

Students' Language Learning Beliefs and other Aspects that Affect Their Achievement

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Received: Dec. 13, 2017 Accepted: December 20, 2017 Published: December 27, 2017

doi:10.5296/ijl.v9i6.12294 URL: <https://doi.org/10.5296/ijl.v9i6.12294>

Abstract

Studies have revealed that language learners' beliefs affect their language learning (White, 2008). Mori (1999) found significant correlation between beliefs and achievement in her study of American college students studying Japanese. This study investigates language students with very similar beliefs, but different level of achievement in a language test. Findings reveal that besides the students' beliefs, other aspects such as students' language learning background could also affect their achievement.

Keywords: Language students, Students' beliefs, Learning background

1. Introduction

English in Mexico is now the main foreign language taught within its educational system, and it comes across the curriculum of several Higher Education Institutions. This study investigates how the beliefs of two groups of Higher Education students in Western Mexico have affected their language knowledge. The paper does a brief literature review of studies which investigate the influence that learners' beliefs have over their language learning. It also analyses the beliefs of students with different level of achievement on a language test, aiming to find out how the beliefs of these two opposing groups affect their language learning. Other aspects concerning the students' background language learning are also analysed to determine if they also have any consequence upon their learning.

2. Students' Beliefs about Their Language Learning

The findings of research studies in the field of language learning strategies have revealed that those learners who approach cognitive and metacognitive behaviours differently obtain more successful results (Wenden, 1986; Chamot, 2005; Abhakorn, 2008). The employment of strategies also helps less successful language learners improve their performance (Zare, 2012).

Different case studies have employed learning strategies as a method of helping language learners increase their learning efficiency (Yang, 1999; Yilmaz, 2010; Ungureanu and Georgescu, 2012). Bruen (2001) found out that the more proficient students use a greater number of language learning strategies in a more structured and purposeful manner, and apply them to a wider range of situations and tasks; this result was found during a study the researcher conducted with 100 second year students of German. Likewise, Pearson (1988) carried out a project that revealed that successful Japanese speakers of English use specific strategies to learn and communicate. The study identified the conditions under which men on long-term job assignments used English and characterize in general terms their lifestyles while living and working outside Japan. Research findings made known the relevance of global strategies, in which learners create practice opportunities with native speakers.

Like strategies, beliefs underpinning the choice of learning strategy to use could also become an influential factor for success or failure during learning, meaning that what learners believe about language learning in general, or language learning strategies in particular might influence learners' performance. Support for this comes from Peackon (1999, p. 247) who states that 'Foreign language learning is almost certainly the subject of many firm beliefs and convictions (...) around the world, and these beliefs almost certainly affect language learning'. In addition, Horwitz (1987, p. 120) pointed out that 'students' beliefs about language learning is an important step toward understanding the etiology of learning strategies'. Mori (1999, p. 378) also reported that 'what students consider to be an effective strategy significantly influences their use of strategies'. And Horwitz (1999, p. 557) added that 'Understanding learner beliefs about language learning is essential to understand learner strategies and planning appropriate language instruction'. Horwitz (1999) found that EFL learners and foreign language learners in the U.S. had different beliefs about their motivation for language learning. The EFL learners learned English because of instrumental motivation

while foreign language learners learned the target language because of integrative motivation. Similarly, Vibulphol (2004) conducted a study to investigate beliefs about language learning of pre-service EFL teachers in Thailand, among all the results the researcher found that the majority of the participants responded that the main reasons why they wanted to learn English was because they wanted to have friends from other countries, and learn about English speakers, integrative motivation. Respondents also mentioned that they wanted to learn English because it was important for communication, for Higher Education, for information access and for job opportunity, instrumental motivation.

Trinder (2013) have shown how language learning is affected by learners' beliefs as shown in a report based on the responses from an ESL group to an iconic instrument to assess students' beliefs about language learning, Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), (Horwitz, 1987). The Likert-scale questionnaire assessed beliefs about language learning in four different areas: foreign language attitude, the difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, and language learning strategies. The Horwitz (1987) made some revealing findings at some revealing conclusions:

- erroneous beliefs about language learning lead to less effective language learning strategies
- (...) knowledge of student belief systems may be particularly useful [to] confront erroneous beliefs with new information
- (...) a systematic assessment of student beliefs would greatly facilitate learning
- (...) just as the assessment of the linguistic background (p. 126-127).

Using their own instruments other researchers have investigated the topic with similar results. For example, Mori (1999) found significant correlation between beliefs and achievement in her study of American college students studying Japanese. The researcher administered a questionnaire to assess beliefs about language learning in six different areas: difficulty, analytical approach, risk taking, avoidance of ambiguity, easiness, and reliance on L1. The investigator discovered that, even at a modest level, on a statistical basis beliefs were significantly related to achievement. She also reported that

- a) learners who consider a target language easy are more likely to outperform those who view it as being difficult.
- b) students who accept multiple, ambiguous answers are more likely to better understand course materials than those who seek unambiguous clear-cut answers.
- c) students who generally believe that the ability to learn is innately fixed tend to attain lower proficiency in a foreign language (p. 398-399).

Another illustrative study conducted by Trinder (2013) at the Vienna University of Economics and Business revealed that students from a specific area of study, such as Economics and Business, have more in common than their choice of discipline. For instance, they were highly tolerant of ambiguity and willing to communicate; since having an introverted or shy personality could interfere with communication. A second assessment area was the impact of new teaching context on conceptions of learning, approaches, and strategies, considering that in many Austrian universities international students outnumber

native ones. In this respect in particular respondents' notions on how languages are best learnt stress the benefits of exposure to the target language, ideally in immersion settings, and learning through oral communication' (Trinder, 2013, p. 9). A third variable the study focused on was the differences between more and less successful students. Students expressed their understanding of the key aspects for successful language learning, for example: 'achieving their aims, adopting an active approach and adapting their preferred learning style to suit the occasion (...); whereas unsuccessful students reacted with disillusionment and the adoption of minimalistic surface approaches' (p. 9), which means that they did not actively search for opportunities outside the language classes.

3. The Study

The studies stated above have revealed that language students who employ learning strategies improve their performance, and also that the beliefs learners have on their own language learning process affect their learning achievement. Even though there is evidence which supports these claims, it is appropriate to investigate other aspects affecting students' language learning such as students' language learning background.

English in Mexico is now the main foreign language taught within its educational system, as it is part of the curriculum of lower secondary, upper secondary education, and several Higher Education Institutions. The educational level chosen to conduct the research was Higher Education. The subjects chosen for this study were undergraduate Economics, International Trade and Finance learners who belong to the Faculty of Economics at the University of Colima. A Faculty in the University of Colima is a group of University study programmes concerned with a major division of knowledge.

The Faculty of Economics was chosen as it has a long-established history of teaching languages, as well as many other Faculties at the University of Colima. Many of the skills and learning tasks undertaken on the courses reflect more general academic English skills and so the context can be classified more specifically as English for academic purposes.

4. Participants

Students at the Faculty of Economics must study English as a foreign language during their four years. The participants of the study have studied English before coming to the University as previously stated; children in Mexico start studying English in lower secondary and continue in upper secondary. Furthermore, the students must take an English examination as an entry requirement to the Faculty.

The primary selection of student participants in the study was based on the records the Faculty had of the students' performance on the English entry test; the strengths and weaknesses of the learners about language knowledge. In other words, they were purposeful or purposive selected (Dörnyei, 2007). This is what Hutchinson and Waters (1987) refer to as 'lacks' (p. 55), what the learner knows or doesn't know about the language.

To investigate the students' language knowledge and their beliefs the study followed the research questions below.

5. Research Questions

- What were the grades achieved by learners on the language test?
- How similar/different were learners' beliefs?
- To what extent did learners' beliefs affect their language learning'?
- What other aspects or situations affected learners' language learning?

6. The Language Test

The test the Faculty administers is the Business English Certificate (BEC) preliminary sample papers. It is administered through the English language teaching department of the University. Even the department is not an authorized Cambridge English examination centre; they followed a formal protocol an authentic examination procedure.

The BEC is targeted to learners who want to have a business-related English language qualification, and it is set at level B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The formal certification contains four different parts: reading, listening, writing, and speaking; but the department only takes three parts into account, speaking section is omitted; because there are not enough examiners to examine this section. The sample paper for BEC Preliminary is an institutional goal of the Faculty of Economics learners to complete the formal certification as a way of helping learners to have an advantage in the jobs market and more choice if they want to work or study abroad.

7. The Questionnaire

The questionnaire employed in this investigation (See Appendix 1) included four sections: section one asked questions about personal beliefs the language learning process, their motivations to learn, the teacher and their role in the learning process. Section two aimed to find out which aspects of language they felt they needed most help or practice with. Section three sought to discover their preferred ways of learning English, and section four investigated their English learning background. Sections one, two and three of the questionnaire a likert-scale as 'the method is simple, versatile, and reliable' (Dörnyei, 2010, p. 27). Because section four intended to collect learners' background information, it was necessary to modify the format to a multiple choice one. To design the questionnaire several questionnaires were reviewed (Zughoul and Hussein, 1985; Chia, Johnson, Chia, and Olive 1999; Yang and Lau, 2003; Amuzie and Winke, 2009; Xhaferi and Xhaferi, 2011; Lavasani and Faryadres, 2011; Mehrdad, 2012; Trinder, 2013) the items that most met the needs of the study were adopted.

The questionnaire was validated in two different forms. Firstly, it was given to a few colleagues and asked them to give their opinions in terms of the lay out, the number of items, the wording of the instructions and items; they provided constructive feedback in all aspects. After that, it was administered it to a group of voluntary students, who provided feedback about the time it took them to complete it, the clarity of the instructions, the wording of the items, and the layout (Bell, 2005).

8. Results on the Language Test

The complete and official BEC Preliminary consists of four tests: reading, writing, listening, and speaking (as it is known the test is only administered by official centers). What the Faculty of Economics did was to administer a practice test, which contained only three sections reading, writing, and listening.

For the purpose of this research the practice test was administered to this group totals 90 marks. Each skill (reading, writing, and listening) is weighted 30 marks. Passing grades are Pass with Merit and Pass. The minimum successful performance in order to achieve a Pass corresponds to about 65% of the total marks. Narrow Fail and Fail are failing grades. Table 1 shows the performance achieved on the BEC Preliminary practice test.

Table 1. Grades achieved by learners in the BEC Preliminary practice test (N=127)

Grade	Frequency	Percent
Pass with Merit	1	.7
Pass	21	16.6
Narrow Fail	48	37.8
Fail	57	44.9

Table 1 shows that 21 learners passed (LP) the test and 57 failed (LF). Therefore, following Mori (1999); Horwitz (1999); Peackon (1999) who suggests that learners' beliefs about language learning affect their achievement answers of the questionnaire were analysed to find out possible associations between learners' beliefs and their performance on the test.

9. Results on the Questionnaire

Although linguistics discrepancies exist between LF and LP, they expressed many more coincidences than differences on the questionnaire on three of its four sections: beliefs about their language learning (items 1 to 19), aspects of language they felt they needed most help or practice with (items 20 to 27), and their preferred ways of learning English (items 28 to 52). The three sections contained 52 items, a number from 1 to 6 to each response option for scoring purposes was assigned, where 1 is strongly disagree and 6 is strongly agree. Figure 1 below shows the most frequently occurring score, the mode, in most of the 52 items.

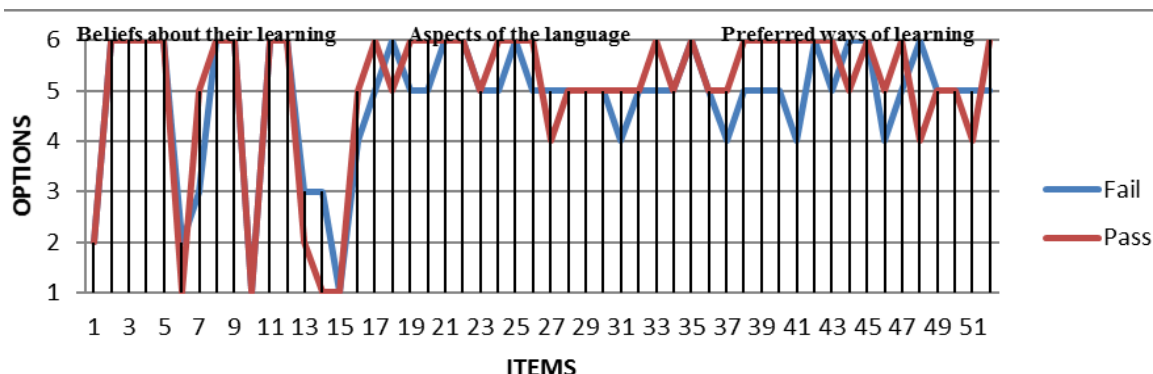


Figure 1. Overlapping beliefs between learners who failed and passed the language test (N=78)

Figure 1 above indicates which option occurs most often at every item. As shown above, in over half of the items learners chose the same option. In the remaining, the selection was very similar; a difference of only one number. This indicates that despite the learners' different language proficiency, they have equal beliefs about language learning. These rules out the idea that LF beliefs about language learning affected their achievements on the language test. Tables 2 and 3 below show some key items that explain in more detail the data presented in Figure 1 above. Table 2 shows the items where the percentage of agreement both groups reached. The numbers of the items are the same presented in the questionnaire.

Table 2. Some key beliefs in which LF and LP agreed (N=78).

Items	Fail	Pass
2. Learning English is important to me because I want to study in other countries.	78%	89%
4. My knowledge of English is a decisive factor for my success at the University.	100%	100%
5. My knowledge of English is a decisive factor for my future career.	100%	100%
6. I am confident about my ability to learn English successfully.	86%	100%
7. I have to pass an international exam if I want to graduate.	92%	100%
10. I am working hard to learning English.	64%	77%
20. Write English more.	57%	47%
22. Read information about Economics.	65%	67%
23. Learn more vocabulary.	72%	66%
24. Understand foreign people when they speak to me.	57%	55%
28. Following a textbook.	71%	78%
39. Doing written assignments (short passages, reports, essays).	64%	66%
43. Studying grammar rules.	79%	78%
46. Using dictionaries.	64%	67%
47. Having mistakes corrected.	93%	100%
52. Working individually.	57%	55%

Learners also coincided on some items in which they disagreed. Results are illustrated in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Some key beliefs in which LF and LP disagreed (N=78).

Items	Fail	Pass
1. English is a difficult language to be learned.	71%	78%
15. I study English only to have good marks.	82%	88%

Data presented in Tables 2 and 3 above reveals that both groups of learners had very similar beliefs about language learning; they also chose similar aspects of language they felt they needed most help, and their preferred ways of learning English were also alike. However, there were some items related to beliefs about instrumental and external motivation which did not reveal such coincidences; thus it was suitable to analyse them to find possible reasons of their language lacks. Table 4 below reveals some of the differences discovered, it shows the percentage of agreement both groups reached.

Table 4. Differences of opinion between LF and LP (N=78).

Items	Fail	Pass
3. I feel able to take up subjects taught through English.	14%	100%
8. I like the atmosphere of my English classes.	67%	100%
11. My language success depends on what I only do inside the classroom.	30%	0%
26. Learn grammar.	79%	44%
35. Doing project work.	35%	78%

Data above demonstrates some trends towards a few potential causes of the learners' language weaknesses. Thus it was necessary to carry out a Person Correlation analysis to prove how well the sets of data were related. The Person Correlation goes from 0 to +1, where 1 indicates a high direct correlation, 0 indicates a weak correlation between the variables; whereas -1 a strong inverse relation. Table 5 below presents the results of the analysis.

Table 5. Results of the Person Correlation between the beliefs about instrumental and external motivation of learners who passed and failed, and their results on the language test (N=78)

Items	Person Correlation
3. I feel able to take up subjects taught through English.	.174
8. I like the atmosphere of my English classes.	-.434
11. My language success depends on what I only do inside the classroom.	-.103
26. Learn grammar.	.133
35. Doing project work.	-.021

Despite the differences shown in Table 5 above, the Person Correlation of items 3, 8, 11, 26 and 35, and the final score obtained by the LF (See Table 1) on the language test indicate that there was not a relationship between learners' beliefs and their results on the test; as it is demonstrated in Table 5 above. This can be inferred because the obtained values are very close to zero. Only item 8 shows a median inverse relation with the score of the test. Thus,

the higher the final score, the lower the liking in relation to the atmosphere of their English classes.

10. Other Aspects that Affect Learners' Language Learning

Having found that there was not a direct relation between what learners believed and the results of the language test, other probable causes were investigated; thus differences between the two groups were found in areas such as: their upper-secondary of origin (public or private), years of English language study, types of language courses learners had taken, institutions where they learnt English, situations where they used English more frequently.

It was found that only 33% of LP went to private upper-secondary; the rest of the learners 77% attended public schools, which means that for the great majority of the LP attending private upper secondary schools was not an influencing factor over their English language learning. What seem to be relevant are the previous school years; as 66% of the LP stated that they had studied English for more than eight years, which implies that they probably went to private primary and secondary school, where they very likely received English language instruction, as Mexican private schools include English in their curriculums. On the other hand, 72% of LF expressed that they received English language instruction between four to seven years, which is in line with the five years of compulsory English received, three years in secondary and two years in upper secondary within the public Mexican educational system. This indicates that a great number of students entering the University of Colima only received five years of English language instruction, from the age of twelve or thirteen. Also, a little over half of the LF, 72%, mentioned that the English they had learned was provided in school, while 89% of the LP had received English language education out of the formal school system, that is to say, private centres, self-study, or even in English spoken countries. Another significant data is that 81% of LP used their English in situations not related to the formal instruction in school, such as watching television, listening to music or practicing with friends or family; while 50% of LF only used their English in formal settings, namely school.

11. Conclusion

Studies stated in this paper show that the opinions and beliefs that learners have about their language learning, and about the strategies they employ to learn English have an effect over their language learning success.

This study has investigated how the language learning of a group of learners in a Higher Institution in Western Mexico has been affected by their opinions and beliefs. The results of a language test show a group of students who passed, and another one which did not pass. A questionnaire of beliefs was also administered to both groups of students, and it was found that members of both groups have very similar beliefs about their language learning, concluding that their beliefs did not affect their results on the test.

Therefore, the researchers investigated other aspects related to the students' language learning background, and found out that these affect the language knowledge of the students who passed, since most of them stated that they had studied English for more than eight years, they had received English language education out of the formal school system, and they had

used their English in situations not related to the formal instruction in school. All these happened prior to their Higher Education.

It can be concluded that for this particular group of students, aspects related to their language learning background have a more decisive effect over their language level of achievement than their beliefs.

Acknowledgement

The research is financed by La Universidad de Colima

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Appendix 1 English Learner Questionnaire

This questionnaire aims to find out the learning needs, wants, needs and beliefs of English learners of the University of Colima. It consists of four sections. The answers will be used only with research purposes. The information supplied and your identity will be treated as confidential and will be protected as such.

Section one

In this section, we would like to know how much you agree or disagree with the following statements by circling a number from 1 to 6.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

Example: I like chocolate cake very much. 1 2 3 4 5 6

I believe...

1. English is a difficult language to be learned. 1 2 3 4 5 6

2. Learning English is important to me because I want to study in other countries. 1 2 3 4 5 6

3. I feel able to take up subjects taught through English. 1 2 3 4 5 6

4. My knowledge of English is a decisive factor for my University studies. 1 2 3 4 5 6

5. My knowledge of English is a decisive factor for my professional life. 1 2 3 4 5 6

6. I am confident about my ability to learn English successfully. 1 2 3 4 5 6

7. I have to pass an international exam if I want to graduate. 1 2 3 4 5 6

8. I like the atmosphere of my English classes. 1 2 3 4 5 6

9. My parents encourage me to study English and other foreign languages. 1 2 3 4 5 6

10. I am working hard to learning English. 1 2 3 4 5 6

11. My language success depends on what I do inside the classroom. 1 2 3 4 5 6

12. My language success depends on what I do outside the classroom. 1 2 3 4 5 6

13. My language success depends on what only the teacher does in the classroom. 1 2 3 4 5 6

14. Business related subjects should be taught in English. 1 2 3 4 5 6

15. I study English only to have a good marks. 1 2 3 4 5 6

16. English must be a compulsory subject. 1 2 3 4 5 6

17. Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages. 1 2 3 4 5 6

18. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages. 1 2 3 4 5 6

19. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language. 1 2 3 4 5 6

Section two					
In section two, we would like to find out which aspects of language you feel you need most help or practice with. Answer the same way as you did before.					
Not at all	Not so much	So-so	A little	Quite a lot	Very much
1	2	3	4	5	6
I need to...					
20. Write English more. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
21. Speak English more. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
22. Read information about Economics. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
23. Learn more vocabulary. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
24. Understand foreign people when they speak to me. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
25. Attend international conferences. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
26. Learn grammar. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
27. Pronounce better 1 2 3 4 5 6					
Section three					
This section aims to know your preferred ways of learning English. Answer the same way as you did before.					
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6
I usually learn English...					
28. Following a textbook. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
29. Listening to others using English in class. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
30. Listening to the teacher using English in class. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
31. Listening to audio-recordings. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
32. The teacher giving oral/written feedback. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
33. Giving oral presentations. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
34. Role-playing. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
35. Doing project work. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
36. Doing exams. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
37. Taking part in language games. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
38. Memorizing dialogues, expressions or passages. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
39. Doing written assignments (short passages, reports, essays). 1 2 3 4 5 6					
40. Reading silently in class for information. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
41. Reading aloud in class. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
42. Reading about a specific field. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
43. Studying grammar rules. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
44. Practicing pronunciation. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
45. Using a computer. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
46. Using dictionaries. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
47. Having mistakes corrected. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
48. Learning lists of vocabulary. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
49. Working with the whole class. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
50. Working in small groups. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
51. Working in pairs. 1 2 3 4 5 6					
52. Working individually. 1 2 3 4 5 6					

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