research both internationally (Graham, 2006; Horwitz, 1988; Hurt, 1997; Nikitina & Furuoka, 2006; Rifkin, 2000) and locally (Altan, 2006) that investigates foreign language learners' beliefs. If learners hold

misconceptions about language learning, the process may be hindered, and consequently may not lead to successful results (Cotterall, 1995; Horwitz, 1987, 1988). (Barcelos, Kalaja and Paula's 2011) serves as an introduction to the Beliefs about Second Language Acquisition (SLA) held by learners and teachers of foreign languages in a variety of contexts all over the world. Most of the studies are characterized as being qualitative in nature. In addition, the studies tend to view beliefs as variable and fixed. They also focus on changes in these beliefs and on the interaction between beliefs and learner or teacher actions, acknowledges their relationship to be a complex one. As Horwitz (1987) stated, second language learners often hold different beliefs or notions about language learning, some of which are influenced by students' previous experiences as language learners and others that are shaped by their own cultural backgrounds. The pedagogical implications of previous research findings suggested the importance of probing learners' beliefs about language learning, so that teachers may understand how learners view and approach their education in the classroom and the learners too have to understand what goes behind the scene. Accordingly, language teachers may either address any "limited knowledge", or "erroneous beliefs" learners may have (Horwitz, 1988) or foster existing knowledge that is consistent with a given instructional language learning program (Cotterall, 1995, Horwitz, 1987).

2. Research Questions

1. Do the learners' beliefs affect the learning process of English as a second Language?
2. Is there a relationship between the beliefs of the learners and the learners' language proficiency level at the university?

3. Hypothesis of The Research

This research claims that the beliefs of the learners can affect their learning process. They can have negative implications in learning English as a second language. According to the learner's beliefs, the outcome of the learning process can be determined.

4. Methodology of Research

The objective of this paper is to measure the beliefs of the learners and to check if they can affect their learning process or not. Moreover, it stresses on the features that can hinder the students' knowledge in learning a second language. Needs analysis step is going to be investigated by the use of the inventory. The

results identify the beliefs of the learners in their learning process. The main focus of this study is to explore the beliefs of the learners while learning how to translate foreign texts in an attempt to reduce the frustration that these learners face while acquiring the techniques of the translation process. The Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) is used to measure the students' opinions on a variety of issues and controversies related to language learning. The BALLI inventory is adapted to be applied on the participants who are learning the English language in their university.

5. The Sample

The population that represents the sample of this paper and who responded to the questionnaire speaks Arabic and English. The participants are sixty students who are studying translation in a private university. The percentage of males and females are not the same, the males presented 40% whereas the females are 60% of the population. The participants ranged in their age from 18 to 24. To ensure the homogeneity of the sample in terms of students' language competency, the college asks each student to sit for a language proficiency placement test upon registration for the course. The application of this step in the academic year 2019/2020 produced three levels: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. Students from these levels comprised the subjects that took part in this study, that is to say responding to the questionnaire. They are Egyptian college students who are enrolled at faculty of Arts, Translation section to complete their studying as a part of their learning program. The main reason for choosing private university students than governmental ones is that the majority of them come from the same social standard. The students who join private entities are coming from mainly English schools and various educational systems that can really influence their ideas and this can assure that they represent a homogenous sample. The beliefs they hold according to their age, and gender should be measured. according to Horwitz in the BALLI, the beliefs are divided into five main categories which are the difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, finally the motivation and expectation.

6. Research Instrument

Horwitz has designed an instrument to assess students' beliefs about learning a new language, which she called the "Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory" (BALLI) in 1980. A copy of the adapted questionnaire is included in the Appendix. The BALLI was developed to assess students' opinions on a variety of issues and controversies related to language learning. The BALLI consisted of thirty-four items and assesses student beliefs in five major areas: 1) difficulty of language learning; 2) foreign language aptitude; 3) the nature of language learning; 4) learning and communication strategies; and 5) motivations and expectations. Subsequent studies have employed Horwitz's instrument for inquiries abroad as Yang (1992), Kern (1995) and Mantle-Bromley (1995) who investigated beliefs of Russian language learners. The researcher has adapted Horwitz questionnaire after taking her approval. The beliefs section of the adapted questionnaire consists of 28 items whereas Horwitz questionnaire constitutes 34 items. Not all the items in Horwitz's questionnaire are included in this section because some of the extracted items do not suit the case of the selected sample. For instance, some items ask about the children as "It is easier for children than adults to learn foreign languages". This item cannot be added in this section as it does not apply to this research. We do not have children to compare their beliefs with the adult's beliefs at the private University. "Foreign language aptitude" is represented in the questionnaire in six items. As for the "nature of the language", it has been explained in items numbers: 10,12,20,21,24and 25. Concerning the "difficulty of language learning", it is exemplified in three items. Last but not least, "learning and Communication strategies" are emphasized in twelve items.

7. Results and Discussion

Five components of BALLI are discussed in the result part: the difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivations and expectations of foreign language students.

7.1. The difficulty of language learning.

This category is related to how students indicate the level of difficulty they are experiencing while learning a second language. The items range from language skill preferences to the measurable amount of time spent studying to become fluent in a second language. BALLI items in the difficulty of language learning category are focused on the perceptions of students on the foreign language they learn. This section

is exemplified by three items. "Some languages are easier than others". In this item 55% of the participants strongly agreed with this statement while 6% only disagreed with it.

The current study supports the findings of several other studies in the field arguing that there is a hierarchy of language learning difficulty (Horwitz, 1987; Altan,2006).

7.2. Foreign language aptitude

The foreign language aptitude discusses how and when learners should begin learning a foreign language and which gender is perceived to be a better language learner. BALLI items in this category aim to understand whether the respondents believe in the existence of specialized abilities regarding foreign language learning or not. "Some people are born with a special ability which helps them learn a foreign language". Fifty-five percent of the students were "neutral" in their answers whereas thirteen percent agreed about it. students believed that some people possess a gift for languages. When the students were asked, "women are better than men at learning languages", thirty-six percent disagreed on that statement. More than sixty percent agreed that "people who are good at math and science are not good at learning foreign languages". This category has been found to be statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$.

7.3. The nature of language learning

This category looks at the similarities and differences between grammar and lexical items in the first and the second language. It also includes considering the natural environment in which a foreign language should be learned, such as whether language learning should take place in the country where the language is being learned. BALLI items in the nature of language learning category vary from how the foreign language is best learned, such as living in a country where the target language is spoken and exposure to foreign culture, to items defining the language learning.

"It is best to learn English in an English speaking country". Agreeing with the common belief that the best way to learn a foreign language is to live in a country speaking the target language, sixty- five percent of the participants responded positively on that issue. When it comes to how learners perceived language learning, almost more than half of the respondents believed that foreign language learning mostly entails learning grammar rules and translating from English. This category has again been found to be statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$.

7.4. Learning and communication strategies

The items in this category measure how learners learn and practice the second language, their perspectives on the importance of guessing the meaning, and the use of language laboratories. BALLI items in this category focused on the use of learning strategies and are concerned with communication strategies and all are related to measure students' beliefs during actual classroom practices. The majority of the students believed in the power of practicing with audio materials and repeating what they have learned. More than sixty- five percent agreed when were asked, "It's important to speak a foreign language with an excellent pronunciation". When the students were asked to comment on a statement, "I feel self-conscious speaking the foreign language in front of other people", fifty percent of the learners agreed with it This category has again been found to be statistically significant $p \leq 0.05$.

7.5. Motivations and expectations

The final category that has been identified by Hurwitz (1987) is motivation and expectations. There are only four items that address the learners' instrumental or external motivation and their internal motivation. Eighty-five to eighty-nine percent of students agreed with the statement: "If I learn to speak English very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job". In Hurwitz's study (1988), only twelve to twenty-seven percent of students agreed with that statement. It appears that Egyptian foreign language learners were more extrinsically motivated to learn a foreign language. When the students answered the question "I would like to learn spoken English so that I can get to know English people". Seventy-five percent of the learners agreed with that statement. As this item is used to measure students' level of integrative motivation, a desire to connect with the native speakers appeared to be very strong. This category has again been found to be statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$.

Last but not least, a deep look in the relations between the students' level in the center and their beliefs (figure 1) demonstrates the fact that the beliefs that they have really differ according to the level of the students in the center. As for figure one, it reflects the fact that there is a great difference between the advanced level and the beginner and intermediate levels in their beliefs. There is a direct relation between the beliefs and the level of the students in the center and consequently, the advanced level has stronger beliefs than the other two levels. In comparison to Hurwitz' results and Rifkin in "Revisiting Beliefs about Foreign Language Learning" 2000, learners at the first-year level held beliefs significantly different

from those held by their peers at more advanced levels of instruction. Rifkin (2000) also stated that “The null hypothesis, that there is no relationship between beliefs about language learning and level of instruction, must be rejected because in one third of all the survey items learners at the first-year level held beliefs significantly different from those held by learners at different levels”. Figure (2) reflects the fact that the males of the beginners’ and advanced levels hold stronger beliefs than the females and this is a clear evidence that these beliefs can affect the learning process.

8. Conclusion & Recommendations

The questions in the questionnaire are used to investigate the beliefs that these participants hold concerning the difficulty in the English language, the motivation and expectations of the participants, their aptitude and the nature of the English language. The results indicate that the items in the “Beliefs” inventory do not cause problems to the learners as their beliefs are neither too strong nor too weak. The students are flexible and moderate in these items. They do not hold

strong beliefs as a whole that can affect their learning process. A deep look at the three levels of the students in the center demonstrates the fact that the beliefs really differ according to the level of the students in the center. Teachers need to put in consideration while teaching foreign students the beliefs of their learners to have a class where the communicative method is applied. By this way, we can avoid all the problems that foreigners face while learning the English language. We need to suggest a systematic qualitative research method to increase our knowledge of second language learning during studying abroad. Third, an experimental study may be conducted on two groups, a control versus an experimental group, to further investigate whether the changes in learners’ beliefs of the present exploratory study were due to the impact of the new learning settings or due to other factors that were not controlled in the present study. Faculties should begin by being self-reflective about their pedagogical goals and strengths in teaching. There should be more studies that focuses on the needs of the translators and the field of Translation in general to help in improving the levels of the translators.

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Appendix

(Table 1) Distribution of the studied cases according to the BALLI

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD	χ^2	p
1- It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.	No	28	23	8	1	0	1.70	0.77	31.867	<0.001*
	%	46.7	38.3	13.3	1.7	0.0				
2- Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	No	27	30	3	0	0	1.60	0.59	21.900	<0.001*
	%	45.0	50.0	5.0	0.0	0.0				
3- I enjoy practicing English with the English people I meet.	No	18	33	9	0	0	1.85	0.66	14.700	<0.001*
	%	30.0	55.0	15.0	0.0	0.0				
4- I feel timid speaking English with English people	No	9	22	11	15	3	2.68	1.16	16.667	0.002*
	%	15.0	36.7	18.3	25.0	5.0				
5- People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.	No	1	17	31	11	0	2.87	0.72	31.467	<0.001*
	%	1.7	28.3	51.7	18.3	0.0				
6- My previous language experience indicates my success in learning a new task.	No	2	27	26	5	0	2.57	0.70	35.600	<0.001*
	%	3.3	45.0	43.0	8.3	0.0				

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7- It is important to communicate ideas in a clear and understandable way.	N o	38	20	2	0	0	1.4 0	0.5 6	32.40 0	<0.00 1*
	%	63. 3	33. 3	3.3	0.0	0.0				
8- If I learn English properly, I will understand the English culture.	N o	5	27	10	16	2	2.7 2	1.0 6	32.83 3	<0.00 1*
	%	8.3	45. 0	16. 7	26. 7	3.3				
9- I need to learn English to understand the foreign politics.	N o	8	13	14	19	6	3.0 3	1.2 2	8.833	0.065
	%	13. 3	21. 7	23. 3	31. 7	10. 0				
10- Some languages are easier to learn than others.	N o	33	21	4	2	0	1.5 8	0.7 7	43.33 3	<0.00 1*
	%	55. 0	35. 0	6.7	3.3	0.0				
11- It is easier to read and write Arabic than to speak it.	N o	9	20	20	8	3	2.6 0	1.0 6	19.50 0	<0.00 1*
	%	15. 0	33. 3	33. 3	13. 3	5.0				
12- It is best to learn English in an English speaking country.	N o	39	19	2	0	0	1.3 8	0.5 6	34.30 0	<0.00 1*
	%	65. 0	31. 7	3.3	0.0	0.0				
13- People from my country are good at learning foreign languages.	N o	0	14	21	19	6	3.2 8	0.9 4	8.933	0.030 *
	%	0.0	23. 3	35. 0	31. 7	10. 0				

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14- I believe that I will learn to speak English very well	N o	5	29	21	3	2	2.4 7	0.8 5	50.00 0	<0.00 1*
	%	8.3	48.3	35.0	5.0	3.3				
15- It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation	N o	8	33	12	6	1	2.3 2	0.8 9	51.16 7	<0.00 1*
	%	13.3	55.0	20.0	10.0	1.7				

(Table 2) Distribution of the studied cases according to the BALLI

learning χ^2 : Chi square test

*: Statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$

		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Mean	SD	χ^2	p
16- You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly	N o	7	0	5	24	24	3.7 9	1.2 5	21.73 3	<0.00 1*
	%	11.7	0.0	8.3	40.0	40.0				
17- I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	N o	5	8	33	8	6	3.0 3	1.0 1	46.50 0	<0.00 1*
	%	8.3	13.3	55.0	13.3	10.0				
18- It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	N o	41	16	3	0	0	1.3 7	0.5 8	37.30 0	<0.00 1*
	%	68.3	26.7	5.0	0.0	0.0				

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19- If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on.	N o	5	17	3	29	6	3.2 3	1.2 1	40.00	<0.00 1*
	%	8.3	28.3	5.0	48.3	10.0				
20- The most important part of learning English is learning vocabulary words.	N o	7	35	7	7	4	2.4 3	1.0 6	55.66 7	<0.00 1*
	%	11.7	58.3	11.7	11.7	6.7				
21- The most important part of learning English is learning the grammar.	N o	2	13	23	18	4	3.1 5	0.9 5	26.83 3	<0.00 1*
	%	3.3	21.7	38.3	30.0	6.7				
22- It is important to practice with cassettes or tapes.	N o	7	14	22	15	2	2.8 5	1.0 4	19.83 3	<0.00 1*
	%	11.7	23.3	36.7	25.0	3.3				
23- Women are better than men at learning foreign languages	N o	2	2	26	22	8	3.5 3	0.8 9	42.66 7	<0.00 1*
	%	3.3	3.3	43.3	36.7	13.3				
24- Learning English is different from learning other academic subjects.	N o	11	34	12	3	0	2.1 2	0.7 6	35.33 3	<0.00 1*
	%	18.3	56.7	20.0	5.0	0.0				
25- The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from my native language	N o	1	6	14	31	8	3.6 5	0.9 0	44.83 3	<0.00 1*
	%	1.7	10.0	23.3	51.7	13.3				

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26- If I learn to speak English very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job	N o	6	25	26	3	0	2.4	0.7	29.73	<0.00
	%	10.0	41.7	43.3	5.0	0.0	3	4	3	1*
27- Everyone can learn to speak English	N o	4	39	15	1	1	2.2	0.6	87.00	<0.00
	%	6.7	65.0	25.0	1.7	1.7	7	9	0	1*
28- I would like to learn spoken English so that I can get to know English people.	N o	15	32	10	2	1	2.0	0.8	52.83	<0.00
	%	25.0	53.3	16.7	3.3	1.7	3	4	3	1*

Table (3): Relation between gender and beliefs score in each level in the center

	Level in the center					
	Beginner		Intermediate		Advanced	
	Male (n = 5)	Female (n = 13)	Male (n = 17)	Female (n = 21)	Male (n = 2)	Female (n = 2)
Beliefs score						
Range	73.0 80.0	60.0 81.0	56.0 82.0	62.0 84.0	75.0 81.0	76.0 77.0
Mean ± SD	75.20 2.77	± 67.38 7.25	± 68.35 7.29	± 70.67 5.96	± 78.0 4.24	± 76.50 0.71
p	0.035*		0.289		0.671	

Figure1: Relation between the level in the center and beliefs score

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(Strongly agree = 1, agree = 2, natural = 3, disagree = 4 strongly disagree = 5)

Number of items = 28 Minimum score = $1 \times 28 = 28$ Maximum score = $5 \times 28 = 140$

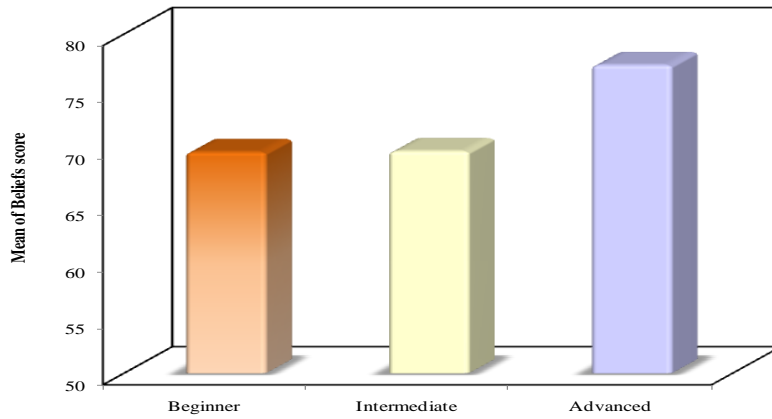
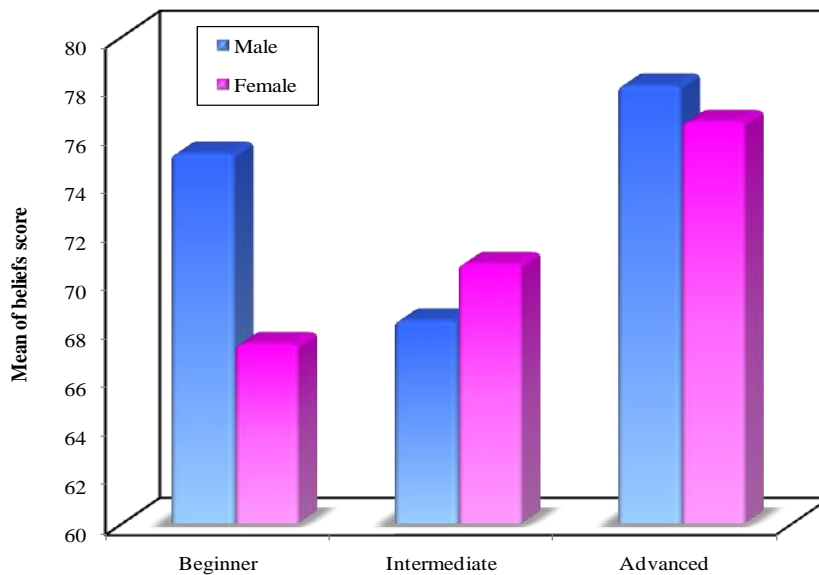


Figure 2: Relation between gender and beliefs score in each level in the center



التحقيق في معتقدات متعلمي اللغات الأجنبية حول تعلم اللغة: دراسة عن طلاب الجامعات
الخاصة

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المستخلص

تهدف الدراسة الحالية الي التعرف على معتقدات الطلاب الجامعيين الذين يتعلمون اللغة الإنجليزية في إحدى الجامعات الخاصة في مصر. كما يبحث في العلاقة بين المستوي التعليمي للمشاركة ومعتقداته الخاصة. ستون طالبا هما من شاركوا في هذه الدراسة وهم الطلبة الذين يدرسون في مجال الترجمة من اللغة العربية الي الإنجليزية والعكس. على هؤلاء المشاركون في هذه الدراسة الرد على المعتقدات حول مخزون تعلم اللغة بالي. المشاركون يمثلوا كلا الجنسين؛ ذكورا واناثا. استخدم الباحث المنهج الوصفي التحليلي عند تطبيق الاستبيان كأسلوب لجمع البيانات. تحدد الدراسة الحالية معتقدات المتعلمين الذين يدرسون الترجمة من الإنجليزية الي العربية والعكس صحيح. تؤكد النتائج ان معتقدات المتعلمين للمستويات الثلاثة المبتدئين والمتوسطين والمتقدمين تختلف من نستوي لأخر.

الكلمات الدالة: معتقدات – الترجمة – الموهبة- صعوبات التعلم