

Beliefs about Foreign Language Learning and Their Relationship to Gender

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Abstract

Learners' beliefs about foreign language learning have been stressed in educational research because they are regarded as fundamental to learners' progress (e.g. Altan, 2012; Russell, 2009; Rieger, 2009; Kormos & Csizér, 2008;). This paper deals with the results of a research project conducted among first-year English language majors studying the Intensive English Language Program at Qassim University. A total of 250 male and female students participated in this study. A modified Arabic version of Horwitz's (1987) BALLI (Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory) was used to explore the overall beliefs of Saudi university students about learning English as a foreign language and to investigate the effect of gender on those beliefs. Results revealed that Saudi university students have positive and realistic beliefs about foreign language as regard the nature of language learning, communication strategies, and motivation and expectations about learning English as a foreign language. The findings also indicated that overall males and females held similar beliefs about language learning as regard the difficulty and the nature of language learning. However, statistical significant gender differences were found in the areas of English language aptitude, learning and communication, and motivation and expectations. The study recommends an identification of Saudi learners' beliefs on a wider scale, so as to provide guidelines to EFL teachers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to tailor their teaching methods to avoid mismatches between classroom practices and learners' beliefs. Finally, the study suggest that recognition of learners' beliefs and reflection on their possible effect on language learning might increase awareness and even adjustment of their expectations.

Keywords: beliefs, expectations, motivation, aptitude

1. Introduction

Nowadays, Knowledge of English has become an essential part of everyday life of the global world. Many people are using English in nearly every sector and for international relations. Ehrlich (2008) estimates that more than 300 million people are speaking English as their native language and more than 400 million are speaking it as a second or foreign language. Altan (2012) argues that the importance of English as a worldwide language has been increasing rapidly and more people are aware of the fact that at least some knowledge of English is necessary to get ahead in life since it brings high social status to the individual, as well as extending job opportunities. One variable which has received a lot of attention recently in the language learning process is beliefs about language learning which Horwitz (2007) considers as central constructs in every discipline which deals with human behavior. Learners' beliefs about foreign languages have been in the focus of educational research because they are considered fundamental to learners' progress (e.g. Kormos et al, 2008; Dörnyei, 2005).

As the global economy continues to develop, so too does the need for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) to prepare itself to be able to participate on an international level. One factor that seems to play a sizeable role in how well KSA can continue to flourish in the 21st century is the ability of its population to learn the language(s) necessary for efficient communication with other nations. Daif-Allah (2010) observes that KSA has recently begun to recognize the need to promote multilingualism in the context of globalization since it cannot participate in the new economy through the medium of Arabic only. Everything shows that the future of KSA requires mastering at least one or two foreign languages besides the Arabic language. In such a framework, the Saudi Ministry of Education has sent big numbers of graduate and undergraduate students to study in famous foreign universities worldwide. Locally, it has attempted to introduce foreign language teaching in primary classrooms (mainly English), besides the current mandatory study of English in both middle and high school.

Accordingly, the English language in the Saudi educational system today is fitting to present an overview of the role of English in KSA (Al-Hajailan, 2003). Foreign language classes in KSA start at the fourth grade (10-year-old) and English is one of the subjects taught in nearly all government-sponsored and private elementary education. Such an initiative responds to the growing concern for international participation as well as to the growing recognition of English as an international language. Therefore, understanding Saudi learners' beliefs has become a key element in developing foreign language proficiency because, as stated by Pajares (1992), identification of beliefs could help learners understand themselves and others as well as adapt to the world around them. In addition Cohen and Dörnyei (2002) concluded that certain beliefs about language learning have significant effect on learners' motivation to learn the target language; for example, unrealistic beliefs regarding the amount of time required to become proficient in a second language could obviously result in frustration. Recently, Rad (2010) and Dörnyei (2005) found that learners' beliefs and viewpoints influence not only the way that they attempt to learn English but also the method that will be used by them.

2. Research Problem

The previous introduction shows a real need to investigate Saudi students' beliefs about foreign language learning. Such investigation will be an extension of what has been done in this regard in other international cultural contexts (Horwitz, 1988; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Peacock, 1999; Ali & Ismail, 2005; Bernat and Lloyd, 2007; Diab, 2009; Rad, 2010; Altan, 2012). Although numerous studies have investigated learners' beliefs about foreign language learning in different countries, yet little is known about learners' beliefs about learning English as a foreign language in the Saudi context. Thus, the present study seeks to fill a gap in locally situated research through answering the following questions:

- 1- What beliefs do novice university students in Saudi Arabia have about learning English as a foreign language?
- 2- How does gender affect learners' beliefs about English language learning?

3. Hypotheses of the Study

The present study seeks to examine the validity of the following hypotheses:

1. Novice university students in Saudi Arabia will show realistic beliefs about English language learning.
2. There are no significant effects of gender on Saudi university students' beliefs about English language learning.

4. Significance of the Study

The current study is significant for both theoretical and practical reasons. At the theoretical level, this study is important in three ways. First, it sheds light on an area of research in foreign language learning beliefs addressed extensively by applied linguists worldwide. Second, it provides information concerning Saudi students' beliefs about English language learning. Third, it extends the discussion of the learners' beliefs by looking at how gender influence beliefs about foreign language learning. At the practical level, the proposed study would help teachers understand learners' approaches to studying English and the type of goals they adopt in their language learning. Also, identification of learners' beliefs will provide guidelines to EFL teachers to tailor their teaching methods to avoid mismatches between classroom practices and learners beliefs.

5. Method

5.1 Participants

English major students of the Intensive English Language Program (IELP) at Qassim University were invited to participate in the study. The students were given a brief, informative oral overview of the nature and purpose of the study before implementing the questionnaire. A total of 250 first-year English language major students volunteered to participate in this study. Of these, 130 were males (52%) and 120 were females (48%). The mean age of the participants was 20.2 years, ranging from 19-22 years. The students' average experience in studying English was six years. The participants included in this study share important common characteristics with most English language major students in Saudi Arabia. They all belong to state university, they all belong to the same level of education, and they follow the same curriculum.

5.2 Instrument

The instrument used in this study is called the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) that is initially created by Horwitz to collect data regarding the beliefs of adult learners about frequently taught languages. The BALLI consists of 34-items which are related to five areas: 1) English language aptitude; 2) the difficulty of language learning; 3) the nature of language learning; 4) learning and communication strategies; and,

5) motivation and expectations. The questionnaire designed based on five point Likert scale which measures respondents' interest according to their level of agreement or disagreement from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). The inventory was almost not changed since the purpose of this study was to reproduce and expand on Horwitz's 1988 study in a Saudi context. Only two items were modified so that they could be expressed in KSA and be suitable for the Saudi context. The Saudi version was translated into Arabic by the present researcher so that students would understand items easily and their responses to the questionnaire items would reflect their true beliefs. A back-to-back translation was carried out to ensure that the translation holds construct validity in Arabic language. Furthermore, to assess the level of reliability of the adapted questionnaire, a pilot test was conducted on twenty students. The feedback from the pre-administration showed that the questionnaire was completely appropriate for research aims. Also Cronbach alpha of this study is 0.74 which shows acceptable consistency of reliability.

5.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were obtained by distributing the questionnaire to 250 male/female students studying the Intensive English Language Program at Qassim University during 2011/12. The forms were completed anonymously in class. However, only 236 questionnaires (125 males-111 females) were eligible to be used in the study. After summarizing and tabulating the information obtained from the background questionnaire, data were analyzed using SPSS 15.0 package program. Frequencies, mean scores and percentages were used to analyze single BALLI items. The differences between male and female learners were determined via a t-test for independent samples. Significant levels were set at $p < 0.05$.

6. Results and Discussion

The purpose of the present study is twofold. It aims to explore the overall beliefs of Saudi university students about learning English as a foreign language. It also aspires at gaining a better understanding of the effect of gender on those beliefs. The results are presented and discussed according to the order of the research questions as follows:

6.1 Analysis of Beliefs Saudi University Students Have about Learning English as a Foreign Language

The discussion for the data presented in tables 1-6 below provides the answer to the first research Question "What beliefs do novice university students in Saudi Arabia have about learning English as a foreign language?" The researcher analyzed the frequencies, and the results were given as percentages in the following tables. Two positively worded points (agree and strongly agree) and two negatively worded points (disagree and strongly disagree) were grouped together so as to find out whether the participants had positive or negative beliefs on one item. Also, the categories suggested by Horwitz (1988) were used for data categorization and in each category, the beliefs of learners were presented in percentages and the significance value was given. The results are presented in areas as categorized in the following tables:

Table 1. Foreign language aptitude

Statements	Total Agree		Total Disagree		Undecided	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.	189	80%	32	14%	15	6 %
2. Some people are born with a special ability which helps them learn a foreign language.	104	44%	61	26%	71	30%
10. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.	127	54%	56	24%	53	22%
15. I have foreign language aptitude.	186	79%	20	8%	30	13%
22. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.	61	26%	85	36%	90	38%
29. People who are good at math and science are not good at learning foreign languages.	54	23%	112	47%	70	30%
32. People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent.	117	50%	72	30%	47	20%
33. Saudis are good at learning foreign languages.	171	72%	254	108%	47	20%
34. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	161	68%	22	9%	53	22%

The items shown in the above table focus on the broad existence of specific abilities for language learning and beliefs about the features of successful and unsuccessful language learners. First, 80% of the respondents in this study either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that 'It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language', consistent with the common wisdom that children are better language learners than adults. Thus, participants hold beliefs consistent with many research studies showing a positive effect of young age on language acquisition, especially pronunciation (Donato, Antonek, and Tucker 1996). Nevertheless, the popular belief that children are more successful language learners than adults is an unrealistic one that may discourage many adult language learners. Participants also supported the concept of foreign language aptitude or special abilities for foreign language learning. 79% believed that they possess a special aptitude for foreign language learning. This language aptitude was stressed as culture specific because 72 % of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that Saudis were good at learning foreign languages. The results indicate that the participants have positive evaluations of their own language learning abilities since they are all English major students, not just students studying English as a foreign language. For this reason 68 % either strongly agreed or agreed that everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.

Moreover, the participants hold moderate opinions regarding the importance of gender in language learning: 26% believed that women are better than men at learning foreign languages, while 36% disagreed and another 38 % were uncertain with this statement. With reference to the effects of intelligence on language learning, 50% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that 'people who speak more than one language are very intelligent'; however, 30% were unsure about the effects of one's intelligence on acquiring additional languages. Also, 44% of the participants indicated that some people are born with a special ability to learn a foreign language, while 26 either strongly disagreed or disagreed with this opinion. Additionally, 54% agreed that it is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one. Finally, 47% of respondents did not believe that being good at mathematics or science meant that one would not be good at learning foreign languages. This shows that the majority of respondents do not make a distinction between an aptitudes for the sciences versus an aptitude for foreign language learning.

Table 2. Difficulty of language learning

Statements	Total Agree		Total Disagree		Undecided	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
3. Some languages are easier to learn than others	186	79%	20	8%	30	13%
4. The language I am trying to learn is very difficult.	61	26%	86	36%	89	38%
6. I believe that I will ultimately learn to speak this language very well.	173	73%	30	13%	33	14%
14. A language learner needs at least four years to learn about the language and use it fluently.	148	63%	22	9%	66	28%
24. It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language.	97	41%	82	35%	57	24%
28. It is easier to read and write this language than to speak and understand it.	75	32%	84	36%	77	33%

Table 2 provides information about the common difficulty of learning a foreign language. The majority of the students (79%) agreed that some languages are easier than others. In response to item 6, students were very optimistic and showed a high level of self-confidence in learning English as a foreign language and explained that they will learn that language well as seen by 73% of the sample. The issue of the length of time it would take to learn a foreign language well was clear in students' minds. It was very positive for most of them (63%) to believe that learning foreign language well needs at least four years of intensive study to learn about the language and to be able to use it fluently. This realistic belief is based on the respondents' awareness of the requirements of their future occupation as English teachers. In terms of the difficulty of the English language, 36% disregarded English as a language of extreme difficulty. Only 26% of respondents regarded English as a very difficult language to learn. With respect to the difficulty of the language skills, mainly speaking and understanding, 41% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that it is easier to speak than to understand a foreign language, and 35% of respondents believed that it is easier to understand than to speak a foreign language, while 24% were unsure. Additionally, 36% of respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed that it is easier to read than write in a foreign language; however, 32% agreed. A further 33% neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement.

Table 3. The nature of language learning

Statements	<i>Total Agree</i>		<i>Total Disagree</i>		<i>Undecided</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
5. The structure of English is different from that of Arabic.	131	56%	52	22%	53	22%
8. It is necessary to know the foreign culture in order to speak the foreign language. .	162	69%	31	13%	43	18%
11. It is better to learn a foreign language in the foreign country.	130	55%	62	26%	44	19%
16. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words.	184	79%	22	9%	30	12%
20. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of a lot of grammar rules.	186	79%	50	21%	0	0%
25. Learning a foreign language is different from learning other school subjects.	172	73%	31	13%	33	14%
26. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of translating from English.	138	59%	46	19%	52	22%

The above table illustrates participants' beliefs about the nature of language learning. The majority of the respondents (79%) believed that learning new words and a lot of grammar rules are the most important parts of language learning. In addition, 59% emphasized the role of translation in fostering English language acquisition. Such students hold a specific belief that translation is a valued learning strategy. These results can be referred to respondents' previous experience of studying English for six years in the middle and high school and taking theoretical courses emphasizing the importance of developing linguistic competence over communicative competence. They are very much affected by the grammar-translation method used by their school teachers and for this reason they have developed the belief that both vocabulary and grammar are necessary for building fluency. An additional majority of respondents, 73%, agreed that 'learning a foreign language is different from learning other school subjects'. BALLI items 8 and 11 emphasize the role of cross-culture awareness in the language learning acquisition. Students are of the opinion that learning a language away of its culture is a waste of time. 69% believed that it is necessary to know the culture of the people whose language they are studying in order to speak the language and understand those who use it as a mother tongue. Another 55% either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that 'it is best to learn English in an English-speaking country', where there is a greater exposure to the foreign language, its culture and its people. Finally, 56% of the respondents stated that the structure of English is very different from that of Arabic. This result is expected since Arabic and English do not belong to the same language family.

Table 4. Learning and communicating strategies

Statements	<i>Total Agree</i>		<i>Total Disagree</i>		<i>Undecided</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
7. It is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent pronunciation and accent.	153	65%	47	20%	36	15%
9. You shouldn't say anything in the foreign language until you can say it correctly.	52	22%	131	56%	53	22%
12. If I heard some people speaking the language I am trying to learn, would go up to them so that I could practice speaking the language.	193	82%	11	5%	32	13%
13. It's o.k. to guess if you don't know a word in the foreign language	138	59%	45	19%	53	22%
17. It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	196	84%	20	8%	20	8%
18. I feel self-conscious speaking the foreign language in front of other people.	168	71%	30	13%	38	16%
19. If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning it will be hard to get rid of them later on.	110	47%	71	30%	55	23%
21. It is important to practice in the language laboratory	178	76%	31	13%	27	11%

The items shown in the above table deal with learning and communication strategies and are directly related to a learner's actual language learning practices. Items 17 and 21 refer to learning strategies, and items 7, 9, 12, 13, 18 and 19 concern communication strategies. First, with reference to 'traditional' learning strategies most of the respondents (76%) acknowledged the benefit of technology for conducting repetition drills and practicing English in language laboratories. A further 84% of the participants agreed that it is 'important to repeat and practice a lot'. Although these results reflect the learning strategies that participants used to practice at the pre-university levels, yet 82% of them realized the importance of practicing English with the English speaking people they meet.

As regard participants feeling when they use English in real life situations, 71% of respondents feel embarrassed when they communicate with native speakers of the language. However, this result depends on participants' educational level and their familiarity of meeting people who speak a foreign language. Guessing meaning from oral and written context is a necessary skill for foreign language learners. For this reason, more than half of the participants (59%) believed that 'it is OK to guess if you don't know a word in English'. This belief would help participants feel relaxed and unworried about vague words in communication. It would also encourage them not to rely on dictionaries all the times and to depend on themselves in getting the meaning of unfamiliar words from the context confidently without being nervous about having to understand each single word. Therefore, 56% of the participants disagreed with the notion that one should not say anything in English until one can say it grammatically correctly. This belief shows that participants are acknowledging fluency over accuracy. However, 65% of respondents believed that it is important to speak English with 'excellent pronunciation'. This last result indicates that the participants view pronunciation correctness as more important than grammatical accuracy. In addition, 47% strongly agreed or agreed that 'If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning, it will be hard to get rid of them later on', while 30% disagreed. These findings indicate that participants of the study seem to hold unrealistic beliefs regarding accuracy and error correction, which, if not challenged, may negatively affect their learning process in the language classes.

Table 5. Motivations and Expectations

Statements	Total Agree		Total Disagree		Undecided	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
23. If I get to speak this language very well, I will have many opportunities to use it.	211	90%	15	6%	10	4%
27. If I learn to speak this language very well, it will help me get a good job.	187	80%	14	6%	35	14%
30. Saudis think that it is important to speak a foreign language.	178	76%	33	14%	25	10%
31. I would like to learn this language so that I can get to know its speakers better	201	85%	11	5%	24	10%

BALLI items in the above table deal with participants' motivation and expectations of learning English as a foreign language. Almost all the participants (90%) are instrumentally motivated to learn English. Also, 80% realize that if they learn to speak English well, they will be able to get a good job. Another 85% of the participants are interactively motivated to learn to speak English as a foreign language because they are highly interested in getting to know its speakers better. In addition, 76% either strongly agreed or disagreed that Saudis hold a belief that learning a foreign language has become a necessity. These realistic beliefs reflect participants' awareness that learning a foreign language has become a key factor which helps to cope with the requirements of globalization. Participants came to appreciate that accuracy of English and linguistic abilities are necessary tool that might determine the nature of their future careers as well as their social status in worldwide communities.

To assess the participants' general beliefs about learning English as a foreign language, statistical analysis was conducted in order to measure the five-Likert mean of respondents rating. According to Likert scale, 5 represents high level of agreement and 1 indicates high degree of disagreement. To make results more understandable, mean analysis will be categorized into 4 parts representing levels of students' beliefs where 1.00-1.99 indicates weak belief, 2.00-2.99 points to neutral belief, 3.00-3.99 shows strong belief, and 4.00-5.00 illustrates very strong beliefs.

Table 6. Analysis of students' general beliefs about learning English as a foreign language

Area	Mean	Standard deviation
English language aptitude	3.501412	0.548099
The difficulty of English language learning	3.346751	0.363414
The nature of language learning	3.727603	0.247494
Learning and communication strategies	3.81303	0.424463
Motivation & expectation	4.191737	0.241398

The mean of Students' beliefs about learning English illustrated in Table 6 above shows that Saudi university students' beliefs ranges from strong to very strong. Participants' demonstrated a very high level of motivation and expectations about learning English as a foreign language since this area tops all other four areas with an average weighted mean of 4.19. This finding shows that Saudi EFL learners believed that the motivation factors have a great role on their learning process. Therefore, developing students' motivation and understanding their expectations will significantly affect students' English language learning. However, participants showed strong beliefs that English language learning is a difficult task to accomplish and accordingly such a belief might challenge their English language learning process. Also, the results demonstrate strong realistic beliefs about the nature of language learning as the weighted mean for participants' belief exceeded 3.7 which indicates strong significant belief. Moreover, participants expressed a strong belief that learning and communication strategies will influence their endeavors to achieve success in the English language learning process. Accordingly, the above discussion verifies the validity of the first research hypothesis "Novice university students in Saudi Arabia will show realistic beliefs about English language learning".

6.2 Analysis of Gender Effect on Learners' Beliefs about English Language Learning

Another aim for the present study was to find out whether there are any significant gender differences in learners' beliefs about English language learning in relation to the BALLI items. Towards this end, the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test was used to test the hypothesis that there are no significant effects of gender on Saudi university students' beliefs about English language learning. This test showed that there are no significant differences in responses between males and females in 14 BALLI items (41%), while significant differences were found in the other 20 items (59%) as shown in tables (7-11) and figures (1-5) below.

Table 7. Gender differences in relation to foreign language aptitude

Statements	Mean Rank		Wilcoxon -Mann-Whitn ey U	Asymp. (2-tailed)	Sig.
	Girls	Boys			
1. It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.	116.54	120.24	6720.000	.656	
2. Some people are born with a special ability which helps them learn a foreign language.	119.24	117.84	6855.000	.871	
10. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.	131.27	107.16	5520.000	.005	
15. I have foreign language aptitude.	128.70	109.44	5805.000	.018	
22. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.	145.80	94.26	3907.500	.000	
29. People who are good at math and science are not good at learning foreign languages.	117.28	119.58	6802.500	.790	
32. People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent.	107.49	128.28	5715.000	.016	
33. Saudis are good at learning foreign languages.	123.91	113.70	6337.500	.226	
34. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	123.09	114.42	6427.500	.306	

The above table and Figure 3 show significant differences in boys and girls' beliefs about *foreign language aptitude* only in items 10, 15, 22, and 32, while they share the same beliefs in the rest of items. Item ten

(Mann-Whitney $U=5520.00$, $p=.004$) shows a lower mean ranking of boys (107.17) compared to girls (131.27). This means that girls are more likely than men to believe that it is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one. Also, item twenty-two (Wilcoxon -Mann-Whitney $U=3907.00$, $p=.000$) which shows a remarkable mean ranking of girls (154.80) compared to boys (109.44) indicates that girls have a very stronger belief that they are better than men at learning foreign languages. Girls' responses also show that they have more positive attitudes than boys towards learning a foreign language where (Wilcoxon -Mann-Whitney $U=5805.00$, $p=.018$) and the mean ranking of girls (128.70) compared to boys (49.26). However, boys seem to have a stronger belief than girls that people who speak more than one language well are very intelligent.

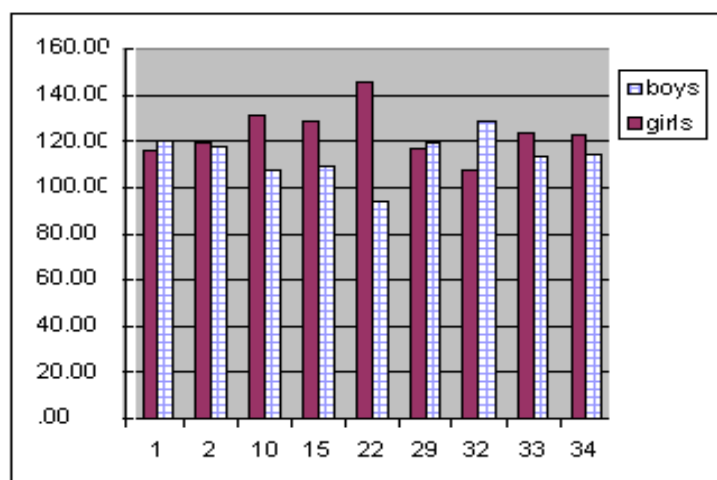


Figure 1. Gender differences in relation to foreign language aptitude

The following table illustrates the effect of gender differences on learners' beliefs about the difficulty of language learning.

Table 8. Gender differences as regard to the difficulty of English language learning

Statements	Mean Rank		Wilcoxon -Mann-Whitn ey U	Asymp. (2-tailed)	Sig.
	Girls	Boys			
3. Some languages are easier to learn than others	131.95	106.56	5445.000	.003	
4. The language I am trying to learn is very difficult.	126.34	111.54	6067.500	.079	
6. I believe that I will ultimately learn to speak this language very well.	133.70	105.00	5250.000	.001	
14. A language learner needs at least four years to learn about the language and use it fluently.	110.73	125.40	6075.000	.082	
24. It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language.	88.77	144.90	3637.500	.000	
28. It is easier to read and write this language than to speak and understand it.	101.68	133.44	5070.000	.000	

The above results illustrate the effect of gender differences on learners' beliefs about the difficulty of language learning. Item 3 (Wilcoxon -Mann-Whitney $U=5445.000$, $p=.003$) which shows a high mean ranking of girls (131.95) compared to boys (106.56) indicates that girls do have higher beliefs than boys that some languages are easier to learn than others. Also, girls seem to possess more self confidence in their learning abilities than boys to believe that they will eventually learn to speak the English language very well where Wilcoxon -Mann-Whitney $U=5250.000$, $p=.001$ and the mean ranking of girls (133.70) compared to boys (105.00). On the other hand, boys are likely to have more realistic than girls to believe that language learners need a longer period of time to learn

about the language and use it fluently. This result contrasts with that of Siebert (2003) who found males rated their own fellow citizens' abilities more highly, and believed that a language could be learnt in a shorter time than women did. Additional significant gender differences were also found in students' beliefs concerning the difficulty of learning to use the different language skills. Responses for items 24 and 28 show that boys held a stronger belief than girls that it is easier to speak than understand a foreign language. Boys also are more likely than girls to believe that it is easier to read and write the English language than to speak and understand it. For this reason, in item 24 it was found that Wilcoxon -Mann-Whitney $U=3736.500$, $p=.000$ and the mean rank for boys is 144.90 compared to that of girls 88.7. However, this last result seem to be in favor of girls rather than boys because girls seem to have better awareness that writing and speaking are productive skills that need serious efforts to learn to use. These results are illustrated also in Figure 2 below.

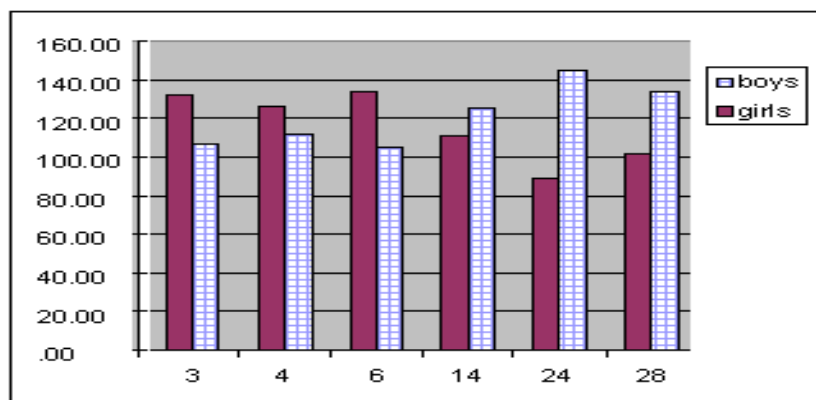


Figure 2. Gender differences as regard to the difficulty of English language learning

Analysis of gender differences as to the nature of language learning in Table 9 below reveals similarities between boys and girls in most items.

Table 9. Gender differences as regard the nature of language learning

Statements	Mean Rank		Wilcoxon -Mann-Whitn ey U	Asymp. (2-tailed)	Sig.
	Girls	Boys			
5. The structure of English is different from that of Arabic.	139.78	99.60	4575.000	.000	
8. It is necessary to know the foreign culture in order to speak the foreign language.	114.85	121.74	6532.500	.416	
11. It is better to learn a foreign language in the foreign country.	99.04	135.78	4777.500	.000	
16. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words.	122.62	114.84	6480.000	.351	
20. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of a lot of grammar rules.	122.82	114.66	6457.500	.321	
25. Learning a foreign language is different from learning other school subjects.	117.96	118.98	6877.500	.902	
26. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of translating from English.	129.72	108.54	5692.500	.012	

The data in the above table shows that significant differences are found in items 5, 11, and 26 only. Both genders differed in their belief that a foreign language is better taught in a foreign country. Item 11 (Wilcoxon -Mann-Whitney $U=4777.500$, $p=.000$) which shows a high mean ranking of boys (135.78) compared to girls (99.04) indicates that boys have a higher belief than girls that it is better to learn a foreign language in the

foreign country. Yet, this last result might indicate that girls are more realistic than boys to believe that it is not necessarily to learn a foreign language in a foreign country because there are millions of EFL learners worldwide who learnt to speak English well in their native countries. However, boys seem to be more levelheaded than girls in other aspects. Responses to item 26 (Wilcoxon -Mann-Whitney $U=5692.500$, $p=.012$) which shows a high mean ranking of girls (129.72) compared to boys (108.54) indicates that boys are more likely than girls to believe that language learning is not just a matter of translating from English since there are many other different approaches and techniques that can be used in the English language learning process. These results are demonstrated in Figure 3 below.

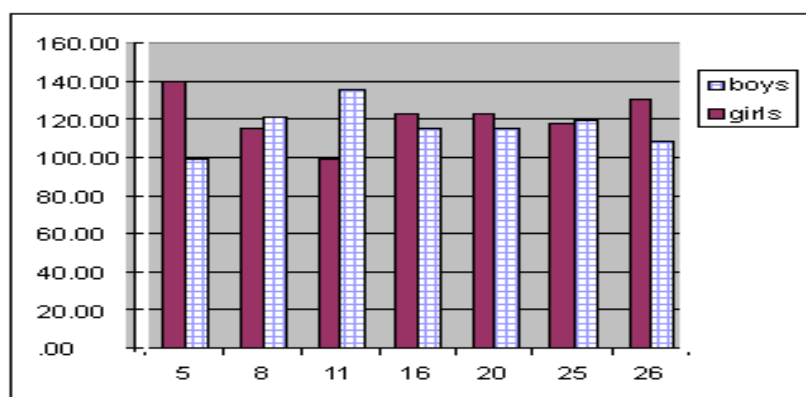


Figure 3. Gender differences as regard the nature of language learning

Important information is provided in Table 10 about the preferred learning styles of both boys and girls. The findings reveal girls' awareness of the effect of learning and using good pronunciation and accent on expressing and getting meaning.

Table 10. Gender differences regarding Learning and communication strategies

Statements	Mean Rank		Wilcoxon -Mann-Whitn ey U	Asymp. (2-tailed)	Sig.
	Girls	Boys			
7. It is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent pronunciation and accent.	141.07	98.46	4432.500	.000	
9. You shouldn't say anything in the foreign language until you can say it correctly.	128.97	109.20	5775.000	.023	
12. If I heard some people speaking the language I am trying to learn, would go up to them so that I could practice speaking the language.	112.35	123.96	6255.000	.159	
13. It's o.k. to guess if you don't know a word in the foreign language	107.42	128.34	5707.500	.015	
17. It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	134.31	104.46	5182.500	.000	
18. I feel self-conscious speaking the foreign language in front of other people.	115.86	120.84	6645.000	.557	
19. If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning it will be hard to get rid of them later on.	120.66	116.58	6697.500	.639	
21. It is important to practice in the language laboratory	135.12	103.74	5092.500	.000	

In the above table, item 7 (Wilcoxon -Mann-Whitney $U=4432.500$, $p=.000$) shows a high mean ranking of girls (141.07) compared to boys (98.46). This signifies that girls have more sound beliefs than boys that it is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent pronunciation and accent. Another significant gender difference is

that girls seem to stress accuracy of the foreign language while boys emphasize fluency. The results in the above table illustrates that boys are more rational than girls in believing that mistakes are expected from language learners and that language learners should not be demotivated by those mistakes. Therefore they disagree with girls in their belief that one shouldn't say anything in the foreign language until he can say it correctly. In item 13, (Wilcoxon -Mann-Whitney $U=5707.500$, $p=.023$) which shows a high mean ranking of boys (128.34) compared to girls (107.42) indicates that boys are more likely than girls to realize that mistakes during the process of language learning will disappear eventually through practicing the foreign language and using guessing techniques. Another significant difference between boys and girls relates to their learning strategy. In items 21, as well as item 17, (Wilcoxon -Mann-Whitney $U=5092.500$, $p=.023$) shows a high mean rank of girls (135.2) compared to boys (103.74). This shows that girls are more likely than boys to rely mainly on repetition and memorization for learning English and to prefer practicing English in the language laboratory. Besides, girls seem to realize the positive role of technology in learning English. This result might also indicate that boys prefer to learn the language differently through a set of interactive activities and active involvement everyday meaningful situations. The following figure provided further illustration for these results.

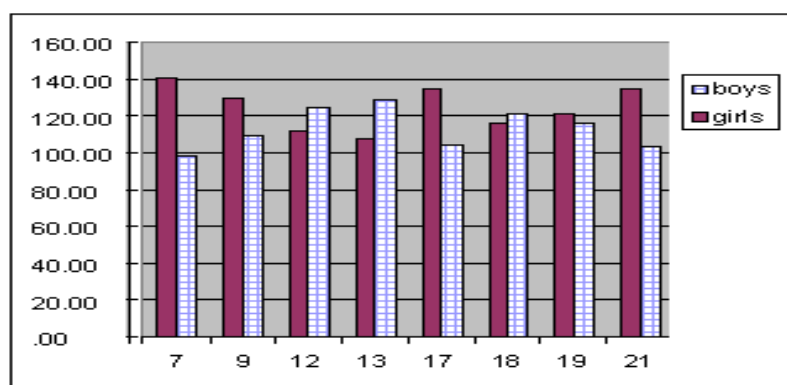


Figure 4. Gender differences regarding Learning and communication strategies

The following table, Table 11, provides essential information with regard to gender differences in respondents' perceptions for the motivation and expectation items.

Table 11. Gender differences in relation to motivation and expectation

Statements	Mean Rank		Wilcoxon -Mann-Whitn ey U	Asymp. (2-tailed)	Sig.
	Girls	Boys			
23. If I get to speak this language very well, I will have many opportunities to use it.	137.49	101.64	4830.000	.000	
27. If I learn to speak this language very well, it will help me get a good job.	108.84	127.08	5865.000	.023	
30. Saudis think that it is important to speak a foreign language.	133.70	105.00	5250.000	.001	
31. I would like to learn this language so that I can get to know its speakers better	127.49	110.52	5940.000	.038	

In item 27, in the above table, (Wilcoxon -Mann-Whitney $U=5865.000$, $p=.023$) which shows a high mean ranking of boys (127.08) compared to girls (108.84) indicates that boys are more instrumentally motivated than girls to learn to speak English very well to get a good job. Conversely, the results show that girls (127.49) are more integratively oriented than boys (110.52) to learn English so as to get to know and socialize with its speakers in a better way. This result confirms that of Bacon and Finnemann (1992) who found that women in their study were more open to authentic input and possess a higher level of motivation and strategy use in language learning in addition to a higher level of social interaction with the target language (Spanish).

Additionally, item 30 (Wilcoxon -Mann-Whitney $U=5250.000$, $p=.001$) which shows a high mean ranking of girls (133.70) compared to boys (105.00) indicates that girls are also more likely than boys to believe that it is important to speak a foreign language since they will have many opportunities to use it. These differences are clearly illustrated in the following figure.

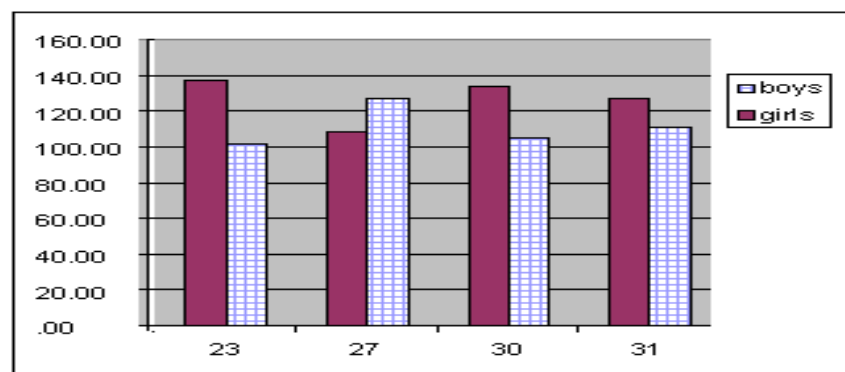


Figure 5. Gender differences in relation to motivation and expectation

All in all, further significant results were obtained by applying regression to test significant relationship between gender and the five areas of students' general foreign language learning beliefs. In Table 12 and Figure 6 below, the mean analysis results of students' beliefs about learning English and its relationship with gender are represented.

Table 12. Analysis of students' common beliefs about learning English as a foreign language according to gender

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Aptitude	Boys	125	3.4133	.39977	.03576	-3.598	234	.000
	Girls	111	3.6006	.39819	.03779	-3.599	230.924	.000
Difficulty	Boys	125	3.3867	.48665	.04353	1.405	234	.161
	Girls	111	3.3018	.43491	.04128	1.415	233.989	.158
Nature	Boys	125	3.6914	.56313	.05037	-1.114	234	.266
	Girls	111	3.7683	.48848	.04636	-1.123	233.878	.262
Strategy	Boys	125	3.6950	.66702	.05966	-3.420	234	.001
	Girls	111	3.9459	.41445	.03934	-3.512	210.424	.001
Motivation	Boys	125	4.0500	.72401	.06476	-3.712	234	.000
	Girls	111	4.3514	.48310	.04585	-3.798	217.796	.000

The above findings implied that there are differences between male and female (gender) beliefs about learning English in three aspects out of five. It means that both genders that participated in this study analysis did have significant concern in terms of English language aptitude $p=0.00$, $p=0.00$ learning and communication strategies $p=0.01$, $p=0.01$ and motivation and expectations $p=0.00$, $p=0.00$. The results also showed that Saudi female students showed higher concerns about those beliefs compared to those of males. Additionally, the statistical analysis indicated no significant differences in relation to gender in the areas of the difficulty of learning the English language where $p=0.161$, $p=0.158$ and the nature of language learning where $p=0.266$, $p=0.262$. Correspondingly, Bernat and Lloyd (2007) found that the males and females differed significantly in only two BALLI items, as women were more likely to perceive multilingualism as a feature of intelligence than men were, and also enjoyed talking to natives less than their male counterparts did. However, results of the present study disagree with those of Tercanlioglu (2005) who found no significant differences in beliefs about language learning of 45 male and 73 female full-time undergraduate EFL teacher trainees at a Turkish university. She concluded age, stage of life, and contextual differences in the language-learning situation may also be important

sources of group variation in learner beliefs. In conclusion, the discussion of data illustrated in tables (7-11) and figures (1-5) provides a detailed answer to the second research question "How *does gender affect learners' beliefs about English language learning?*". In addition, it disproves the validity of the second research hypothesis "There are no significant effects of gender on Saudi university students' beliefs about English language learning."

7. Conclusion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore the overall beliefs Saudi novice university learners have about learning English as a foreign language. It also aims at gaining a better understanding of the effect of gender on determining learners' beliefs. Using a modified Arabic version of Horwitz's (1987) BALLI, the results reveal that Saudi university students have positive and realistic beliefs about foreign language as regard motivation and expectations about learning English as a foreign language, the nature of language learning and communication strategies. The findings also indicate that overall males and females seem to respond in a similar fashion in terms of their beliefs about language learning as regard the difficulty and the nature of language learning, with statistically significant gender differences in the areas of English language aptitude, learning and communication and motivation and expectations. The male students of the Intensive English Language Course in Qassim University believed that learning English strategies and courses would be easy to them, and female student tendency to have and use superior and higher communication technology and strategies to learn English. The study also shows that males and females differed on the degree of enjoyment both genders find in practicing English with native speakers, with females being more likely to enjoy the experience than males. The findings also reveal that, compared to males, females enjoy learning practicing English in the language lab and prefer repetition and memorization. It may be likely that female students' shyness to speak is a more of a gender and cultural issue related to situational anxiety and norms of the Saudi conservative society. Additionally, male and female Saudi students differed in their considerations of beliefs related to their own language abilities, the length of time it takes to acquire a new language, the importance of learning and using excellent pronunciation. Females were much more confident about their own learning abilities than males. However, males were more realistic than females as regard the length of time it would take them to learn English. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that some differences between boys and girls might not necessarily gender bound since other social, personal, cultural, cognitive and affective factors can influence the nature of foreign language learners' beliefs.

A number of pedagogical implications can be gleaned from the present study. Firstly, identification of learners' beliefs and reflection on their possible effect on language learning may lead to increased awareness and even adjustment of their expectations. Secondly, the identification of Saudi learners' beliefs might provide guidelines to EFL teachers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to tailor their teaching methods to avoid mismatches between classroom practices and learners' beliefs. Finally, educators might take learners' prior beliefs as well as gender differences about EFL learning into account when designing language learning syllabi because any material taught in the EFL program will have to correspond with those prior beliefs and other gender, social, personal, cultural, cognitive and affective factors.

Due to the small size of population in the present study, it appears difficult to generalize the findings of this research to the entire population of English language students in Saudi Arabia. Accordingly, future research is needed to be carried out on a wider scale so as to investigate the role learners' beliefs across different populations, contexts, majors and age groups. Additional studies are also necessary to get a better understanding of the nature and development of language beliefs among EFL teachers and learners. Research as such will develop teachers' awareness of learners' beliefs of language learning as well as their own so as to assist less successful language learners to become successful. Finally, a careful investigation of language teachers' beliefs about language learning might develop the design and content of EFL teacher education programs in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

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