

First Year University Students and What They Believe About Learning a Second Language

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ABSTRACT

The belief or beliefs about language learning play an important role in determining how students feel about language learning and the way they approach the language learning process. Because of this, it is important for language instructors to know the beliefs that their learners hold about language learning so that they would be better informed on how to guide the students to learn the language successfully. Studies on students' language learning beliefs have produced some inconsistent findings. As such, the purpose of this study is to address this issue and to add more knowledge to the field of students' language learning beliefs. 100 first year degree students who were taking a compulsory English course in a university campus located in northern Malaysia were involved in the study. A 34-item questionnaire was used to identify the students' beliefs about English language learning. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data. Findings indicated that the students considered language learning motivation and expectations as the most important belief dimension in language learning. They also hold various beliefs (beneficial or otherwise) regarding the language learning process. Appropriate actions must be taken by the language instructors to capitalize on the positive beliefs held by the students and eliminate the negative ones.

Keywords: Language learner beliefs, English language learning, university students

INTRODUCTION

Many students are unable to achieve fluency or mastery in English language even though they have learnt the language for many years. Various studies have been conducted to investigate the factors which contribute to Second Language (L2) learners' success and failure in learning English language. One of most investigated factors is the beliefs about language learning (Abdollahzadeh & Rajaeenia, 2024; Fujiwara, 2011; Truitt, 1995). According to Bidari (2021) and Mori (1999), the beliefs that the students have about language learning can affect the way they approach language learning. While many studies have investigated matters related to this topic, there appears to be some inconsistencies with regards to the findings. This study, therefore, is conducted to address this issue.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Beliefs about language learning

Beliefs can be defined as an individual's representations of the world regardless of whether it is true or not, right or wrong. With regards to language learning, various researchers (e.g. Horwitz, 1988; Wenden; 1987; Abraham & Vann, 1987; Yang, 1999) have pointed out the power of beliefs on students. In other words, beliefs have a great bearing on learning because what learners believe about the language learning process will influence the way they approach language learning (Horwitz, 1988; Ellis, 2008). For example, beliefs can influence students' choice of strategy use, motivation, expectation, experience, and actions, which can either help or interfere with the student learning process (Jelešković & Mulalić, 2024; Nola & Gurol, 2005).

In fact, research on language learning beliefs across various contexts has consistently pointed to a clear link between the beliefs held by learners and the strategies they choose. From her study of EFL learners in Taiwan, Yang (1999) suggested that there was a close relationship between learner beliefs and strategy. A study by Tang and Tian (2015) on Chinese EFL learners also found a relationship between language learning beliefs and strategies. Language learning beliefs are also known to play a significant role on learner autonomy. Due to that, Wenden (1986) and Coterall (1995) advocate the investigation of learner beliefs as a first step towards improving learner autonomy.

Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)

One of the most extensively used instruments for measuring the language learning beliefs of language learners is the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), a questionnaire developed by Elaine K. Horwitz in the 1980s, to measure the language learning beliefs of students in the United States of America (Bidari, 2021; Kuntz, 1996). The inventory contains 34 items with a *Likert*-like rating scale. It assesses student beliefs in five areas or dimensions: difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation and expectations. BALLI has been used widely and in different settings and contexts (as recommended by Horwitz, 1987, 1988, 1999). It has been used not only to assess student beliefs about learning English but also about learning other languages. While BALLI has been applied to many different contexts by researchers around the world, Horwitz (1988) herself cautions that BALLI was not intended to become the Master Blueprint of Learner Belief Systems especially because it was designed for the American students and that no effort was taken to include inventory of “idiosyncratic” beliefs and even common beliefs about language learning (p. 293).

Recent research on beliefs about language learning

Some of the more recent studies using Horwitz’s BALLI instrument were by Abd Majid and Ismail (2024), Baharum, Ismail, and Shauki (2024), Sun and Wudthayagorn (2024), Ghafor, Ahmad, and Mustafa (2022), and Abu Radwan (2022). In their study involving 258 Malaysian engineering undergraduates, Abd Majid and Ismail (2024) found that motivation and expectations was the highest scored dimension by the students. This was followed by nature of language learning, language aptitude, difficulty of language learning, and learning and communication strategies. The study by Baharum, Ismail, and Shauki (2024) involving 113 Malaysian TESL students reported that motivation and expectations was the highest scored dimension as well, followed by difficulty of language learning, nature of language learning, language aptitude, and learning and communication strategies. As for the study involving Chinese and Thai university students by Sun and Wudthayagorn (2024) the top three dimensions as rated by the students were the nature, aptitude, and difficulty of language learning. The study by Ghafor, Ahmad, and Mustafa (2022) revealed that the Kurdish EFL university students considered motivation and expectations as the most important belief dimension, followed by strategies, nature, aptitude, and finally ending with language learning difficulty. Finally, a study by Abu Radwan (2022) involving 173 undergraduates from a university in Oman showed that motivation and expectations was the highest rated dimension by the students, followed by nature, strategies, aptitude, and difficulty of language learning. A summary of the findings by the researchers is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Previous findings on belief dimensions

Researcher(s)	Ranking the five belief dimensions from High to Low				
Abd Majid & Ismail (2024)	Motivation	Nature	Aptitude	Difficulty	Strategies
Baharum, Ismail, & Shauki (2024)	Motivation	Difficulty	Nature	Aptitude	Strategies
Sun & Wudthayagorn (2024)	Nature	Aptitude	Difficulty	Not tested/reported	Not tested/reported
Ghafor, Ahmad, & Mustafa (2022)	Motivation	Strategies	Nature	Aptitude	Difficulty
Abu Radwan (2022)	Motivation	Nature	Strategies	Aptitude	Difficulty

As can be seen from the table, there appears to be some inconsistencies regarding the order of the belief dimensions. However, more studies need to be carried out before any conclusion can be made regarding this aspect.

As such, the purpose of this study is, therefore, to explore and learn more about the ideas that the students have about learning English language. The study addresses the following two questions: What are the opinions that the students have about learning English as a second language? Do the students share the same beliefs as the students mentioned in the previous studies? This study, on the beliefs of language learning, but in a different context and with a different set of students, is hoped to be able to contribute more knowledge regarding this topic and to uncover the pattern among the findings.

METHODOLOGY

The respondents

One hundred (N=100) university students located in northern Malaysia took part in the study. The students were business students. All of them were Malays. 19 (19%) were male and the rest were female students (81%). The students were in the first year of their degree program and were taking a compulsory English language course. They were between 20 and 25 years (mean age = 21.6 years). The majority of the participants (56%) were 22 years old.

The instrument

The instrument used in this study was a slightly amended version of Horwitz's (1988) Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), a 34-item self-reporting questionnaire, which sought to identify students' language learning beliefs in five dimensions: difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation and expectations.

32 of the statements required the students to read and rate each of the statement as it applies to their belief about language learning using a 5-point scale: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neither agree nor disagree (3), agree (4), and strongly agree (5). Two other items were in the form of multiple choice questions in which the respondents were required to indicate the difficulty level of the language they were learning and the time it would take to learn and become proficient in the new language. BALLI was used in this study because it has been recognized as a reliable instrument by many researchers (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2006).

As this study attempted to identify the students' beliefs regarding English language learning, some of the words and phrases in the original inventory were replaced with words and phrases which were more appropriate for the current investigation. Once the permission to collect data was received from the university, a pilot test was carried out with a group of students to ensure the comprehensibility of the modified questionnaire; to examine the reliability of the questionnaire and to check the amount of time required by the respondents to complete the questionnaire. The students reported that they did not have any problem understanding the items in the questionnaire. In terms of reliability, the Cronbach Alpha of the modified BALLI for the pilot study was 0.693. It was noted that it took approximately 20 minutes for the students to complete the questionnaire.

For the actual study, the questionnaires were distributed to the respondents (N=100) through their respective course instructors. A one page briefing and instruction was also attached to each of the questionnaire. Among others, it explained to the participants the objective of the study and that their participation in the study was confidential. The students were given ample time to read and respond to the items in the questionnaire. Once they had completed the questionnaires, the questionnaires were returned to their respective course instructors who then proceeded to give them back to the researcher.

Method of data analysis

The data collected was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. In the actual study in which 100 students were involved, the Cronbach Alpha for the modified BALLI was 0.663. Even though the value was slightly lower compared to the value reported for the pilot study ($r = 0.693$), the instrument was still regarded as a reliable instrument. This is because an alpha coefficient of 0.60 and above is still considered as acceptable (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Descriptive statistics, frequencies and percentages, were used to report the results.

FINDINGS

To assign meaning to the students' general beliefs about language learning, a mean score for each language learning dimension was computed from the five-point Likert scale. From the mean scores, the students' level of beliefs are categorized as: very weak belief (1.00 – 1.99), weak belief (2.00 – 2.99), neutral or moderate belief (3.00 – 3.99), strong belief (4.00 – 4.99), and very strong belief (5.0)

Table 2: General beliefs about language learning

Dimension	Mean	Std. Deviation
Difficulty of language learning	3.28	.30
Foreign language aptitude	3.42	.29
Nature of Language Learning	3.46	.36
Learning and communication strategies	3.40	.33
Motivation and expectations	4.37	.48
Overall	3.60	.24

From Table 2, it can be seen that the students have varying degrees of beliefs about language learning. The students show the strongest beliefs in the motivation and expectations dimension (mean score = 4.37; SD = .48). This indicates that the students believe that motivation and expectations in language learning is the most important factor in language learning. The next highest dimension is a cluster of the nature of language learning, language aptitude, and learning strategies. These three dimensions are clustered together since their mean scores are almost the same and/or very close to one another (e.g. 3.46, 3.42, and 3.40). This indicates that the students believe that the way one approaches language learning, the strategies used, and the natural aptitude that one has in terms of language learning, all play an important part in the language learning process. Finally, the lowest belief dimension as rated by the students is the difficulty of language learning. This implies that the students are optimistic that they would be able to learn and master the language despite the challenges that they face in learning the language.

The results from this study closely match the findings by Abd Majid and Ismail (2024). The first three highly rated dimensions are motivation and expectations, nature, and aptitude of language learning. In terms of the highest rated dimension, this study's finding, which is motivation and expectations, is the same as the findings by Abd Majid and Ismail (2024), Baharum, Ismail, and Shauki (2024), Ghafor, Ahmad, and Mustafa (2022), and Abu Radwan (2022). In terms of the lowest rated dimension, this study's finding, which is language learning difficulty, is the same as the findings by Ghafor, Ahmad, and Mustafa (2022), and Abu Radwan (2022). An updated table on the ranks of the beliefs dimension is given below.

Table 3: Ranking the belief dimensions (Updated)

Researcher(s)	Ranking the five belief dimensions from High to Low				
Ahmad (2026)	Motivation	Nature	Aptitude	Strategies	Difficulty
Abd Majid & Ismail (2024)	Motivation	Nature	Aptitude	Difficulty	Strategies
Baharum, Ismail, & Shauki (2024)	Motivation	Difficulty	Nature	Aptitude	Strategies

Sun & Wudthayagorn (2024)	Nature	Aptitude	Difficulty	Not tested/reported	Not tested/reported
Ghafor, Ahmad, & Mustafa (2022)	Motivation	Strategies	Nature	Aptitude	Difficulty
Abu Radwan (2022)	Motivation	Nature	Strategies	Aptitude	Difficulty

The following sections will provide more details regarding the students' opinion about each belief dimension.

The difficulty of language learning

Item 3, 6, 24, and 28 of the questionnaire sought to identify the respondents' beliefs regarding the difficulty of English language learning. Frequencies (f) and percentages (%) for each parameter (1+2, strongly disagree and disagree; 3, neither agree nor disagree; 4+5, agree and strongly agree) were calculated to show the level of agreement and/or disagreement of the aforementioned BALLI items. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Difficulty of language learning

Items	1+2		3		4+5		N
	f	%	f	%	f	%	
3. Some languages are easier to learn than others.	3	3	31	31	66	66	100
6. I believe that I will ultimately learn to speak English language very well.	3	3	30	30	67	67	100
24. It is easier to speak than to understand English language.	27	27	41	41	32	32	100
28. It is easier to read and write in English than to speak and understand it.	10	10	42	42	48	48	100

From the table, it can be seen that 66% of the students believe that languages differ in terms of the difficulty level of learning them (item 3). More than half (67%) are also positive that they will eventually be able to speak English language well (item 6). However, when it comes to determining which aspects of English language learning are more easy or more difficult (items 24 and 25), a sizable number of the students indicated that they were not sure (41% and 42% respectively). Only 32% of the respondents feel that it is easier to speak than to comprehend English language (item 24) and only 48% feel that it is easier to read and write in English than to speak and understand it.

The two multiple choice items in the questionnaire are also related to the difficulty of English language learning. Item 4 asks the respondents' opinion on the difficulty level of English language. 75% of the respondents feel that English language is a language of medium difficulty. As for item 14, it asks the students' opinion on how long it would take them to become fluent if they spend one hour a day learning the language. Slightly more than half (53%) believe that it will take them three to five years to become fluent in the language. 29% believe that it will take one to two years for them to become fluent in the language.

Foreign language aptitude

Items 1, 2, 10, 15, 22, 29, 32, 33, and 34 of the questionnaire sought to identify the respondents' beliefs regarding their aptitude for learning English language. Frequencies (f) and percentages (%) for each parameter (1+2, strongly disagree and disagree; 3, neither agree nor disagree; 4+5, agree and strongly agree) were calculated to show the level of agreement and/or disagreement of the aforementioned BALLI items. The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Aptitude for learning English language

Items	1+2		3		4+5		N
	f	%	f	%	f	%	
1. It is easier for children than adults to learn English language.	14	14	30	30	56	56	100
2. Some people are born with special ability which helps them learn English language.	18	18	22	22	60	60	100
10. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.	17	17	44	44	39	39	100
15. I have English language aptitude.	11	11	71	71	18	18	100
22. Women are better than men at learning English language.	31	31	52	52	17	17	100
29. People who are good at math and science are not good at learning English language.	56	56	29	29	15	15	100
32. People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.	3	3	16	16	81	81	100
33. Malaysians are good at learning English language.	5	5	36	36	59	59	100
34. Everyone can learn to speak English language.	1	1	5	5	94	94	100

From the table, it can be observed that 56% of the students feel that children will have an easier time than adults in learning the target language (item 1). 60% also believe that that some people are more ‘gifted’ than others in learning the language (item 2). 44% of the students, however, are not sure whether already being able to speak a foreign language will help a person to learn another one easily (item 10). Interestingly, 77% of the respondents also are not sure whether they have the aptitude to learn English language (item 15). As to whether women are better language learner than men (item 22), 52% indicated that they are not sure about it. More than half disagreed that people who are good at math and science are not good at learning English language (item 29). 81% of the respondents agree that people who can speak more than one language are very intelligent (item 32). Only 59% feel that Malaysians are good at learning English language (item 33). Another 36% are not so sure about it. An overwhelming majority (94%) believe that anyone can learn to speak the language (item 34).

The Nature of Language Learning

Items 5, 8, 11, 16, 20, 25, 26, and 28 of the questionnaire sought to identify the respondents’ beliefs regarding the nature of English language leaning. Frequencies (f) and percentages (%) for each parameter (1+2, strongly disagree and disagree; 3, neither agree nor disagree; 4+5, agree and strongly agree) were calculated to show the level of agreement and/or disagreement of the aforementioned BALLI items. The results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: The Nature of English Language Learning

Items	1+2		3		4+5		N
	f	%	f	%	f	%	
5. The language I am trying to learn, which is English language, is structured in the same way as the Malay Language.	34	34	30	30	36	36	100
8. It is necessary to know the English culture in order to speak English language.	17	17	32	32	51	51	100
11. It is better to learn English language in English-speaking countries like England, the USA, Australia and New Zealand than in Malaysia.	39	39	33	33	28	28	100

16. Learning English language is mostly a matter of learning many new vocabulary words.	3	3	15	15	82	82	100
20. Learning English language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules.	2	2	15	15	83	83	100
25. Learning English language is different from learning other subjects.	8	8	32	32	60	60	100
26. Learning English language is mostly a matter of translating from and to Malay Language.	28	28	37	37	35	35	100
28. It is easier to read and write in English than to speak and understand it.	10	10	42	42	48	48	100

Even though the students feel that it is necessary to know the native speakers culture in order to speak the language (item 8), they also feel that it is not necessarily better to learn the language in native speakers' countries (item 11). This is probably because a large majority of them seem to feel that learning English language is predominantly learning grammar (item 20) and vocabulary (item 16). In terms of the similarity between English language and Malay language (item 5), the students seem to be equally divided in their opinion. Only 36% agree with the statement. 34%, on the other hand, disagree. The remaining 30% neither agree nor disagree. This uncertainty is also apparent in their responses to item 26 in which learning English language is mostly a matter of translating from and to Malay language. The majority of the respondents, however, agree that learning English is different from learning other subjects (item 25). However, when they are asked to rate which skills are easier, almost half of the respondents indicate that reading and writing is easier than speaking.

Learning and Communication Strategies

Items 7, 9, 12, 13, 17, 18, 19, and 21 of the questionnaire sought to identify the respondents' beliefs regarding English language learning and communication strategies. Frequencies (f) and percentages (%) for each parameter (1+2, strongly disagree and disagree; 3, neither agree nor disagree; 4+5, agree and strongly agree) were calculated to show the level of agreement and/or disagreement of the aforementioned BALLI items. The results are shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Learning and Communication Strategies

Items	1+2		3		4+5		N
	f	%	f	%	f	%	
7. It is important to speak English language with excellent accent.	3	3	18	18	79	79	100
9. You should not say anything in English language until you can say it correctly.	76	76	16	16	8	8	100
12. If I hear someone speaking the language I am trying to learn which is English language, I would go up to them so that I could practice speaking English language.	8	8	32	32	60	60	100
13. It is okay to guess if you do not know a word in English language.	29	29	25	25	46	46	100
17. It is important to repeat and practice often.	0	0	9	9	91	91	100
18. I feel self-conscious speaking English language in front of other people.	9	9	37	37	54	54	100
19. If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning, it will be hard to get rid of them later on.	33	33	36	36	31	31	100
21. It is important to practice in the language laboratory.	9	9	35	35	56	56	100

Items 17 and 21 assess students' beliefs regarding language learning strategies. Items 7, 9, 12, 13, 18, and 19, on the other hand, assess students' beliefs regarding the communication strategies.

When it comes to language learning strategies, 91% of the respondents believe in the value of constant repeat and practice of what they learn. More than half (56%) also believe that language laboratory plays an important role in helping them to practice using the language. 35% however neither agree nor disagree about the importance of practicing in the language laboratory.

As for communication strategies, 79% of the students believe that it is very important for them to speak English language with an excellent accent. 76% disagree that they should not say anything in the target language until they can say it correctly. It is heartening to see that more than half of the respondents indicate that they would approach English speaking people in order to practice speaking in the language. However, they seem to contradict themselves when more than half admit that they feel self conscious speaking the language in front of other people. 46% believe that it is okay to guess when they do not know a word in English language. However, when it comes to item 19 in which they are asked whether it is alright for them to be allowed to make mistakes in the beginning, there seem to be an almost equal distribution among the three parameters: 33% disagree, 36% are not sure, and 31% agree.

Motivations and Expectations

Items 23, 27, 30, and 31 of the questionnaire sought to identify the respondents' motivations and expectations of English language learning. Frequencies (f) and percentages (%) for each parameter (1+2, strongly disagree and disagree; 3, neither agree nor disagree; 4+5, agree and strongly agree) were calculated to show the level of agreement and/or disagreement of the aforementioned BALLI items. The results are shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Motivations and Expectations of English language learning

Items	1+2		3		4+5		N
	f	%	f	%	f	%	
23. If I speak English language very well, I will have many opportunities to use it.	2	2	3	3	95	95	100
27. If I learn to speak English language very well it will help me get a good job.	0	0	5	5	95	95	100
30. Malaysians think that it is important to speak English language.	0	0	9	9	91	91	100
31. I would like to learn English language so that I can get to know its native speakers better.	0	0	11	11	89	89	100

When it comes to aspects of motivations and expectations of English language learning, unlike the previous four areas, a clear majority of the respondents indicated that they agree and strongly agree with all the items in this particular area.

95% of the respondents believe that they will have many opportunities to use the language if they are able to speak it well (item 23). 95% of them also believe that being able to speak the language very well will help them to get a good job (item 27). This view appears to be consistent with their belief regarding the importance of being able to speak English language among Malaysians (91%; item 30). Finally, 89% of the respondents indicated that they would like to learn the language in order to get to know its native speakers better (item 31).

CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study is to identify and describe the beliefs about learning English as a second language among first year university students from northern Malaysia. Horwitz's (1988) BALLI was used as

the primary instrument for collecting data. Approximately 100 students were recruited as respondents for the study.

Findings revealed that in terms of ranking the belief dimensions, the highest rated dimension is motivation and expectations, and the lowest rated dimension is difficulty of language learning. Findings also revealed that the majority of the students are optimistic and aspire to be able to speak English well even though they are not sure whether they have the aptitude for language learning or not. Still, they believe that practicing and repeating what they learn is the key to their eventual success. Unfortunately, the students are setting themselves up for unnecessary stress and maybe even an eventual disappointment in their language learning endeavour. This is because they believe that they should not say anything in the target language until they can say it correctly and with an excellent accent! No wonder many of them feel self-conscious when speaking in front of other people.

From this study, we can conclude that students do come to class with the right intention which is to learn and being able to speak the language well. But, some erroneous beliefs about language learning that they have might deter them from being able to achieve their ambition. By being aware of their belief systems, an instructor would be better able to provide the advice and guidance that the students need (Horwitz, 2020) so that they would discard the erroneous beliefs that they have and instead adopt the right mindset and beliefs which would lead them to success in their language learning endeavour.

There are several limitations to this study. The number of students selected for this study is small (N=100), the students belong in the same program (business studies), of the same ethnicity (Malays), and they come from the same university. This limits the generalizability of the findings. Future studies could use a bigger number of respondents, involve students from various ethnicities, study programs, and universities. Future research also could focus on uncovering the possible reasons or explanations behind the various beliefs held by the students (using qualitative research methodology) as well as to produce a more up-to-date inventory about students' language learning beliefs.

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