

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Much research has already been done on the impact of student beliefs about language learning – confirming associations between beliefs and motivation, confidence, satisfaction, effective learning strategies and success – leading to much discussion about the teacher’s role in fostering positive beliefs. Whereas many have argued that it is the teacher’s responsibility to instill healthy beliefs inside the classroom, others contend that students build their own personal beliefs about language learning irrespective of the teacher (that beliefs are non-transferable and teachers are wasting their time trying to alter or expand upon them.) A third group believes that learning a language and developing beliefs about language learning are naturally intertwined and students will absorb positive beliefs from their instructors without any need for explicit instruction on the subject. In order to say anything definitive on the subject there are a few open questions that would first need to be resolved:

1. Are student beliefs about language learning malleable?
2. Is there a causal link between beliefs about language learning and language learning success?
3. Are changes in belief resilient or do students quickly revert back to their prior beliefs after their class is finished?

This paper provides original research investigating question one and discusses current research into questions two and three along with some ideas on how they could be more usefully explored.

Rationale for the Study

By far, the majority of research utilizing the BALLI has been latitudinal in nature, meant either to describe a group of students, compare students based on demographic information, or correlate student beliefs with some other aspect of language acquisition. Very few studies have used the BALLI to study the way learner beliefs change over time. This current study tries to fill this gap by posing several questions on this subject then answering those questions by triangulating two distinct methods research. First, a latitudinal study is conducted to find several associations involving beliefs about language learning. This leads to a more directed longitudinal study tracking how learner beliefs change over time. The research questions for the longitudinal and latitudinal study carry similar practical relevance – Research question 1 for the longitudinal study tests the same basic idea of question 1 on the longitudinal study, question 2 (latitudinal) is similar to question 2 (longitudinal) etc. -- so the two studies should help validate each other.

Brief description of the latitudinal study: The latitudinal study tests the association between the length of time a student has been in the Paradise English program and their beliefs about language learning. The BALLI was administered only once and the results are compared with the number of weeks the students have been enrolled in the program, which was obtained from the students' records.

Table 1: Strengths and weaknesses of the latitudinal study

Strengths	Weaknesses
Comparatively large sample size.	Doesn't track directly how students change beliefs
Well tested administration and data analysis techniques used in other research studies.	Works best in studies with large populations
Allows twelve data points, providing a fuller picture of how the time spent in the program influences beliefs.	Relies on a random distribution of subjects to prevent data bias.
Avoids the bias inherent in subsequent implementations of the same survey	Difficult to do seminal research since so much latitudinal research has already been conducted using the BALLI.

Brief description of the longitudinal study: The longitudinal study measured the change in student beliefs over an eight-week period. The BALLI was administered to the students three times (at four week intervals) and the results were compared with each other.

Table 2: Strengths and weaknesses of the longitudinal study

Strengths	Weaknesses
Works well in studies with small sample sizes.	Smaller sample size
Does not rely on a random distribution of students.	Inherent bias of re-surveying students
Directly answers questions regarding the change in students beliefs'	Only provides three data points instead of twelve
Because longitudinal studies using the BALLI are fairly uncommon, the research methods used are more likely to benefit future studies.	Not as well tested when using the BALLI as the data collection instrument.

Overview of Key Terms

Beliefs about language learning (sometimes shortened to 'beliefs:') This term has no established definition and has been used by many researchers to mean many different things. This study does not venture any general definition, and whenever the term is used it should be understood to refer only to those beliefs (and belief categories) surveyed by the BALLI. Further information on this subject is provided in the Literature Review section of this paper, under the subsection Methods of Categorizing and Quantifying Beliefs About Language Learning.

Actual Belief: This term corresponds to a teachers response to a particular BALLI item or group of BALLI items.

Portrayed Belief: The term portrayed belief refers to the belief that the **instructors perceive themselves to be portraying to their students in the classroom.** This could be significantly different from the belief the instructor is actually portraying to their students (which would only be measurably by querying the students themselves) but the term 'portrayed belief' was chosen for the sake of brevity. Because student perceptions of the beliefs their instructors portray are not mentioned in this study, the use of this simpler term should not cause confusion.

Collapsed belief: This study follows the trend of prior research to rely on collapsed belief rather than the raw ratings of agreement/disagreement using the Likert scale. The collapsed belief consists of three categories. Agree, neutral, and disagree. Likert scores of 1 and 2 correspond to 'disagree,' 3 corresponds to neutral and 4 and 5 correspond to disagree.

Coincidence of belief: Beliefs about language learning (as defined above) cannot be judged on their correctness, because the beliefs are judged neither to be right nor

wrong. Instead, we can judge the similarity in beliefs between two different groups. This study terms this level of similarity as 'coincidence.' For the latitudinal study, this will be represented as a percentage termed 'agreement percentage.' For the longitudinal study, this will be represented as a raw number termed 'change in agreement.' The mathematical formula for these two terms are listed below.

Agreement percentage: The formula for this is $(Na-Nd)/T$ where Na means the number of students who agree with their instructor, Nd means the number of students who disagree with their instructor (neutral responses are not included,) and T means the total number of students (including all agree, disagree and neutral responses.)

Change in agreement: The formula for this is $(Na_2 - Na_1) - (Nd_2 - Nd_1)$ where Na₂ means the number of students who agreed with their instructor in survey 2, Na₁ means the number of students who agreed with their instructors in survey 1, Nd₂ means the number of students who disagreed with their instructors in survey 2, and Nd₁ means the number of students who disagreed with their instructors in survey 1.

Aims

1. To study the effects an English immersion program can have on student beliefs
2. To introduce a less tested method of using the BALLI and see if it produces results consistent with results obtained through better-tested methods.

Research Questions

Latitudinal analysis

1. Which beliefs about language learning have a statistically significant association with the length of time a student has spent in the Paradise English program?
2. Is there a positive correlation between the length of time a student has been in the Paradise English program and the level of coincidence between his belief and the beliefs (actual or portrayed) of his instructors?
3. Is the correlation greater for beliefs that instructors believe to be important to language learning?

Longitudinal analysis

1. Which beliefs about language learning change as a result of the Paradise English program?
2. Do students' beliefs change to be closer to the beliefs (actual or portrayed) of their teachers?
3. Do more students alter their belief for BALLI items that instructors believe to be important to language learning?

Cross analysis

Do the findings from the latitudinal analysis and the longitudinal analysis support each other?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study was partially discussed in the introduction of this section. The results could also be used to further address the open question, discussed in the Literature Review section and Appendix D: Preliminary Research, of whether beliefs about language learning are context-specific. Because the subjects of this study are transported from their familiar home environment to an environment one (both for living and for study) this research maximizes the potential for belief changes to occur. However, this also means it will be very to use this research to say anything about specific factors influencing belief. Because the subjects of this study were mostly living with their instructors in a homestay English program (for instance) it will be unclear whether students' classes or their environment was the major factor in changing their beliefs. Studies isolating such factors could build upon this study and could provide extremely important results. If living environments are found to influence student belief, this could lead to research into such topics as the benefits of international student dormitories. If classroom lessons were the predominant factor, this could pave the way for research into developing specific teaching methods to foster positive beliefs.