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Ania Saorin Iborra

Miguel F. Ruiz Garrido

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Beliefs about Learning EFL: A Study of Thai Female High School Students

Oranoot Chirdchoo and Jirada Wudthayagorn*

Abstract

This research describes beliefs about learning English as a foreign language of Thai female high school students and discusses the potential impact of these beliefs on students' expectations and strategies in English language learning. Four aspects of beliefs were studied: beliefs about the difficulty of English language learning, beliefs about foreign language aptitude, beliefs about the nature of language learning, and beliefs about communicative strategies. Questionnaires, adapted from BALLI (Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory), were used to collect the data. In addition, descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data.

The results demonstrated that the students held beliefs that are conducive to language learning. The students also demonstrated a locus of control in language learning. However, some expressed misconceptions about how languages are learned. It is recommended that language teachers investigate students' beliefs so that they may help students validate and develop appropriate beliefs. Pedagogical and research implications are also discussed.

Introduction

Assisting a language learner to be successful and proficient and understanding what factors contribute to language learning and development have long been topics of discussion among research scholars. To this end, some researchers focus on teachers (e.g., classroom management and teacher talk), while others focus on teaching methods (e.g., TPR, or Task-Based instruction). A current trend in education,

and more specifically in language education, is to shift the focus to the learners themselves. In this way, learners become the most important part in a learning process; teachers become merely guides or coaches who assist learners to achieve course goals. Likewise, research studies have demonstrated that elements of learners (e.g., learning styles, attitude and motivation, belief, etc.) play a crucial role in language learning and achievement.

With regards to this paper, one fundamental element of learners, that is, belief, was studied. It has been proved that belief is related to language proficiency and language achievement positively (Horwitz, 1998; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Mantle-Bromley & Miller, 1991; Mori, 1999; Murphy, 1985). That is to say, students who endorse positive beliefs about learning English (or any other languages) and positive beliefs about themselves appear to be successful learners and achieve greater language proficiency.

It is also interesting to note that beliefs about different foreign languages (e.g., Japanese, French, and Spanish) learned by American students have been extensively investigated; however, less is known about English, especially as learned by Thai students.

A research study with Thai students who learn English as a foreign language is urgent and necessary because of the requirement of English as a foreign language in Thai compulsory education, particularly with high school students. Furthermore, these students are at the stage of entering higher education, i.e., university, in which English is one of the subjects for the entrance examination and also one of the required subjects in their early years of higher education.

We, as teachers of the English language, may help the students shape their beliefs in an appropriate direction so that they hold beliefs that are conducive to good language learning and language experience. In addition, such beliefs will serve as a foundation of their positive attitudes and desirable behavior towards the study of English, which ultimately will lead them to master and be proficient in the language.

Purpose of the Study

This study describes the beliefs about learning English as a foreign language of a group of Thai female high school students and discusses the potential impact of these beliefs on the students' expectations of and strategies in English language learning.

Literature Review

A belief or thought is one component of attitude. To better understand 'belief,' we will explain what attitude is and how belief and attitude are related. Mantle-Bromley (1995) states that attitude refers to affect, is evaluative, and is an emotional reaction toward attitudinal objects. Gardner (1985) notes that attitude is "an evaluative reaction to some referent or attitudinal object, inferred on the basis of the individual's beliefs or opinions about the referent" (p. 9). In relation to English foreign language teaching and learning, attitudinal objects can be animate (such as language teachers of English or English native speakers) or inanimate (such as the English language or its culture).

Attitude has three components. The first component is a cognitive component or the beliefs that each person has about attitudinal objects. The second is an affective component or feelings toward an attitudinal object. The third one, a behavioral component, has to do with intentions or actions related to attitudinal objects. The three components of attitude lie in a hierarchical order, beginning with beliefs, following by affective attitudes, and behavioral attitudes. Each component is related, and they influence one another.

Research studies have shown that attitudes (including beliefs, affective attitudes, and behavioral attitudes) are related to language achievement (e.g.,

Donato, Antonek, & Tucker, 1994, 1996; Gardner, 1985, 1988; Horwitz, 1988; Kern, 1995; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Mori, 1999; Rifkin, 2000; Tucker, Donato, & Antonek, 1996). For example, students who believe that the target language such as Japanese is not difficult to learn and believe that they are able to learn it well are more likely to be successful in learning Japanese than those who do not believe so (see, for example, Mori, 1999). The affective component is, for example, feelings toward language classes. The students, who have positive feelings (such as like, enjoy, feel relaxed) toward French or Spanish classes, were found to progress well and achieve at a higher level in these classes (see for example, Mantle-Bromley, 1995). In relation to the behavioral component, it was found that Canadian students who found opportunities to use French outside the classroom regularly were more proficient than those who had less opportunity to do so (see, for example, Gardner & Trembley, 1994).

To conclude, belief is the foundation of attitude. An individual has his own beliefs which lead to particular feelings and specific behavior. Students who have positive and appropriate beliefs about language learning (e.g., they believe that they can learn and speak another language very well) also tend to like or enjoy language classes and express positive feelings toward language learning. Such beliefs and feelings lead them to certain behavior such as looking forward to language class, finding opportunities to use the target language, and a desire to continue their language studies. As a result, they are more likely to be successful language learners.

Scope of the Study

1. This study investigates students' beliefs about (a) the difficulty of English

language learning, (b) foreign language aptitude, (c) the nature of language learning, and (d) learning and communicative strategies.

Note that these four aspects of beliefs are based on Horwitz's studies (1985, 1987, 1988) on beliefs about language learning and her questionnaire, so-called BALLI (see additional explanation later in this paper). Motivation and expectations, the other important parts in BALLI, are under investigation in another project.

2. This study focuses on beliefs about learning EFL of female students in Grade 12 (or Matthayom Suksa 6). These students were in the last year of their high school education. Thus, we may see some interesting beliefs that they had formed and expressed over the years in high school.

Limitation of the Study

The participants in this study were from Sura Naree Witthaya School, a public all-girls school in Nakorn Ratchasima province where there are six grade levels available from Grade 7 (or Matthayom Suksa 1) to Grade 12 (or Matthayom Suksa 6). We note that the results and discussions in this study were based on the students at this school. We do not attempt to make a generalization about students in other schools.

However, this study is an initial step to identify specific beliefs that the students carry into the language classroom; and thus may shed some light on how language teachers can help students maintain or develop appropriate beliefs useful for language learning.

Methodology

Participants

One hundred and seven high school students in Grade 12 at Sura Naree Witthaya

School participated in this study. All of them were females. These students had been studying English since Grade 7. (Some of the students may have begun studying English earlier during elementary school.) These students had studied English with the first author during the period of data collection.

Instrument

The questionnaire used in this study was adapted from BALLI (Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory), designed by Horwitz (1985). BALLI was extensively used by several researchers in the United States. They were interested in examining students' beliefs about learning foreign languages such as German, French, Spanish, and less commonly taught languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, Swahili and Yoruba (Horwitz, 1988; Kern, 1995; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Oh, 1996; Rifkin, 2000). BALLI was proven to reflect students' beliefs, and thus these researchers were able to describe their beliefs and discuss the potential effect on students' assumptions of and strategies in language learning.

The questionnaire consists of four parts assessing students' beliefs about the difficulty of English language learning, foreign language aptitude, the nature of language learning, and learning and communicative strategies. A four-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD) was provided as answers.

Data Collection

The data collection was done in late March, 2000. The first author distributed the questionnaires in class. She explained that the objective of this study was to investigate students' beliefs about English language learning. She also informed the students that there were no right or wrong answers and that their answers would not affect their grades. The students took approximately 40 minutes to complete the questionnaires.

The first author read each item out loud. Then, the students answered them one by one. The students could ask if they did not understand something or had any questions. With this data collection procedure, the teacher was able to manage the classroom because the students began and finished answering the questionnaires at the same time. Furthermore, the students did not skip any item resulting in a complete data set for analysis.

Data Analysis

Scores were calculated in terms of percentages. All percentages were rounded to the nearest whole number. Thus, the numbers reported in this study may be greater or lesser than 100%.

Results

In this section, the results of students' beliefs about the difficulty of English language learning, foreign language aptitude, the nature of language learning, and learning and communicative strategies are presented.

Table 1
Beliefs about the Difficulty of English Language Learning

Items	SA	A	D	SD
1. English is easier to learn than other foreign languages.	16%	64%	19%	2%
2. I believe that I will learn to speak English very well.	5%	43%	51%	1%
3. It is easier to speak than understand English.	11%	48%	45%	2%
4. It is easier to read and write English than understand it.	11%	47%	39%	5%
5. English is:				
1). A very difficult language.	6%			
2). A difficult language.	37%			
3). A language of medium difficulty.	53%			
4). An easy language.	4%			
5). A very easy language to learn.	0%			
6. If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take him/her to become fluent?				
1). Less than a year	6%			
2). 1-2 years	13%			
3). 3-5 years	30%			
4). 5-10 years	29%			
5). You can't learn language one hour a day.	16%			

Table 1 illustrates beliefs about the difficulty of English language learning among Matthayom Suksa 6 students. More than half of the students (64%) agreed that English was easier to learn than other foreign languages, but fewer (43%) believed that they would learn to speak English very well. The number of students who agreed and strongly agreed that it was easier to speak than understand English (59% in total--48% agreed and 11% strongly agreed) is different from those who did not believe so (47% in total--45% disagreed and 2% strongly disagreed).

In addition, about half of the students

(47%) agreed that it was easier to read and write English than to understand it while 39% of them disagreed. Thus, in general, more students perceived that speaking, reading, and writing were easier than understanding English. This point will be elaborated upon later.

Next, 90% of the students believed that the difficulty of English language ranged from medium difficulty (53%) to a difficulty degree of (37%), and more than 50% of them believed that it would take them about 3 years or longer to be fluent in English if they spent one hour a day learning the language.

Table 2
Beliefs about Foreign Language Aptitude

Items	SA	A	D	SD
1. It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.	36%	43%	13%	5%
2. Some people are born with a special ability which helps them learn a foreign language.	10%	39%	28%	12%
3. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.	27%	52%	17%	2%
4. Learning another language is easy for me.	1%	9%	59%	13%
5. Girls are better than boys at learning foreign languages.	3%	14%	43%	33%
6. People who are good at math are not good at learning foreign languages.	7%	14%	50%	29%
7. People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent.	14%	54%	32%	2%
8. Thai people are good at learning foreign languages.	3%	25%	55%	4%
9. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	36%	59%	5%	1%

Most of the students agreed (43%) or strongly agreed (36%) that it was easier for children to learn a foreign language. While 39% of the students believed in an innate ability in learning a foreign language, 28% disagreed and 12% strongly disagreed. Also, about half of them (52%) agreed it was easier to learn another language if they already spoke foreign languages.

Surprisingly, 59% of them disagreed that learning another language was easy for them. Interestingly enough, even though all of them were female, the majority of them (43%) disagreed that girls were better than boys at learning foreign languages. That is, they did not think that gender was a relevant

issue in language learning. Also, 50% disagreed that people who were good at math were not good at learning foreign languages. In other words, they believed that there is no distinction between verbal skills and numerical skills.

Moreover, most of the students agreed (54%) and strongly agreed (14%) that people who speak more than one language well were intelligent. The majority of them (55%) disagreed that Thai people were good at learning foreign languages. However, most of them agreed (59%) and strongly agreed (36%) that everyone could learn to speak a foreign language.

Table 3
Beliefs about the Nature of Language Learning

Items	SA	A	D	SD
1. It is necessary to know the foreign culture in order to speak the foreign language.	17%	66%	13%	2%
2. It is better to learn a foreign language in the foreign country.	36%	53%	7%	2%
3. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words.	10%	50%	37%	3%
4. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules.	11%	56%	30%	3%
5. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of translating from Thai to that language.	8%	5%	41%	6%
6. Learning a foreign language is different from learning other school subjects.	9%	73%	30%	0%

Now, we consider beliefs about the nature of language learning among high school students. The majority of the students agreed (66%) and strongly agreed (17%) that it was necessary to know the culture in order to speak the language. Also, most of them believed (53% agreed and 36% strongly agreed) that it was better for them to learn a foreign language in the foreign country.

The number of students who believed that learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new words (50%), grammar rules (56%), and a matter of translation (45%) were slightly higher than

those students who did not believe so (37%, 30%, and 41%, respectively).

In addition, the number of students who indicated strong agreement was even higher than that of the students who showed strong disagreement. This finding means that, in general, more students tended to agree that learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new words and grammar rules as well as a matter of translation. Finally, most of the students (73%) believed that learning a foreign language is different from learning other school subjects.

Table 4
Beliefs about Learning and Communicative Strategies

Items	SA	A	D	SD
1. It is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent accent.	21%	51%	27%	1%
2. You shouldn't say anything in the foreign language until you can say it correctly.	5%	12%	45%	37%
3. If I heard someone speaking the language I am trying to learn, I would go up to them so that I could practice speaking the language.	12%	45%	36%	7%
4. It's okay to guess if you don't know a word in the foreign language.	10%	55%	27%	7%
5. It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	46%	47%	7%	4%
6. I feel funny speaking the foreign language in front of other people.	8%	36%	42%	10%
7. If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning, it will be hard to get rid of them later on.	27%	36%	34%	7%

Table 4 reveals that about half of the students (51%) agreed and about one-fifth (21%) strongly agreed with the importance of an excellent accent when speaking a foreign language. The majority of the students disagreed (45%) and strongly disagreed (37%) that they should not say anything until they can say it correctly. Thus, it is likely that the students were not discouraged to speak English in class.

The majority of the students (45%) agreed that if they heard someone speak the language they were trying to learn, i.e. English, they would go up to them and practice speaking English. Surprisingly, several students (36%) disagreed.

In relation to guessing, the results show that 55% of the students would guess if they did not know a word. Still, several students

(27%) disagreed about using guessing strategies. Moreover, most of the students agreed (47%) and strongly agreed (46%) about the importance of repetition and practicing.

Most of the students (42%) did not feel embarrassed to speak the language in front of people. However, many of them had different opinions, that is, 36% agreed that they felt strange when doing so. Finally, most of the students agreed (36%) and strongly agreed (27%) that if they were allowed to make mistakes in the beginning, it would be difficult to get rid of such mistakes later on.

We have seen that the students believed in specific ways of using learning and communicative strategies when speaking English. In brief, results show that students

hold certain sets of beliefs that are beneficial to language learning; for example, they realize the importance of learning culture. However, some misconceptions are expressed; for example, they believe that learning a foreign language is a matter of learning a lot of new words and grammar rules.

Discussion and Pedagogical Implications

The results of this study point to several important issues related to English language learning.

Beliefs that are conducive to language learning

The students hold beliefs that are conducive to language learning. Research studies have concluded that a learner's age is positively related to phonological development (e.g., Patkowski, 1980, 1982, 1990), fluency (e.g., Donato, Antonek, Tucker, 1996), and attitudes toward the language being learned (e.g., Donato, Tucker, Wudthayagom & Igarashi, 2000). That is, young students tend to learn foreign languages more easily than older students. Consistent with these research studies, the students in this study believed that it is easier for children than adults to learn foreign languages. These students have been exposed to English since Grade 7 or for about six years. Thus, language teachers may discuss with these students the benefits that they have gained from learning English at an early age so that they are more aware of the value of English language learning.

Also, the teachers may discuss this issue with younger students so that they realize learning outcomes which may be achieved in the future such as better pronunciation and fluency, and a higher level of proficiency. As a consequence, they may feel positive about themselves as

learners and want to continue to study English. In other words, positive and appropriate beliefs may lead to favorable attitudes towards learning English and towards themselves. Put differently, positive attitudes will be the foundation for desirable behavior in language learning, i.e., seek more opportunities to use English, take more advanced language courses and continue to learn English on their own.

The students also showed optimism that everyone can learn to speak foreign languages, even though about half of them believed that English is a language of medium difficulty. Because the students had already endorsed such a positive belief, the teachers may encourage the students to put extra effort into learning. Teachers may discuss with them the advantages of learning English. Teachers may also design interesting, meaningful, and attainable lessons so that the students realize that they can perform in English successfully. Furthermore, the students recognized the importance of learning about culture. The teachers may explicitly address relationships between language and culture and the importance of culture in language learning. Realizing such relationships may help the students better understand themselves and others and may also minimize ethnocentric perceptions.

In coping with beliefs that are conducive to language learning, the students may be informed about the benefits of holding these correct and positive beliefs. The language teachers may also create lessons that correspond with the students' beliefs. Thus, the students realize that what they believe is accurate leads to realistic outcomes.

Misconceptions of language learning

Examining the data once again, we

have seen that some students expressed misconceptions about language classrooms such as they believed that learning a foreign language is a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary and grammar rules and a matter of translation. Even though it is true that new vocabulary and grammar rules are undoubtedly essential, they are not the only elements that lead to proficiency in foreign language learning. The teachers may discuss the nature of learning English (or any languages), in that it requires both content knowledge (e.g., sound system, vocabulary, and grammar rules) and skill. It is not only about learning new words or grammar. It is also about practicing what they have learned and seeking opportunities to use it. Similarly, translation may be needed and/or usually employed to clarify a certain point in language lessons, but it is not the only method for English language learning and instruction. The ultimate goal of learning a foreign language is to use it to communicate effectively inside and outside the classroom.

Other misconceptions related to learning and communicative strategies were also found. Some students believed that if they were allowed to make mistakes in the beginning, it would be difficult to get rid of such mistakes later on. Teachers should inform students that mistakes are natural in language learning. However, when mistakes are prevalent and shared by a majority of students in the class, the teachers may bring the problem to the students' attention. It is also important to note that students should not be expected to adopt the correct form or structure instantly and consistently because they may be in that stage of interlanguage system development. (Lightbown & Spada, 1998).

Furthermore, some of them would not

practice speaking English if they heard someone else speak it. Likewise, they would miss opportunities to use English if there was a chance to do so. Such misconceptions may be reshaped through teacher-student discussion related to these issues.

Locus of control in language learning

The students believed that it was easier for them to read, write, and speak than to understand English. In other words, the students may have felt that they had more difficulty with listening comprehension but relatively less with reading, writing and speaking.

Peirce, Swain, and Hart's explanation of locus of control (1993) is appropriate to this study. The reason why the students felt comfortable with writing, speaking, and reading is because the locus of control resided with them. In writing and reading, as elaborated by Peirce, Swain and Hart (1993), the students have the opportunity to reflect on the encoding and decoding process. That is, while writing, the students have time to think about the selection of vocabulary and the appropriate use of grammar, and they can revise their work if necessary. While reading, they can use reading strategies such as consulting a dictionary or rereading the text if they do not understand at any point. In speaking, they "can speak slowly, pause, and make use of strategies... in order to enhance communication" (Peirce, Swain, & Hart, 1993, p.37). In contrast, in listening, the locus of control resides outside the students, thus they are unable to control the rate of information.

The students in this study showed a locus of control in language learning that parallels to what Peirce, Swain, and Hart

found in their study; that is, the students felt more comfortable with reading, writing and speaking than with listening. The language learning experiences they had had over the years could lead them to develop such beliefs. It is a matter of fact that the students have had minimal opportunities to interact with native speakers of English and normally study English with Thai teachers in the classroom. In addition, the primary focus had been reading and writing, followed by speaking and listening activities. By assessing the student's beliefs, language teachers may improve or re-adjust language lessons by increasing activities needed by the students, particularly listening activities.

Conclusion

This study investigated the beliefs about learning English as a foreign language among Thai high school students. We have seen that the students carried certain sets of beliefs into language classrooms. Perhaps some of these beliefs have even been formed and shaped in the classroom during instruction itself. Some of these beliefs were conducive to language learning situations, whereas others were not. We may speculate that such positive and negative beliefs may reflect students' language experiences received over a number of years. It is necessary to point out that beliefs are malleable and thus can be changed. In addition to shaping students' beliefs in appropriate directions, language teachers may be reminded that instructional practice in the classroom may affect students' beliefs to a greater or lesser

degree.

Although the participants in this study were all girls from one school, it may still be possible to describe some of the Thai students' beliefs about learning English. Generally speaking, even though the students expressed some negative beliefs, positive beliefs have also been developed. For example, they understand the importance of learning about culture; they do not feel embarrassed when speaking English in front of people; they agree that young people learn foreign language with ease; they employ guessing strategies; and they believe that everyone can learn to speak a foreign language. These positive beliefs are essential because they will lead to positive attitudes toward English language study and then to desirable behavior patterns in language learning.

We encourage language teachers to assess students' beliefs towards the study of English so that we can better understand what kind of beliefs students carry into language classrooms. Thus, we can guide them to develop and/or maintain appropriate beliefs that will contribute to their success in language learning.

It is recommended that this study be an initial step to understanding the beliefs about learning English as a foreign language of Thai high school students. Future research can be conducted in different perspectives; for example, identifying and comparing beliefs about learning EFL across genders and levels of education, comparing students' beliefs with teachers' beliefs, and examining relationships between beliefs and learning strategies.

The Authors

Oranoot Chirdchoo received her B.A. (English) from the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University in 1974 and Dip. TEFL from the University of Sydney in 1990. She was an instructor of English at Sura Naree Witthaya School in Nakorn Ratchasima from 1980-2000. She is currently teaching English at Ratchananthajarn Samsaen Witthayalai 2 in Bangkok. She maintains her research interests in reading, material development, and language assessment.

Jirada Wudthayagorn earned her Ph.D. in Foreign Language Education from the University of Pittsburgh in 2000. During her study in the U.S.; she also received training in linguistics and sociolinguistics. She is now an instructor of English at Maejo University in Chiang Mai. Her research interests are psychological and sociocultural factors in language learning, sociolinguistics, and language education and assessment. She can be reached at jirada@mju.ac.th

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