Gender and Beliefs in Learning English at the National Defence University of Malaysia

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Abstract

This study investigates students’ beliefs in learning English at the National Defence University of Malaysia (NDUM). It also aims to look at the differences of these beliefs according to gender. Students do not learn language the same way and it is therefore important for us to understand these differences, especially what are their beliefs in language learning, and use this information to improve English teaching and learning. This study uses a questionnaire adapted from Horwitz (1987) Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory distributed to first year cadet officers. Data from questionnaire show some similarities and differences across gender. Both genders rated the same lowest three items. Males rated most items higher than females. There is intention of correlating accumulated data to students’ attitudes, motivation and strategies in learning English in future studies.

Keywords: learning English, beliefs, cadet officers
1. Introduction

How does one learn a second language? English is Malaysia’s second language while the first language is Bahasa Melayu. According to the Monitor theory by Krashen in 1982, second language can be learned or acquired. Krashen (1982) posited that learning a language is a conscious one which includes error correction and the study of grammatical rules being isolated from natural language whereas the acquisition of a language is a natural process. How do we know whether language is learned or acquired? What are the things that differentiate one language learner to another? What causes a learner to approach language tasks differently and what makes him stand out amongst other language learner of the same proficiency? Altan (2006) claimed that the answer is learners’ perceptions or beliefs in language learning as learners are what they believe thus the saying whatever can be conceived by the mind, can be achieved. Learners’ beliefs influence their strategies in learning a language (Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Mercer & Ryan, 2010; Metallidou & Vlachou, 2007) such as making reasoned guesses when they are unsure, making efforts to communicate, and learning through communication, finding strategies for overcoming inhibitions in target language interaction, practising the language whenever possible, monitoring their speech and that of others, attending to form (i.e., grammar), and paying attention to meaning (Rubin, 1975). Because of that, learners’ beliefs has received a lot of attention recently in the language learning process which Horwitz (2007) considers as central constructs in every discipline which deal with human behaviour. Learners’ beliefs about languages have been in the focus of educational research because they are considered fundamental to learners’ progress (Daif-Allah, 2012; Dörnyei, 2005; Graham et al., 2008; Javid et al., 2012; Kormos et al., 2008; Yeung et al., 2011).

2. Learners’ beliefs in learning English

Since Horwitz’s pioneering study in 1985, numerous researchers have shown that language learners’ beliefs are critical to learning (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005; Ellis, 2008; Mercer & Ryan, 2010; Yaman, 2012). Gabillon (2005) suggested that beliefs are viewed as important constructs to be investigated in relation to the subsequent impact on people’s behaviour in disciplines such as cognitive, educational, and social psychology, where human behaviour and learning are of primary concern. Consequently, more studies have proven that students who have positive and realistic beliefs about learning English reached higher proficiency in English compared to those who lacked these beliefs (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005; Dörnyei, 2005). Research has established that our perceptions and beliefs are shaped by our attitudes (Abu-Melhim, 2009; Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi, & Alzware, 2012; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), experiences (Gaoyin & Alvermann, 1995; Kuntz, 1999) and culture (Alexander & Dochy, 1995; Tumposky, 1991), including immediate family environment (Dias, 2001). Gender is another variable that influences beliefs (Bacon & Finnemann, 1992; Ozurturk, 2012; Siebert, 2003; Yaman, 2012).

Respondents in Inozu’s (2011) study were 326 trainee teachers who were enrolled in a four-year education programme in English language and teaching methodology. These trainee teachers completed a survey which consisted of 12 statements representing key beliefs about
language learning as defined by Lightbown and Spada (1999). Results indicated that these trainee teachers strongly believed the importance of motivation. Out of 326 trainee teachers, 79 percent considered motivation as the most important factor for success in language learning. A majority (75%) also believed in the importance of introducing foreign languages at an early age. 82 percent of the trainee teachers agreed that simple language structures should be taught before complex ones and 62 percent thought that most mistakes are made because of interference from first language.

Yaman (2012) used Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) to investigate the beliefs about language learning of Turkish English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and found that there is a significant difference among the 12th grade Science, Social Sciences and Language students in terms of their English learning beliefs. The students in his study were aware of the fact that being proficient in English is not a criterion to have a good job in developing countries; they thought that they can have a job in their area without needing to learn English. Yaman (2012) claimed that if there was a proficiency exam with different criteria for each job, the students would give more importance to learning English at each level. The study also revealed that there is a significant difference between males and females in terms of their English learning beliefs. Females have more tendencies to different areas which will be useful for them such as learning English where it can be better for them if they know English beside the other academic subjects and this can help them with their careers.

2. Students’ beliefs in language learning and gender

The study by Yaman (2012) above correlated gender to beliefs in language learning. So did studies by Bacon and Finnemann (1992) and Siebert (2003). Bacon and Finnemann (1992) investigated gender differences in self reported beliefs about foreign language learning and authentic oral and written input. 938 Spanish students from two large state universities were surveyed with approximately even ratio of male to female respondents. The researchers had developed their own 109-item questionnaire that was similar to BALLI which has a 5-point Likert format in which students responded to a series of statements regarding their experience, beliefs, attitudes, motivation and strategies with the Spanish language, both in and outside the class. Using multivariate discriminant analysis, Bacon and Finnemann (1992) found that female compared to male students reported a higher level of motivation and strategy use in language learning, greater use of global strategies in dealing with authentic input, and a higher level of social interaction with the target language (Spanish).

In addition, using BALLI (Horwitz, 1987), Siebert (2003) conducted a study of 64 female and 91 male language learners (N=156) of mixed ethnic backgrounds involving 22 nationalities studying English at a higher education institution in the U.S. Siebert found a number of significant differences in beliefs among males and females in relation to language learning and strategy use, using descriptive statistics in the form of percentages. Male students were more likely than female students to rate their abilities highly. The male students were more likely to respond that they have a special ability for learning languages (25%), but only 10 percent of females agreed and no females strongly agreed to have the special ability. Male and female students also significantly differed in their assessments of how long it takes to learn a foreign language. Thus, if someone spent 1 hour a day learning a
language, the females estimated that it would take 5-10 years or that a language cannot be learned in 1 hour a day. Male students, on the other hand, were much more optimistic and indicated that it would take 1-2 or 3-5 years. These findings suggested that male and female students differ in their assessments of beliefs related to ability. Only 7 percent of females, but 24 percent of males, agreed that it is important to practice with audio-visual equipment. In addition, 23 percent of females, as opposed to 47 percent of males either strongly agreed or agreed that the most important part of learning a foreign language is learning grammar.

On top of these studies, Tercanlioglu (2005) performed an ANOVA and found no significant differences in beliefs about language learning of 45 male and 73 female full-time undergraduate EFL teacher trainees at a large Turkish university. She concluded that it is possible that age, stage of life and contextual differences in the language-learning situation may also be important sources of group variation in learner beliefs.

It is clear that past researches have triangulated the connection between beliefs and language learning. Similarly, this study plans to look at the first year cadet officers’ beliefs in learning English at the National Defence University of Malaysia.

3. Methodology

3.1 Samples

Data were collected from one hundred first year students at NDUM where there are 72 males and 28 females of which 94 are Malays, 4 Chinese and 2 Indians. 11 of them achieved Band 1, 60 got Band 2, 24 Band 3 and 5 Band 4 for MUET.

3.2 Measurements: BALLI survey instrument by Horwitz (1987) for ESL learners (25 items)

The survey instrument which was administered in this study is an adapted version of Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) which is designed by Elaine K. Horwitz in 1987. The BALLI has a Cronbach alpha of .79. BALLI measures beliefs about five language learning areas: (1) foreign language aptitude, (2) the difficulty of language learning, (3) the nature of language learning, (4) learning and communication strategies and (5) motivations and expectations. All items are rated on a 5-point rating scale, with 25 items ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5). Questions 1 and 10 are different in their answer options. In Question 1, the response options ask for the difficulty of the English language ranged from very easy (1), to very difficult (5) and Question 10 asks how long does it take to speak English and the answers range from 1 year (1) to you can’t learn a language in one hour a day or never (5).

The items on the BALLI assess learners’ beliefs in five areas: 1) the difficulty of language learning (DLL: 4 items: Items 1, 10, 18, 24), 2) foreign language aptitude (FLA: 6 items: Items 6, 7, 11, 14, 21, 23), 3) the nature of language learning (NLL: 5 items: Items 4, 8, 12, 17, 20), 4) learning and communication strategies (LCS: 7 items:
Items 3, 5, 9, 13, 16, 19, 25), and 5) motivation and expectations (MNE: 3 items: Items 2, 15, 22).

This study aims to answer the following research question:

- Are there any similarities or differences in students’ beliefs according to gender in learning English language as a second language at the National Defence University of Malaysia?

To answer the research question, collected data were analysed by using the descriptive analysis which included frequency count, percentages, and mean analysis.

4. Data Analysis and Discussions

4.1 Samples’ gender, MUET achievements and race

Figure 1: Frequencies (%) for gender, MUET results and race

There are 72 percent male respondents and 28 percent female respondents. Out of the 100 respondents, 94 percent are Malay, four percent are Chinese and two percent are Indian. Referring to their MUET results, eleven percent got Band 1, majority (60%) got Band 2, 24 percent with Band 3, and only five percent scored Band 4.
4.2 Samples’ beliefs in learning English as a whole

The table below shows the percentages of answers for selected BALLI items.

**Table 1: Percentages of answers for selected BALLI items**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither disagree nor agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BS5</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BS7</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BS10</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Lowest scores for both genders**

**Highest scores for female respondents**

| BS8    | 4      | 5       | 25                          | 36    | 30             |
| BS13   | 0      | 0       | 10                          | 51    | 39             |
| BS15   | 0      | 4       | 23                          | 48    | 25             |

**Lowest scores for male respondents**

| BS13   | 0      | 0       | 10                          | 51    | 39             |
| BS22   | 0      | 2       | 17                          | 34    | 47             |
| BS23   | 0      | 4       | 21                          | 30    | 45             |

There are 25 items to test samples’ beliefs in learning English. The respondents scored lowest for items 5, 7, and 10. For item 5: You shouldn’t say anything until you can say it correctly, 63 percent disagreed to this statement. This means that respondents are brave enough to communicate even though they are unable to pronounce or say words in English correctly. This also indicates that communicative competence is more important than pronunciation and respondents communicate for meaning rather than excellent pronunciation. This belief might be the reason why the students are not reluctant to speak or use English and they are not ashamed or embarrassed if they use grammatically or incorrect English words or sentences. The next item which had low score is item 7: People who are good in Mathematics or Science are not good at learning English. Most respondents did not agree to this statement (61%) which can be interpreted as they are not aware of the distinction between linguistics and logical intelligence as suggested by the multiple intelligence theory (Gardner, 1983). People who are good in Mathematics or Science can also be good in languages. The third lowest item is item 10: If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long will it take him/her to become fluent? 63 percent of respondents claimed that people who spent an hour a day will need lesser time to be fluent (1-2 years) and 30 percent said that they will take 3-5 years and more to be fluent and 7 percent said they could never be fluent with only an hour a day of English.
The female respondents scored highest for items 8, 13, and 15 where for these items too they outdid their male counterparts. Item 8: *I learn English so that I can understand English pop music.* It could be said that female respondents learn English more for functional reasons or they are more instrumentally motivated (Gardner & Lambert, 1959) than the male respondents. They learn English because they need to accomplish certain functions such as singing in English, reading English novels, reading English newspapers, and score in their English exam. Item 13: *It is important to repeat and practise a lot.* In repeating or drilling exercises, these students focus on pronunciation and usage of English and stress on vocabulary and grammatical structures. Drilling as a reinforcement of grammatical structure in Audio Lingual Method (ALM) stemmed for the behaviourist theory. The females also rated highly Item 15: *People in Malaysia feel that it is important to learn English.* This shows that they are aware of the importance of English especially when they step into the working world especially in oral and written communication skills for employment. The importance of learning English is supported by the government and can be seen through the establishment of English as the country’s second language. This is a motivation to respondents to really make the effort to learn the language.

4.3 Samples’ mean scores on beliefs in learning English according to gender

Figure 2 shows the mean scores on beliefs in learning English according to gender.

**Figure 2:** Chart on samples’ mean scores for beliefs in learning English according to gender

*BS: BALLI scale*
There are 25 items to test samples’ beliefs in learning English. In general, the males rated higher in most of the items except items 8, 13, 15, and 20. Male samples outdid their female counterparts in most BALLI items.

It can be seen that there is a similarity between both male and female samples in the low ratings of their beliefs about learning English. Firstly, both gender rated lowest for Items 5, 7, and 10. The samples believe that even though they are not proficient or fluent, they should still converse in the language although they cannot speak correctly. They also do not believe that people who are good in Mathematics and Science are bad English learners. Most of these samples also agree that if a learner spends an hour a day to learn English, they will succeed in mastering the language at a minimal time period.

As for high ratings, both genders confessed English can be learned through repetition and practice. Both genders related mastering English with lots of repetitions and practices. This suggests that in speaking, there is no other way but one has to use the language in speech. The female samples stated that they want to learn the language and they believed that everyone is able to speak (oral skills) a foreign/second language. On the other hand the male samples agreed to the notion that English is seen as an important language in the country. They understand the language but found it hard to converse in the language.

5. Conclusion

The present study examines gender differences in beliefs in learning English for samples from the National Defence University using descriptive analysis. It is evident from the data analysis done that respondents conform as well as vary in their beliefs in learning English according to gender. This indirectly indicates that there is no predetermined belief system for everyone or all learners. Therefore it is essential to measure the imperceptible beliefs among students. For educators to know what their students think or believe about language learning is a good way to create a suitable classroom environment and help educators decide teaching strategies which make their lessons closer to the set objectives. In other words, by understanding and being aware of students’ beliefs, educators can choose different strategies according to the students’ beliefs, where apart from making lessons more interesting, they can also motivate and instil students’ belief that mastering English is possible.

Apart from gender, there are many other variables that contribute to success in learning language. Further investigation of these variables is important due to the differences they vary in their contributions in learning outcomes. This study recommends an identification of Malaysian students’ language learning beliefs on a wider scale, and enhances recognition of students’ beliefs and reflection on the possible effects on language learning as this will increase awareness and assist less successful language learners to become successful.
6. References


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