

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND THE BELIEF OF EFL LEARNERS: A STUDY OF LANGUAGE LEARNERS AT UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate beliefs about English language learning of Bangladeshi EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners at undergraduate level. For the survey of this research, a structured questionnaire based on Horwitz's Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) was used. As Horwitz (1987) stated "second language learners often hold different beliefs or notions about language learning, some of which are influenced by students' previous experiences as language learners and others that are shaped by their own cultural backgrounds." To identify EFL learner's pattern of beliefs about language learning, data have been analyzed. From data analysis it is pointed out that EFL learners have a broad range of conceptions which is, to some extent, similar to and different from those reported in the current literary pieces. The results of the survey therefore must be treated with caution. The outcome of this survey proves that learning English is a must as most of the learners believe that they will get a good job if they have excellent command of English. So, the recommendation is that the existing syllabuses, curriculums should be modified and the authority should apply appropriate teaching methodology.

Key Words: BALLI, Beliefs, curriculum, EFL, syllabus.

Introduction

In the age of globalization, English has become the one and only language that dominates the social, political and economic arena of this world. The new business management in this globe is only possible because the business managers enriched themselves by acquiring English language proficiency. English language is a window that opens the world to us. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and English Language now have proved themselves to be the two most crucial gears of this globalized world. "Computers have made an entry into education in the past decades and have brought significant benefits to teachers and students alike. Computers can provide help to the ESL learners in different ways such as teaching students to learn a new language.

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The computer can be used to test students about the language they have already learnt. It can assist them to practice certain tasks. The computer permits students to communicate easily with other from different places.” “Nowadays the increasing use of mobile technology, such as smartphones and tablet computers, has led to a growing usage applications created to facilitate language learning, such as The Phrasal Verbs Machine from Cambridge.”

English language is the only language that can meet the challenges of the competitive world. So, the students of undergraduate level of Bangladesh have to realize the importance of learning English language properly. We should take necessary steps to enrich our English language skills. Holec argues that, “Language learners must go through a sort of psychological preparation or ‘deconditioning’ to rid themselves of preconceived notions and prejudices which would be likely to interfere with their language learning process.”

Belief, according to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary is “a strong feeling that sth/sb exists or is true; confidence that sth/sb is good or right” (Hornby 100-101). Beliefs deal with human behavior and learning. Beliefs are central construct in every discipline which deals with human. Language teachers truly acknowledged the fact that EFL learners enter the classroom with a complex set of characteristics such as learning strategies, styles, experiences, attitudes and last but not the least, expectations. Various individual variables like theories or beliefs about the nature of language and language learning influence and may condition learner’s approach to the learning system. There is a growing body of literature that suggests that understanding learner’s beliefs plays a crucial role in understanding learner strategies and designing appropriate language instruction (Bernat, 2004; Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005[3]; Horwitz, 1987), Richards and Lockhart, 1996[8]; Horwitz, 1999). It is very important for both language instructors and curriculum designers to assess the beliefs that language learners bring to the language classroom. A language teacher must know the necessary teaching strategies and techniques to be utilized. He should be aware of his audience. So that he could arrange the classroom procedure in the most effective way. He should be ready to rectify his own belief and that of the learners which lead to a congenial and tension free classroom. A language teacher should not confine himself to teaching some course curriculum in his class. He is responsible of eradicating and revising learners’ misconceptions and of elevating them to the real ones. Identification of these benefits and reflection on their potential impact on language learning can help language teachers and policy makers to design more suitable and effective syllabus and effective curriculum. Horwitz’ (1987) Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) [7], the most widely used research instrument to elicit learner’s beliefs about language learning has been adapted for the current study. For better understanding of belief, Horwitz prepared BALLI consisting of 34 questions which are divided into five categories. These five categories are: (a) Language learning appetite (b) Difficulties of language learning (c) Nature of learning language (d) Learning and communication strategy and (e) Motivation. In BALLI survey participants are given simple questions/ statements like “It is important to report and

practice lot” and the participants reply choosing one of the following five options; (a) Strongly agree (b) Agree (c) Neither agree nor disagree (d) Disagree (e) Strongly disagree. In Taiwan, Yang (1992) studied the relationship between Taiwanese university students’ beliefs and learning strategy use and Liu(2004) conducted a similar study on senior high school students. They both found that subjects in their studies generally endorsed the concept of foreign language aptitude and most of them were optimistic and highly motivated about learning English.

Materials and Methods

The central purpose of the study is to investigate language learning beliefs of EFL students at undergraduate level in Sylhet, Dhaka and Patuakhali, filling a gap in research on learner beliefs in the local context. This study is important in the sense that with the result of the survey of this research, English language teachers and policy makers would be able to know more clearly about the views of the learners on language and language learning. Considering language learners’ views teachers might design more suitable and effective syllabus, curriculum as well as classes.

This research is made of literature review and questionnaire survey. For literature review various articles, books, research papers are mainly reviewed. For the questionnaire survey “Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)” of Horwitz (1987) [6] is used. University-level students were targeted for the survey because they were able to be viewed as individuals with more metacognitive maturity than younger learners in primary and secondary education. They were the students of 1st year 1st term having educational background with national curriculum in Bengali medium.

Data Collection

The number of total participants of the survey was 70. The authors physically went to the seven universities situated in Sylhet, Dhaka and Patuakhali to carry out the survey smoothly. The objective of going physically to all institutes was to explain the content to the students clearly so that the real picture would come out. Breakdown of the number of the participants in the survey is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Breakdown of the participants

Sl. No.	Name of the University	No. of the Participants
01	Sylhet International University	10
02	Leading University	10
03	Metropolitan University	10
04	Sylhet Agricultural University	10
05	Shahjalal University of Science and Technology	10
06	Dhaka University of Engineering and Technology	10
07	Patukhali University of Science and Technology	10

Results and Discussions

The results of BALLI have produced some interesting findings, which give insight into the learners’ beliefs about the nature of the English language including its difficulty, the existence of language aptitude, learning and communication strategies, and motivation to

succeed. The findings are represented by frequency of responses in the tables below. Though all question items of Horwitz have been used, only significant and closely relevant items for the Bangladeshi EFL learners are discussed in detail.

In category A, participants’ beliefs about language learning appetite was discussed and results of this category are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Beliefs about Language Learning Appetite (Frequencies of Response)

SL. No	Question	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language	32	25	8	3	2
2	Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages	15	42	8	4	1
3	People from my country are good at learning foreign languages	8	18	33	9	2
4	It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one	8	30	8	22	2
5	People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages	9	2	7	32	20
6	I have a special ability for learning foreign languages	10	8	27	21	4
7	Women are better than men at learning foreign languages	8	10	16	31	5
8	People who speak more than one language are very intelligent	19	30	6	8	7
9	Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language	15	25	10	10	10

This category relates to the effects of age on language learning appetite, general existence of specialized abilities for language learning, and beliefs about the characteristics of successful and unsuccessful language learners. Thus, these items address the issue of individual potential for achievement in language learning. In the result of category A, 80% participants believed that children can learn foreign languages easily than adult, reflecting a popular belief that children are better language learners than adults. The respondents in this study also endorsed the concept of existence of special ability for foreign language learning. In Item 2, 80% indicated that some people had a special ability for learning foreign languages, though, in Item 6, only 28% agreed that they have this special ability. From this data it is clear that most of the participants are not very much confident in learning the English language. Whether language aptitude is culture or gender specific was addressed by Items 3 and 7 respectively. Here, 32% of respondents

either strongly agreed or agreed that people from Bangladesh were good at learning foreign languages, though the majority (46%) of respondents was uncertain. In terms of gender, 56% of learners believed that men were better than women at learning foreign languages. As the current study included 69% males and 31% females and as it is a prestigious issue, it is therefore likely that respondents favored their own gender with respect to ability in language learning. Further, with reference to the effects of intelligence on language learning (Item 8), the respondents were divided. Here, 66% of respondents believed that “people who speak more than one language are very intelligent”, however 8% were uncertain of the effects of one’s IQ on acquiring additional languages. While intelligence may be a strong factor when it comes to learning which involves language analysis and rule deducting, it may play a less important role in the classroom where the instruction focuses more on communication and interaction (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). Finally, 72% of respondents did not believe that being good at mathematics or science meant that one would not be good at learning foreign languages, suggesting that the majority of respondents do not make a distinction between aptitudes for the sciences versus an aptitude for the humanities-type subjects.

In category B, participants’ beliefs about difficulties of language learning would be discussed. Results of this category are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Beliefs about difficulties of Language Learning (Frequencies of Response)

Item No.	Question	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
10	There are some foreign languages which are easy to learn.	20	35	6	6	3
11	Some languages are easier to learn than others. English is : a. A very difficult language b. A difficult language c. A language of medium difficulty d. An easy language e. A very easy language					
12	I believe I will learn to speak English very well	21	34	7	6	2
13	If someone spent an hour a day learning a language, how long it would take to speak the language very well? a. Less than a year b. 1-2 years c. 3-5 years d. 5-10 years e. You can’t learn a language in 1 hour a day					
14	It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language.	9	27	6	13	15
15	It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.	9	31	19	9	2

This category concerns the general difficulty of learning a foreign language and the specific difficulty of the students' particular target language. In Item 10, 80% of respondents believed that some languages are easier than others, though 12% did not make such a distinction. In terms of the difficulty of the English language in Item 11, 55% regarded English as a language of medium difficulty, though 33% believed it was either difficult or very difficult. Only 11% of respondents regarded English as an easy or very easy language to learn. In this category Item 12 is very important as it shows the confidence of the learners. In the result of Item 12, it seemed that 78% of the participants were confident that they learned to speak English very well. With respect to the difficulty of oral productive and aural receptive skills (Item 14), 50% of respondents believed that it was easier to speak than to understand a foreign language, however, 42% disagreed. A further 8% were uncertain whether speaking or listening for comprehension was easier. Similarly, in Item 15, 64% of respondents agreed that it is easier to read and write in foreign language, however, 16% disagreed. A further 20% neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement.

In category C, participants' beliefs about nature of Language learning are discussed and results of this category C are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Beliefs about Nature of Language Learning (Frequencies of Response)

SL. No.	Question	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
16	It is necessary to learn about English speaking cultures to speak English.	15	33	5	8	9
17	It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country.	19	29	4	16	2
18	The most important part of learning a foreign language is vocabulary.	32	19	9	10	0
19	The most important part of learning a foreign language is the grammar.	15	19	10	19	7
20	Learning a foreign language is different from learning other academic subjects.	11	28	8	19	4
21	The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from my native language.	18	21	9	15	7

This category includes a broad range of issues related to the nature of the language learning process. BALLI items 16 and 17 referred to the role of cultural contact in language learning. Here 72% believed that it is necessary to know the culture of foreign language under study in order to speak the language, reflecting an understanding of the importance of gaining a linguistic pragmatic awareness for effective communication; and 62% of respondents agreed with the statement that “It is best to learn English in an

English-speaking country”, recognizing the inherent value of learning language in an immersion-type setting, where there is a greater exposure to the foreign language, its culture and its people. Next, Item 18 related to the importance of vocabulary learning when acquiring a new language. 76% of respondents in this study believed that learning new words is the most important part of language learning, while 10% neither agreed nor disagreed on this issue. In Item 19, in case of asking to rate the importance of learning grammar, 46% agreed that the most important part of learning a foreign language was learning grammar, though a similar proportion of students (38%) disagreed and further 12% neither agreed nor disagreed on this issue. These findings, which reflect an almost even distribution, may likely be due to a recent (more so for some of the regions of the world, less so for the others) shift in language teaching methodologies worldwide. Some learners may be of the belief that the more traditional grammar-based approach to foreign language learning is still more fruitful than the more contemporary communicative approaches. Item 20 determines if the learner views language learning as different from other types of learning. 58% of respondents disagreed that people who are good at academic subjects are not good at foreign languages; and 30% disagreed on the matter. Finally, Item 21 asks learners whether they believe the most important part of learning English is learning to translate from the learners’ own mother tongue. Responses indicate that 60% of learners do not believe translating to be a highly valued learning strategy, thus reflecting a departure from the grammar-translation methods in foreign language learning. Further, 30% had in fact emphasized translation as a very important part of language learning. In category D, participants’ beliefs about learning and communication strategy would be discussed. Results of this category are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Beliefs about Learning and Communication Strategy (Frequencies of Response)

Item No.	Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
22	It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.	31	25	7	4	3
23	You shouldn’t say anything in English until you can say it correctly.	4	16	10	23	17
24	I enjoy practicing English with the Englishmen I meet.	14	33	8	6	9
25	It’s OK to guess if you don’t know a word in English.	7	17	9	29	8
26	It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	40	19	7	4	0
27	I feel shy speaking English with other people.	8	17	15	23	7
28	If beginning students are allowed to make errors in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on.	9	22	11	19	9
29	It is important to practice with cassettes/tapes or CD-ROMS	13	29	8	17	3

This category addresses learning and communication strategies and are probably the most directly related to a student's actual language learning practices. First, with reference to 'traditional' learning strategies (Item 26), the majority of students, 90% endorsed repetition and practice. This finding highlights the learners' perception of the importance of 'self-access learning' and the belief about autonomous learning- themes. Majority of the participants (72%) enjoy practicing English with the Englishmen they meet.

This is, in fact, very good sign for the learners because of practicing more with the Englishmen. Their confidence would be high and of course they would be motivated. Apart from contextual factors (such as the degree of willingness of native speakers to engage in conversation with practicing foreign language learners, and/or their social openness to casual conversations with strangers in general) learners' inhibition to speak a foreign language may be explained by the learners' feeling of shyness (Item 27) in such situations. In fact, 34% of respondents reported feeling shy in this situation, though 46% did not. It is encouraging to find that 54% believed that "It is OK to guess if you don't know the meaning of a word of English".

It likely means that learners feel confident that they can work out the meaning of unfamiliar words from the context of the utterance or written text, and not feel anxious about having to understand each individual word. Guessing the meaning of new words without having to over-rely on dictionaries is useful skill. Dictionaries can be no doubt very useful; however, over-reliance can lead to over-dependence, and thus become a 'crutch' for the learner. Another finding is that, in line with current language teaching approaches, the focus of oral discourse is on meaning making and intelligibility over immediate grammatical correctness, where learners feel confident to speak before speaking 'perfectly correctly'.

Thus, in Item 23, 56% disagreed with the notion that one should not say anything in English until one can say it grammatically correctly. Nonetheless, 86% of respondents believed it is important to speak English with an "excellent pronunciation" (Item 22). These findings seem to suggest that learners' view was more important to speak with an excellent pronunciation rather than with grammatical correctness.

With the emergence of English as an International Language (EIL), new developments in English language pedagogy have seen a shift from a focus on "excellent pronunciation" to intelligibility and communicative competence (or socio-pragmatic awareness). In category E, participants' beliefs about motivation would be discussed. Results of this category are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Beliefs about Motivation (Frequencies of Response)

SL. No.	Question	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
30	People in my country feel that it is important to speak English.	24	33	4	9	0
31	I would like to learn English so that I get to know English people better.	14	31	4	17	4
32	If I learn English very well, I will have better opportunities for a job.	44	19	5	3	0
33	I want to learn to speak English well.	43	19	8	0	0
34	I would like to have English friends.	26	26	12	4	2

This category concerns desires and opportunities of the students associated with the learning of their target language. In this category, the vast majority of responses seem to reflect the learners' desire for and optimism in achieving their language learning goals. For example, in Item 32, 94% believed that if they learn to speak English very well, they will have better job opportunities, reflecting the existence of instrumental motivation. Finally, in Item 30, 86% of respondents believed that their countrymen valued the ability to speak English highly. This finding may reflect the elevated status of English as a lingua franca around the world. With increasing globalization in commerce, science and technology, increased movement of capital, labor, and tourism, and its widespread use in media and entertainment, English has become the vehicle for international communication.

Conclusion

This study shows that students have strong beliefs in motivation aspect. However, additional measures have to be taken to strengthen their beliefs in positive aspects of learning English as a foreign language as well as to lower their beliefs in the negative aspects of learning. This is necessary as Horwitz (1987) states that students' beliefs in learning a language have an impact on students' acquisition and the use of effective language learning strategies. It's none but the language teachers who are to restructure the learners' beliefs towards their needs. The following suggestions can be taken into consideration: Ongoing motivational talks can be held to encourage students to improve their command of the English language. Besides, language competition offering great incentives can be held to motivate students to improve their English skills. English lessons also have to be conducted in such a manner that they are as good as fun to arouse the interest in the students. Teachers should apply communicative approach of teaching methodology. Teachers must build a cooperative and goal oriented classroom atmosphere where there will be a lot of interaction and thus the range of spontaneous speaking and

listening performances might be promoted. They need to make sure of students' active participation in the class. Language teachers and policy makers should understand and consider students' views and the necessity accurately in general and design more suitable and effective syllabus, curriculum, teaching materials, strategies and test formats with a view to fitting them best. Classes on English culture may be arranged at least occasionally. The findings light up on the general beliefs brought by the EFL learners at the undergraduate level who have already had a long exposure to English. It's really necessary for a teacher to act to consider what learners expect from the language classes and what learning behavior they like to stand by. Mantle-Bromley therefore suggests: "if we attend to the affective and cognitive components of students' attitudes as well as develop defendable pedagogical techniques, we may be able to increase both the length of students' commitment to language study and their chances of success in it" (1995:383). All recommendations made above may not be implemented immediately for various reasons. For example, standard equipment, teaching strength etc. are required. To say whether in the existing situation it is possible or not, more study is required. As beliefs survey is a psychological study, result may differ on the basis of time, participants, place etc. The author would continue this kind of study as well as some other relevant studies and would try to give more concrete recommendations in near future.

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