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Learning English as a Second Language: Beliefs of Undergraduate Students about Language Learning

Abstract

This research reports on a survey study that explored the beliefs of undergraduate students about their learning English as a second language from University of Sargodha. Students' beliefs about their language learning were investigated using "Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory" and were examined in terms of five components of the inventory. Accordingly 250 students (M=135, F=115) from social sciences participated in the study. The results indicated that the students had strongest beliefs about Learning and Communication Strategies followed by Motivation and Expectation and The Nature of Language Learning. Foreign Language Learning Aptitude and Difficulty of Language Learning earned lower scores but were still in affirmative form. The findings also displayed no significant gender difference in the language learning beliefs of students. The study concluded with some pedagogical implications.

Key words: Language Learning Beliefs, English as a Second Language

Introduction

Pakistan is a multi-lingual country where English language is taught as a second language and is employed as a medium of instruction. It is also taught as a compulsory subject in schools, colleges and universities. At university level it is taught as a compulsory subject along with communication skills in English in BS program in all disciplines. Secondly, students from multilingual community are generally bilingual, or speak three and more languages and local dialects. They hold diverse opinions and beliefs about learning English as a second language. Therefore, it is important to discover the language learning beliefs of these students who grew up in a multilingual environment.

Students' beliefs are the defining factors of the behavior of students towards learning a language. It is a commonly understood that language learners do have certain beliefs about their language learning without being conscious of them. These have been referred to (Hosenfeld, 1978; Wenden, 1986) as "mini theories" of second language acquisition. Richardson, (1996: 103) defined as "psychologically held understandings, premises or propositions about the world that are felt to be true". Beliefs about language learning play significant role in the experiences of the students and in determining their success as language learners.

The present research aims to investigate the beliefs of students of University of Sargodha about learning English as second language by using Horwitz's (1988) inventory. Since a man is what he believes in, many researchers have focused on what students believe about the nature of language learning in recent years (Cotterall, 1999; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990). Most of the early studies on language learning beliefs were mainly conducted in relation to individual differences between successful and unsuccessful learners (Nation & McLaughlin, 1986; Rubin, 1981,

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1987; Wong-Fillmore, 1979).

Horwitz(1987)is regarded a pioneer in investigating beliefs of foreign language learning students as she designed an instrument which she called the “Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory” (BALLI). Horwitz (1988) investigated the beliefs of foreign language students at University of Texas. The results revealed that most of the learners underestimated the language learning difficulty and they had an aptitude for learning a foreign language.

After the development and administration of BALLI many studies employed Horwitz’s(1988) instrument for inquiring the beliefs of second language learners across the world such as Australia, Korea, Lebanon, United States, Turkey, and similar belief patterns have been reported by them. (Diab, 2000, 2006; Horwitz, 1987, 1988; Kunt, 1997; Park, 1995; Truitt, 1995).

Many other studies on the beliefs of foreign language learners include; A study on language learning beliefs of 90 undergraduate distance students of china (Zhang and Cui, 2010); on the beliefs of Malaysian university students(Nikitina & Furuoka, 2006); on the beliefs of Thai language learners (Altan, 2006; Kunt ,1997). The studies pertinent to the scope of the current research are discussed below. Yang (1999) explored beliefs about language learning among English language students at Taiwanese universities study examined the relationship between the beliefs of 500 Taiwanese students and their selection of strategies. It was revealed that the students reported a strong sense of self-efficacy about learning English, placed a high value on learning spoken English, on the importance of repetition and practice, and agreed with the notion of various aptitudes for special abilities for foreign language learning. The researcher concluded, as beliefs about language learning can affect the use of strategies, learning strategies may also influence learners” beliefs about language learning.

Peacock (2001) reports on a longitudinal study that investigated changes in the beliefs about second language learning of 146 trainee ESL students over their 3-year program at the City University of Hong Kong. Although he reports differences in three key areas, disturbingly, no significant changes have been found. These key areas are: learning a second language means learning a lot of vocabulary and grammar rules and the belief that those speaking more than one language well are very intelligent. Peacock (2001) concludes that these participants when preparing their classroom tasks, materials, etc. might over-emphasize the learning of vocabulary and grammar rules compared to the other classroom tasks necessary for foreign language learning. And believing that those speaking more than one language are very intelligent might negatively affect their capacity to assess their future students’ progress.

Researchers have also explored the beliefs of foreign language learners in relation to gender differences as well. For example Bernat (2006) investigated the language learning beliefs held by Australian and American participants and found statistically significant differences with to gender. However no research till present has been conducted on language learning beliefs of Pakistani university students. Therefore the present research aims to investigate the beliefs of undergraduate students about learning English as a second language and the gender differences in the beliefs of students at university of Sargodha.

Method

A sample of 250 students was taken from the discipline of social sciences represented by five different departments namely: Education, Economics, Social Work, Psychology and International Relations from University of Sargodha. Of the total number of the sample were

115 male students and 135 female students. The researchers personally administered the questionnaire to the participants to ensure the reliability of the results.

The study used the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (Horwitz, 1987). It contains 38 items and measures student beliefs in five main areas: i.e. Learning and communication strategies; foreign language aptitude; the nature of language learning; difficulty of language learning; and motivations and expectations. Before administration, the BAALI questionnaire was a bit modified according to the understanding and context of Pakistani learners.

Results

Descriptive statistics and t-test were used to analyze the beliefs and gender differences in the beliefs of students. The relationship among different factors was discovered by Pearson Product Moment correlation coefficient.

Table 1.
Mean, SD and t test for University Students' Beliefs about Language Learning

SN	Factors	Mean	SD	t	Sig.	Mean Difference
1	Foreign Language Aptitude	3.4655	.79068	8.222	.000	.46553
2	Difficulty of Language	3.5141	1.36393	5.264	.000	.51410
3	Motivation and Expectations	3.8709	.99886	12.176	.000	.87094
4	Learning and Communication Strategies	3.9692	.73403	18.439	.000	.96923
5	The Nature of Language Learning	3.7103	.83072	11.939	.000	.71026

Test Value = 3

Above table reveals that Learning and communication strategies (M=3.46, SD=.79) Motivation and Expectations (M=3.87, SD=.99), and Nature of Language Learning (M=3.71, SD=.83) have higher means as compared to factor 1 and 2. The grand mean was 3.75 which was reasonably high from the midpoint (3) showing that all the factors were believed to be important for learning English. One sample t test reveals that all the means were significantly different than the test value, which is three.

Table 2.
Mean, SD and t test for Gender Difference in Beliefs of University Students' about Language Learning (Male=115, Females=135)

Factors of Language Learning	Gender	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
Foreign Language Aptitude	Female	31.47	7.577	.814	.416

	Male	30.57	5.96			
			1			
Difficulty of Language	Female	13.99	5.32			
		3	7	-		
	Male	14.20	5.77	.23	.807	
		0	8	7		
The Nature of Language Learning	Female	22.17	3.08			
		0	5	-		
	Male	22.46	7.74	.38	.703	
		7	7	2		
Learning and Communication Strategies	Female	44.07	8.19			
		4	8	1.0		
	Male	42.73	7.77	.71	.286	
		3	6			
Motivation and Expectations	Female	23.39	5.88			
		3	1	.58		
	Male	22.85	6.27	.3	.561	
		0	3			

Above table explain the means for beliefs of male and female university students about language learning. Males have higher means for the nature of language learning (Males, $M=22.47$, Females, $M=22.17$) and the difficulty of language (Males, $M=14.20$, Females, $M=13.99$), whereas for the factors of Motivation and expectation (Females, $M=23.39$, Males, $M=22.85$), learning and communication strategies (Females, $M=44.07$, Males, $M=42.73$), and foreign language learning (Females, $M=31.47$, Males, $M=30.57$), females have higher mean than males but these mean gender differences were not statistically significant for all factors.

Table 3.
Pearson r for University Students' Beliefs about FLL

	Variables	FLL	DLL	ME	LCS	NLL	
The reveals that correlation week, fact that them are significant. learning and	Foreign Language Learning	-	.118	.062	.208*	.053	above table all the values are despite the some of statistically The factor,
	The Difficulty of Language Learning	.118	-	.291**	.031	.075	
	Motivation and Expectations	.062	.291**	-	.153*	-.008	
	Learning and Communication Strategies	.208**	.031	.153*	-	.197*	
	The Nature of Language Learning	.053	.075	-.008	.197*	-	

communication strategies being used by the university students, are related with foreign language learning ($r=.208$), motivation and expectations ($r=.153$) and the nature of language learning ($r=.197$). More over difficulty of language learning is significantly related with motivation and expectations ($r=.291$).

Discussion

The data were analyzed from three different perspectives taken up in the present research. In the first place students' responses in terms of their beliefs about learning of English were examined. In the second place students' responses were examined in relation to the five components/subcategories labeled as factors in BALLI questionnaire, whereas in the third place the beliefs were investigated with reference to gender differences.

The results revealed that majority of the students of Sargodha University realize the importance of learning English for Pakistani people and believe that learning a foreign language requires a special ability. However, they considered some of the languages easier as compared to others. Most of the students think English can be best learned through repetition and practice which indicate their exposure to traditional method of learning through memorization and drills. Many students believe that language can be best learned through reading newspapers and magazines along with watching movies and listening to native audio cassettes. Moreover, it is also revealed that the students of Pakistani universities tend to underestimate the difficulty of English language learning as a few of them realize English language as difficult just as the learners in the studies by Horwits(1988) and Kern(1995). In both the studies the students have been found underestimating the difficulty of language.

On the five components of BALLI, the results have been found different from previous researches in different EFL contexts (e.g. Jafari & Shokrpour, 2012). Among five subcategories of BALLI, the strongest beliefs were about Learning and Communication Strategies followed by Motivation and Expectation, The Nature of Language Learning, Foreign Language Learning Aptitude and Difficulty of Language Learning. This can be related to the fact that communication strategies and skills are integral part of the scheme of studies offered to BS students in all disciplines. This indicates that the university students attach due importance to learning and communication strategies and consider them as important factor behind their success and actively engaged in communication activities. However, the weakest factor among all is the factor of the difficulty of language which indicates that the university students attach comparatively lesser importance to this factor by considering it not a very much difficult language.

On gender differences, similar to the findings of Mesri (2012) the results have shown statistically non-significant differences. Both males and females have shown strongest beliefs regarding learning and communication strategies with females showing slightly greater tendency towards this component, whereas, they have shown relatively weakest beliefs regarding the difficulty of language learning. As regard the difficulty of language, male students consider English more difficult as compared to the female students. Most of the females believe in the importance of reading newspapers, watching English films, repetition and practice as well as excellent pronunciation in second language learning. Whereas, male students believe more in the importance of translation, learning grammar and speaking of English in the process of learning English as a second language.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion it is ascertained that the undergraduate learners at UOS generally believe in the importance of communication strategies and tend to repeat and practice language chunks for communication purpose. In addition, many students believe that language can be best learned through reading newspapers and magazines along with watching movies and listening to native audio cassettes. Therefore, such type of activities may be focused to enhance the

language learning process. The university students tend to underestimate the difficulty of learning English as they don't consider it difficult to learn. This requires a more serious approach towards learning English by the teacher and the students. Pedagogically, these findings will help deepen our understanding of the nature of beliefs about language learner. There is much vacuum for the researchers on the language learning beliefs of Pakistani learners. Future studies may be conducted on the language learning beliefs of second language learners in relation to learning strategies as well as their academic performance.

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