

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Beliefs about Language Learning on Language Learning Success

It is well-known that learner beliefs often differ from instructor beliefs and much research has already been done on the subject. (Examples: Cook, 2001, Bada and Okan, 2006, and Richards and Lockhart, 1994). It is also well-known that learner beliefs are associated with motivation and on eventual success in language learning. This is clearly explained by Richards & Lockhart:

“Learners beliefs are influenced by the social context of learning and can influence both their attitude towards the language itself as well as towards language learning in general. Learners’ belief systems cover a wide range of issues and can influence learners’ motivation to learn, their expectations about language learning, their perceptions about what is easy or difficult about a language, as well as the kind of learning strategies they favor. (Richards and Lockhart, 1994)

Or, as Elaine Horwitz puts it, “ESL teachers often encounter student resistance to some of their instructional activities. Some students want more opportunities for free conversation and complain about pattern drills while other others distrust communicative approaches and insist that every utterance should be strictly corrected. Teachers are likely to find similar instances of student concern or dissatisfaction whenever instructional activities are inconsistent with student preconceived beliefs about language learning. When language classes fail to meet student expectations, students can lose confidence in the instructional approach and their ultimate achievement can be limited. (Horwitz, 1987)”

Actual Versus Portrayed Beliefs

Actual and portrayed beliefs may seem like similar concepts, but they differ in one important aspect. Whereas teachers' actual beliefs can not be altered to fit the needs of the class, portrayed beliefs are based on their own conscious decisions, as well as the decisions of others involved with the curriculum. Pedagogically, a negative result would show that classroom methods were having little impact on student beliefs, possibly relieving teachers of their responsibility in this area, allowing them to concentrate on other aspects of language teaching. A positive result could show the opposite, demonstrating to teachers the importance of using class time to foster positive beliefs. A positive result could also justify experimental research into what specific factors in language programs are influencing student beliefs. This is important because the majority of research into student beliefs has so far been correlational, not exploring any causal links. If this research were conducted, it could show us how to develop effective methods of promoting positive beliefs about language learning inside the classroom. However, it is also important to point out that (so far) most of the research into the link between student beliefs and success in language learning has been likewise correlational, so more research is required to determine if altering students' beliefs would make them any more successful.

Categorizing and Quantifying Beliefs about Language Learning

The BALLI was the first widely used instrument for studying the beliefs of Language learners. Since its initial creation in 1983, it has been used by many researchers to answer a wide range of questions. Originally, it was used to assess the beliefs of American students learning a foreign language in an all-English environment. In 1985 a version was created for ESL teachers (Horwitz, 1985.) The version most of the current research is concerned with is the 1987 version, which was modified from the original to aim at assessing the beliefs of non-native learners of English.

The 1987 version is a 34-question questionnaire that employs a Likert scale. For each of the thirty-four statements given, the students must circle a response from one to five. One corresponds to “strongly agree” and five corresponds to ‘strongly disagree.’ Before the creation of this final version, the other versions were pilot tested for clarity and comprehensiveness with 150 first semester, foreign language students and 50 intensive English students at the University of Texas at Austin (Horwitz, 1987.) It examines learner beliefs in the five following areas:

1. Second language aptitude
2. The difficulty of language learning
3. The nature of language learning
4. Learning and communication strategies
5. Motivation and expectations for second language learning

The BALLI does not make any judgment on which statements are correct or incorrect and only attempts to gauge the beliefs of students. However, it has often been adapted for various purposes, and is now used as a data collection source in many kinds of research (discussed below,) some of which does try to judge the merits of holding some of the beliefs described.

In her 1987 article, "Surveying Student Beliefs About Language Learning" Horwitz describes some research that was done using the BALLI as a tool. The questionnaire was administered to three separate classes. The 32 students were at the intermediate level in the Intensive English program at the University of Texas at Austin. 26 were male and 6 were female. They came from twelve separate countries. The researcher divided the questions into their five categories (listed above) and provided detailed results of students responses. Because the BALLI does not result in any composite score, it would be difficult to provide full results here, but here is how Horwitz describes the outcomes of that research:

"The BALLI has proven very successful in the identification of many student beliefs about language learning. Some of the results reported here may surprise ESL teachers, others probably confirm their experiences and intuitions." (Horwitz, 1987)

Elaine Horwitz suggested the BALLI could also be used in future research on the acquisition and use of learning strategies. For example, the relative importance of student beliefs about language learning on their use of learning strategies or the connection of specific beliefs to specific learning strategies. She also suggested that researchers study the interaction of beliefs with variables such as attitude, motivation, or cognitive style to better understand how these variables impact on language learning. She believed that the BALLI could be useful for two distinct areas of research: Research attempting to survey beliefs without judging their correctness, their benefits, or their drawbacks, and research attempting to determine the effects of holding particular beliefs.

Criticisms of the BALLI and Research into its Validity

Because the BALLI has been such a widely used instrument for studying the beliefs of language learners, there has also been much research into its reliability and validity. Usually, this research is part of a larger study, and the intent is to determine the BALLI's validity in answering a specific question in a specific setting. However, there has also been research into the reliability and validity of the BALLI in a more general sense. Kunz (1996) analyzed the possible pitfalls of the BALLI and listed the following three concerns:

1. Statements dealing with learners' beliefs were generated by language teachers, not by learners themselves.
2. Themes under which students' beliefs are organized in Horwitz's inventory were not generated statistically from students' responses, and the choice of those themes and their labeling were never explained. In other words, as Kuntz (1996) observes, "the five present themes represent a belief structure that teachers think students hold and not one that the sample of students actually revealed".
3. Horwitz's research employed only descriptive statistics; therefore there is no statistical backing as to the significance of selected variables.

The most rigorous study addressing these concerns was done by Larisa (2006.) The subjects were 107 students learning the Russian language at the University Malaysia, Sabah, and the objective was to determine if the belief-classifications of the BALLI formed discrete, interpretable, and independent dimensions. The data showed that the UMS students' responses to the BALLI for

the most part formed discrete, interpretable and independent dimensions. The findings of this research lend support to the proposition that language learning beliefs are systematic. In other words, statistical backing was obtained to support Horwitz's separation of beliefs into separate themes. Thus, the research results show that the BALLI items representing "motivation", "aptitude", "strategy" and "language difficulty" formed statistically independent factors based on the students' answers to the questionnaire. Only one of the themes of BALLI – beliefs concerning the "nature of language learning" – did not form a separate factor. The researcher explained that this could be because of the low number of students (107) participating in the study. (Larisa 2006)

The Open Question as to Whether Beliefs about Language Learning are Context-Specific

Many research studies (including this one) rely on the assumption that beliefs about language learning are context specific – that they can be influenced by the environment in which someone lives and studies. However, there has recently been significant research that has questioned this assumption. If it were true that beliefs about language learning are not context specific, it would make little sense to evaluate the effect of a certain context on those beliefs. Most studies tend to favor the notion of context-specificity (Yang, 1992; Cotterall, 1995; Rifkin 2000) but several researchers disagree. In her paper Assessing EAP Learners' Beliefs about Language Learning in the Australian Context, Eva Bernat compares two extensive studies done on adult ESL students studying abroad and asserts that 'despite a small number of inter-group differences, it seems premature to conclude that beliefs about

language learning vary by contextual setting.' Her reasoning was that in most of the BALLI items (24 out of 34) there was less than 10% discrepancy rate on agreement between students in the two studies she compared.

Possible shortcomings of this study were that she compared results using only responses in the 'agree' category (rather than using the complete table for a chi-square distribution, which seems to be the standard) and she only compared two studies, which surveyed populations with similar abilities (TOEFL scores above 570), in similar programs (University EAP programs), and with similar motivations. As preliminary research to this study (shown in Appendix D) the context-specificity of the twelve BALLI items in this study are tested. The current study's data is combined with Bernats' and a chi-square analysis is performed on the complete agree, neutral, disagree tables are tested with a chi-square analysis, providing different (although not necessarily conflicting) results from Bernat's.