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An insight into secondary school students' beliefs regarding learning English language

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Abstract: The present descriptive study aimed to get an insight into secondary school students' beliefs regarding English language learning. The survey method was employed for obtaining data from the secondary school students ($N = 664$). A modified version of "beliefs about language learning inventory" was used to collect data. Five out of nine towns of Lahore and then four public schools from each town were selected by using area sampling. Results showed that secondary school students had a broad range of beliefs. Students had strong instrumental motivation for learning English language. However, they varied drastically in their beliefs about the difficulty of learning English. It was revealed that science students held stronger beliefs in terms of motivation, importance, and easiness. Further, girls were more motivated than boys to learn English language; were more concerned about its importance and considered English language easy to learn. The study indicated a difference in beliefs about language learning by gender and academic major. Curriculum designers, decision-makers, and language instructors must be aware of learners' beliefs which can provide guidance for effective curriculum, decision, and instruction.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fakhra Aziz is an assistant professor in Institute of Education, Lahore College for Women University. Her focus is on issues related to quality of teaching and learning processes. The research reported in the current paper presents students perceptions related to language learning which are most important to understand their higher order thinking skills. She has been involved in researches related to teachers' professional development, impact of training on teachers' motivation and competencies, students' learning disabilities, student teacher relationship, and gender based issues. She has been taught educational leadership and educational psychology at MS level and modules based on research methods at Bed and BS level.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Beliefs are a central construct in every discipline, which deal with human behavior and learning. Like in many Asian countries, English is not the first language of Pakistani students, yet it is the medium of education for most students. Therefore it has become a serious issue to understand, and analyze students' beliefs regarding learning of English language. This study was developed to probe students' beliefs regarding learning of English language. Data was collected by distributing Beliefs about Language Learning Instrument among 664 secondary school students. It presents a clear and complete picture of students' beliefs regarding language learning. The study reported that majority of secondary school students believed that being proficient in English is crucial for their success and future performance. Gender and major academic was found to be influential for learning. To get a more comprehensive evidence of secondary school students' beliefs, more studies must be carried out using other methods of research like interviews, observation, diaries, or longitudinal procedures.

Subjects: Education; Secondary Education; Teaching & Learning - Education; Educational Psychology

Keywords: beliefs; language learning; difficulty level; nature of learning

1. Introduction

English is not the national language of Pakistan, but it is widely used in all economic, educational, business, and social sectors of the country. Ghani (2003) rightly said that English in Pakistan is a prerequisite either for higher education or for white collar jobs. English serves as a tool for international communication and collaboration, and is the lingua franca for the people of different provinces. A number of factors have been reported that influence the process of language learning, among which attitude, motivation, interest, need, previous experience, knowledge, and above all beliefs and perceptions of the students about learning language are significant (Hosseini & Pourmandnia, 2013). The complex nature and difficulty in defining beliefs has been a controversial theme for researchers. Horwitz (1985) reported that learners' beliefs deeply affect their ability in the classroom. Breen (2001) concluded that the learning process and students' achievement are results of their beliefs, attitudes, and metacognitive knowledge that students bring with them in the class. Yang's (1999) results elucidated cyclic relationships between learners' beliefs and the strategies they applied as well as the final success in learning English. Oxford (2003) stressed upon the importance of educators' awareness of the strategies used by learners. He opined that teachers' high concern for students' particular styles can maximize harmony between teaching instruction and students' preferences. Jernigan (2001) recognized a dire need to acknowledge the effect of motivation on learners' beliefs from the teachers' side for nurturing constant motivation for language learning. Altan (2006) supported the endorsement and said that understanding of learners' beliefs leads teachers toward developing an attitude of specific pedagogy so that students can get maximum benefit.

For the last few decades, researchers have tried to evaluate individual differences. These individual differences affect the learners' emotions, feelings, attitudes, anxieties, perceptions, and motivation (Ellis, 1994).

Different versions of the Beliefs about Language Learning Instrument (BALLI) have been used to identify and explore learners' beliefs about language learning. Bernat (2004) investigated learners' beliefs by using BALLI and reported that the majority of respondents agreed on the importance of repeating and practising the target language, as well as on the fact that English proficiency likely leads to greater job opportunities. Further, the importance of good pronunciation was recognized by eighty percent of learners.

Chung (1999) investigated the impact of former beliefs of learners on comprehension of second language listeners. He reported no significant impact. Shimo (2002) found that students with good pronunciation were better listeners. Chiou (2006) found that students' emphasis was on perfect English pronunciation while teachers reported the need to comprehend spoken English. Diab's (2000) findings uncovered a number of commonalities and divergent views of the participants. Results showed that most of the participants found learning French to be difficult, but learning English to be easy. Most French students believed that language is best learnt in its native land. The researcher attributed these differences among the groups to be a result of their beliefs related to learning foreign languages.

Research shows that learners who had positive beliefs, such as viewing a target language to be easy, were generally successful as compared to their counterparts. Learners who believed language learning is an inborn gift, faced difficulty in acquiring proficiency. Similarly, learners who believed that learning is a speedy process took fewer risks and did not learn much from their mistakes. On the other hand, more daring learners viewed language learning as difficult, tended to make more mistakes, but found the process enjoyable.

In view of the important status of English in Pakistan, much time and energy of the learners, teachers and researchers have been spent on trying to make English learning and teaching more effective. It has been observed for many decades that many secondary school students perform well in other subjects, but fail in the subject of compulsory English which leads to their dropout. Many efforts regarding the training of English teachers have been reported, but there is a need to do more. In the past, efforts were mainly focused on pedagogy, while students' learning strategies and their beliefs about English language learning were ignored. However, in the current scenario, realizing the importance of affective factors, educational research in second and foreign language learning and teaching is gradually turning toward the investigation of the beliefs and conceptions of language learners and language teachers. In this context, the present study was planned to get an insight into secondary school students' beliefs regarding English language learning.

Though the main aim of this study was to explore secondary school students' beliefs about English language learning, a particular aim was to investigate the effects of gender and academic majors on students' beliefs. The study specifically tends to identify the particular beliefs and effects of two important demographical variables for their performance in English. The research also explores the most common and least common beliefs regarding language learning. Keeping these aims in mind, the following research questions were made to achieve the objectives of the study:

- (1) What kinds of beliefs do secondary school students hold regarding English language learning?
- (2) Are there any differences between the beliefs of boys and girls?
- (3) Are there any differences between the beliefs of science students and arts students?

2. Methodology

Beliefs about the Language Learning Instrument (BALLI) was modified and adopted. It was originally developed by Horwitz (1987) for the assessment of learners' beliefs regarding language acquisition. The instrument was frequently used in many researches, and its reliability and validity have been verified statistically from context to context (Horwitz, 1999). Items regarding individual background were added as a separate part above the BALLI statements. BALLI was translated into Urdu by two independent language experts and administered to students. The translated and modified BALLI was administered to students belonging to Government Model Secondary School, E Block, for a pilot study. Reliability analysis was done; Alpha Value was found to be 0.73. Five easily accessible towns out of nine main towns of Lahore were selected for conducting the study. Institutions in each selected town were divided into secondary schools for boys and girls. The secondary schools for boys and girls were selected randomly. A sample size of approximately 664 students from secondary classes was calculated. A considerable sample of students from the arts and science groups was then purposefully selected from each school. Science students represented 54% of respondents, while arts students represented 46%. The target population consisted of all enrolled boys and girls from grades nine and ten in the secondary schools of Ravi Town, Shalimar Town, Gulberg Town, Samanabad Town, and Iqbal Town.

3. Data analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Science, version 17 was used to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics like frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were calculated to summarize the opinions. Data was also cross tabulated to find out the beliefs by gender and by academic majors. T-test was applied to find out the difference between cohorts.

4. Results

Among 664 secondary school students, 450 were boys and 214 were girls. The major academic area of 46% participants was Humanities and of 54% was science. About 74% boys and 80% girls believed that proficiency in English is very important, while only 1.4% boys and 0.4% girls thought it is not important at all.

Descriptive statistics reported gender differences too. Both groups took their future considerations as the most important reason behind learning English. Boys perceived more importance for learning English for their examinations than girls. On the other hand, more girls learned English due to their interest in culture than boys. The least reported reason for learning language by boys was their interest in culture, whereas by girls it was needed for traveling.

4.1. Descriptive statistics of the beliefs about language learning inventory

Descriptive analysis including mean, standard deviations, and frequency of students' responses for the inventory was done. The inventory had five categories.

A descriptive analysis for each category was carried out independently. At the end, the overall inventory was analyzed. Although participants were asked to respond on a 5-point Likert scale, for the purpose of interpretation, two points i.e. strongly agree and agree were merged into a single point i.e. agree. Similarly, strongly disagree and disagree were also merged into disagree after calculating simple descriptive statistics.

4.1.1. Foreign language aptitude

The majority of secondary school students (87%) opined that children can learn language more easily than adults. Having a special ability for learning a foreign language is important according to 79% of the students. Further, 49% of the secondary school students showed confidence in having a special ability for learning a foreign language. Forty-three percent (43%) of secondary school students thought that Pakistanis are good learners of foreign languages. Less than half of the secondary school students (41%) believed that a prior knowledge of a foreign language helps people to learn another foreign language more easily. However, 43% of secondary school students did not agree to this idea. A vast majority of the students (67%) was confused about linking language acquisition and other subjects like science or mathematics. Only 18% of students thought that people good at science or mathematics have weaker language skills. Thirty-seven percent (37%) of students felt that males are better at learning foreign languages than females. There was a consensus (68%) on the statement that intelligent people are proficient in more than one language. Forty-four percent (44%) of students thought that foreign languages can be learnt by any one.

4.1.2. The difficulty of language learning

Regarding language acquisition, the majority of students (77%) believed that ease in language acquisition varies from language to language. It can be concluded that according to these students, different languages have different difficulty levels. Only 42% students opined that speaking English was easier than understanding it while 39% thought against it, while a significant proportion of students (19%) were confused on this point. It has revealed that not more than 5% students felt English is a very difficult language; 33% felt English as a medium level difficult language, while more than half (52%) secondary school students considered English as an easy language.

According to 75% secondary school students, it would take them less than a year to get good proficiency by spending one hour daily on language learning. Only 12% of students thought that spending 1 h daily on learning language is insufficient for gaining proficiency. Comprehending a language is considered an easier skill than speaking by 42% of students, while 39% of students opined against it. When these secondary school students were asked about the easiness in acquiring language skills, the majority (61%) reported that speaking and understanding English is more difficult than reading and writing.

4.1.3. The nature of language learning

There were six statements regarding the nature of language learning. Forty-nine percent (49%) of students perceived languages as being context specific, and the knowledge of English culture being helpful in the acquisition of English-speaking skills. The importance of having a good vocabulary in language learning was supported by a significant majority (76%). A large number (77%) of students agreed on the importance of grammar in language acquisition. The majority of students (65%)

recognized foreign language acquisition phenomenon as different from learning other school subjects. Translation to or from English in language acquisition was considered most important by seventy percent (70%) of secondary school students. Only fifteen percent (15%) had reservations about the notion.

4.1.4. Learning and communication strategies

Data analysis of the category “learning and communication strategies” revealed that the importance of an excellent pronunciation for speaking English is recognized by the majority (74%) of students. However, 58% of them reported that they wanted to speak English with accuracy otherwise they preferred to avoid communication in English.

Eighty percent (80%) of the secondary school students perceived it good to practise English with native English speakers, while 45% volunteered to guess the meanings of unfamiliar words in English, and 85% students acknowledged the importance of frequent repetition and practice in abundance for reaching proficiency. Conversely, 60% of the students felt shy while communicating in English. Seventy percent (70%) students opined that letting students make errors in the beginning cause problems in acquiring proficiency later on. More than half of them (56%) recommended the importance of practising with the help of CDs or audio tapes.

4.1.5. Motivation and expectations

Secondary school students showed a positive attitude toward all the statements. The majority (82%) of participants showed a strong confidence in their capability for getting good proficiency in English language. They (69%) agreed that people in Pakistan know the importance of having a good proficiency in English. Half (52%) of the secondary school students showed interest in having English-speaking friends from other countries.

Simple descriptive statistics for the five categories of the instrument are presented below in Table 1. It has been found that secondary school students have the strongest beliefs regarding “motivation and expectation” ($M = 3.759$, $SD = 0.81$), while their beliefs regarding “difficulty of language learning” ($M = 3.158$, $SD = 0.5509$) are the weakest. The order of powerful beliefs is as follows:

MOT > NILL > LCS > FLA > DLL

Table 2 indicates the most common belief statements which are strongly endorsed by students.

S3 “some languages are easier to learn than others” from DLL, S1 “easier for children than adults” from FLA, S21 “The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning its grammar” from NLL, S16 “It is important to repeat and practise a lot” from LCS and S29 “I want to learn to speak English well” from MOT appeared within high mean range. These statements are also representative of the students’ overall beliefs regarding language learning.

There are only two statements representing the least common and weakly endorsed beliefs. S34 from DLL “If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take them to speak the language well: (1) less than a year (2) 1–2 years (3) 3–5 years (4) 5–10 years (5) you can’t

Table 1. Summary of means and standard deviation of respondents

| Beliefs | Mean | SD |
|---------|------|-------|
| DLL | 3.15 | 0.550 |
| FLA | 3.19 | 0.533 |
| NLL | 3.54 | 0.712 |
| LCS | 3.39 | 0.667 |
| MOT | 3.75 | 0.819 |
| Overall | 3.39 | 0.428 |

Table 2. Beliefs with high mean range (M: 3.5 or above)

| Categories | Statement no | Mean | SD |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|------|-------|
| Difficulty of language learning | S3 | 3.83 | 1.045 |
| | S1 | 4.00 | 0.958 |
| Foreign language aptitude | S2 | 3.79 | 0.981 |
| | S28 | 3.67 | 1.180 |
| | S15 | 3.98 | 1.092 |
| Nature of language learning | S21 | 4.02 | 1.057 |
| | S25 | 3.51 | 1.127 |
| | S26 | 3.66 | 1.039 |
| | S6 | 4.03 | 1.128 |
| Learning and communication strategies | S12 | 3.90 | 1.024 |
| | S16 | 4.19 | 1.017 |
| | S20 | 3.63 | 1.220 |
| | S4 | 4.15 | 0.992 |
| Motivation and expectations | S18 | 3.79 | 1.165 |
| | S22 | 3.67 | 1.194 |
| | S27 | 4.14 | 1.052 |
| | S29 | 4.32 | 0.979 |
| | S10 | 3.33 | 1.035 |

Table 3. Beliefs with low mean range (M: 2.4 or below)

| | Item no | Statements | Mean | SD |
|-----|---------|---|------|-------|
| DLL | 34 | If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take them to speak the language well | 1.90 | 1.035 |
| FLA | 10 | People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning a foreign language | 2.38 | 1.108 |

learn a language in 1 h a day?” (M: 1.90) and S10 from FLA item: “People who are good at math and science are not good at learning foreign languages” (M: 2.38) were two least recognized beliefs. The other three categories of BALLI have no single statement which falls within the “low belief range” (Table 3).

4.2. The effect of gender on beliefs about language learning

A gender-wise comparison of students’ beliefs, based on mean and standard deviation is presented in Table 4. Both boys and girls had strong perceived beliefs for motivation and expectation category. The findings indicate that boys exhibited stronger beliefs about the DLL, whereas girls were more motivated to learn English and showed stronger beliefs about all the remaining four categories. On the whole, girls (M = 3.43) possessed comparatively stronger beliefs than boys (M = 3–33). There is a significant difference between the mean scores of both groups on BALLI.

Results in Table 5 indicate a significant difference between the belief score of boys and girls. It has been inferred that boys are less inclined toward learning language than girls.

4.3. The effects of academic majors on beliefs about language learning

Table 6 presents a comparison of belief scores of arts and science students. Both arts and science students perceived strong beliefs for motivation and expectation. Further, science students scored more than arts students. The least score based belief category was DLL. The overall belief score of science students (M = 3.4) was higher than arts students (M = 3.29).

Table 4. Mean & standard deviations of beliefs by gender

| | Categories | Boys | | Girls | |
|---|---------------------------------------|------|-------|-------|-------|
| | | M | SD | M | SD |
| 1 | Difficulty of language learning | 3.04 | 0.602 | 3.01 | 0.521 |
| 2 | Foreign language aptitude | 3.12 | 0.591 | 3.19 | 0.488 |
| 3 | Nature of language learning | 3.49 | 0.729 | 3.48 | 0.681 |
| 4 | Learning and communication strategies | 3.35 | 0.653 | 3.58 | 0.610 |
| 5 | Motivations and expectations | 3.58 | 0.826 | 3.91 | 0.772 |
| | Overall | 3.33 | 0.527 | 3.43 | 0.461 |

Table 5. Belief score of boys and girls

| Groups | N | Mean | SD | df | t-value | p | d |
|--------|-----|------|-------|-----|---------|---------|--------|
| Boys | 450 | 3.33 | 0.527 | 517 | 4.421 | 0.000** | 0.496* |
| Girls | 214 | 3.43 | 0.461 | | | | |

*p < 0.05.

**Cohen's d was calculated by using means & standard deviations of the two groups.

Table 6. Mean and standard deviations of beliefs by academic majors

| | Categories | Arts | | Science | |
|---|---------------------------------------|------|------|---------|------|
| | | M | SD | M | SD |
| 1 | Difficulty of language learning | 2.90 | 0.59 | 3.09 | 0.54 |
| 2 | Foreign language aptitude | 3.09 | 0.54 | 3.20 | 0.55 |
| 3 | Nature of language learning | 3.39 | 0.69 | 3.50 | 0.69 |
| 4 | Learning and communication strategies | 3.40 | 0.59 | 3.50 | 0.63 |
| 5 | Motivations and expectations | 3.61 | 0.79 | 3.79 | 0.79 |
| | Overall | 3.29 | 0.50 | 3.41 | 0.49 |

Table 7. Total belief score of arts and science students

| Groups | N | Mean | SD | df | t-value | p | d |
|---------|-----|------|------|-----|---------|---------|--------|
| Arts | 302 | 3.29 | 0.50 | 507 | 3.42 | 0.000** | 0.486* |
| Science | 350 | 3.41 | 0.49 | | | | |

*p < 0.05.

**Cohen's d was calculated by using means & standard deviations of the two groups.

Results in Table 7 indicate a significant difference between the total score of arts students and science students. It can be concluded that science students are more inclined toward learning English language than arts students.

5. Discussion

The present study presents a clear and complete portrait of secondary school students' beliefs regarding language learning. These students had strong beliefs about learning English language. Their beliefs were significantly affected by gender and academic majors. The present results are not hundred percent in line with or against a number of research studies already conducted in the area in different parts of the world like America, Taiwan, Korea, Turkey, and Lebanon. Siebert (2003), Kim Yoon (2000) in Korea and Diab (2000) in Lebanon reported almost similar results regarding students' beliefs. Gender-wise, students showed different beliefs regarding language. Similarly, students from

different academic majors appeared with different responses. The reason for science students having stronger beliefs may be their language-based major academics. Studies have made it clear that student' beliefs or perceptions are context specific, and change with learning contexts. The present study presented a useful memento regarding the effects of gender and academic major on students' beliefs about learning the English language.

Secondary school students held different types of beliefs. The "motivation and expectation" category was the most strongly endorsed category. This finding is consistent with the findings of Hong (2006), Diab (2000), Kim Yoon (2000), Park (1995), and Truitt (1995).

The importance of speaking English was admitted by a majority of students who strongly believed that spoken English would be learnt well by them. They agreed that for finding better jobs, competence in English is necessary. On the other hand, it was alarming that the majority of students wanted to know English to pass exams, and not to learn the language.

Erdoğan (2005) and Borg (2006) found that a learner's motivation is important for learning a language. The least endorsed category in the present research was "difficulty in English language learning." Students considered English as a difficult language or a language of average difficulty level. These results are again in line with the results of Diab (2000), Kim Yoon (2000), Kunt (1997), Park (1995), Truitt (1995), and Yang (1992). Another important point is that gender and academic majors have significantly influenced students' beliefs.

6. Recommendations

Results of the present study provide the following recommendations:

- (1) The present research provides a comprehensive evidence of secondary school students' beliefs related to English language learning, mainly through self-reporting questionnaires. Thus, more studies need to be carried out using other methods of research like interviews, observation, diaries, or longitudinal procedures so that wide-ranging beliefs of secondary school students in Pakistan may be studied.
- (2) Same researches should be conducted at different levels (higher secondary, graduation, etc.).
- (3) The influence of learners' backgrounds such as ethnicities, medium of instruction, and mother tongue can also be explored.

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