The Relationship between Iranian EFL Learners' Beliefs about Language Learning and Their Use of Learning Strategies

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Abstract

The present study investigated the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' learning strategies use and their language learning beliefs. A sample of 200 Iranian EFL learners who were all English language learners at different language institutes participated in this study. Two instruments, Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) and the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), were used to collect data. The data analysis, through Pearson Correlation, revealed a positive significant relationship between overall BALLI and SILL, which indicates that learners with stronger beliefs use more learning strategies. Further, the results of Regression analysis indicated that only the "learning and communication strategies" and "foreign language aptitude" subscales in BALLI are significant predictors of overall strategy use. The findings of the present study suggest that understanding learners' beliefs about language learning is critical to understand strategies used by learners and accordingly plan proper language instructions.

Keywords: language learning beliefs, language learning strategies, EFL context

1. Introduction

In recent years, the amount of research on the role that learners' beliefs and learning strategies play in second or foreign language learning have considerably increased. The main stimulus for this new trend in research is the fact that some language learners are more successful than others regardless of methods or techniques of teaching. Part of this difference may be ascribed to learners' beliefs (Hurwitz, 1987), and specific sets of strategies (Oxford, 1990) which are used by different learners to learn a foreign or second language.

Oxford (1990) defines language learning strategies as "specific actions taken by language learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations" (p.8). Horwitz (1987) indicated that second language learners often have different beliefs or notions about language learning, which are affected by students' earlier experiences as language learners or shaped by their own cultural backgrounds.

During past thirty years or so, research on language learning strategies have become a recognized field, while the emphasis has been shifted from teachers and teaching to the learners and learning. Several research studies have shown that successful learners employ learning strategies more often and effectively than do poor learners (Reiss, 1985; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). Accordingly, researchers began to improve the learning of less successful learners by teaching them the needed strategies by uncovering the characteristics of successful language learners. Moreover, Abraham and Van (1990) noted that the difference between good and poor language learners concerning their language learning strategies use is not quantitative but qualitative. That is, although less successful learners use lots of the same strategies as successful language learners, the difference is in how effactally they match the learning strategies to the learning task.

In addition, it is generally agreed that language learners enter the classroom with a variety of beliefs about the target language. According to Ellis (2008) 'beliefs' constitute an individual difference variable which is dynamic and situated. He noted 'beliefs' influence both the process and product of learning. Rifkin (2000) asserts that learners' beliefs about the learning process are "of critical importance to the success or failure of any student's efforts to master a foreign language" (p. 394). It has also been illuminated through literature that successful learners hold insightful beliefs about the processes of language learning, their own capabilities and the nature of

language, conversely, learners may have mistaken or negative beliefs which might lead to less effective strategy use, poor cognitive performance and classroom anxiety (Horwitz, Reid & Hresko, Victori & Lockhart as cited in Bernat, 2007). Thus, learners' beliefs have an important role in the learning process which may possibly either facilitate or hinder the successful language learning.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Considering learners as the central part of language learning process, the researchers should focus on individual learners' characteristics, their beliefs and their learning strategies. Dickinson (1987) and Wenden (1991) (both as cited in Mokhtari, 2007) contended that language learning beliefs and learning strategies are important components of understanding 'How to learn' second/foreign language. So, language instructors should help learners develop insightful beliefs about the language they are learning and effective language learning strategies.

It seems there is a gap in the literature, as researchers found there has been no research identifying English language learners' learning strategies use or their language learning beliefs in Iranian private language schools. As almost all language learners begin to learn English in private language schools than universities and they are not as aware of learning strategies and beliefs as English major university students are, the purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between the beliefs which Iranian EFL learners hold about language learning and their learning strategies choice with specific focus on the amount of strategies and category differences.

1.2 Related Empirical Studies

Researchers (Abraham & Van, as cited in Chang 2010; Horwitz, 1987, 1988; Wenden, 1986, 1987) proposed a relationship between students' beliefs about language learning and their learning strategy use. Further, they suggested that learners' preconceived beliefs about language learning may have the potential to affect their actions as language learners and their choice to use certain language learning strategies.

Considering such a correlation between learners' use of learning strategies and their beliefs about language learning, it feels some further researches needed to be done through various methods and analyses to clarify this issue in different learning contexts and learner groups.

Thus, Wen and Johnson (1997, as cited in Penhani, 2006) using several measures of L1 and L2 proficiency found that there is a causal, direct relationship between beliefs and strategy variables. The results revealed that beliefs about language learning positively correlated with form-focused strategies, management of learning strategies, meaning-focused strategies, and mother-tongue-avoidance strategies. They also came to the conclusion that the positive relationship between language learning beliefs and their operationalization in use of learning strategies was important for strategy training. They noted that "The direct effects of belief variables on strategy variables were strong and consistent, reinforcing the view that teachers and material writers need to be aware of, and sensitive to, students' pre-existing assumptions about the language learning process" (p.40).

Yang (1999) studied the relationship between learning strategies and beliefs about language learning of 505 EFL university students in Taiwan. Using Horwitz's (1987) BALLI and Oxford's (1990) SILL, he found that language learners' self-efficacy beliefs were strongly related to their use of all types of strategies. At the same time, their beliefs about the nature of learning spoken English were closely linked to the use of formal oral practice strategies, so the results revealed a cyclical relationship between learners' beliefs and strategy use.

Kim (2001), likewise, conducted a study on 60 Korean university students to examine the association between their use of learning strategies and language learning beliefs. Administering BALLI and SILL in such a research, he proposed a strong relationship between the students' use of learning strategies and language learning beliefs.

Using BALLI and SILL, in the same manner, Penhani (2006) suggested that learners' total belief score influenced cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies significantly among 280 male university students in Iran.

Sioson (2011) investigated the relationship between learners' beliefs and their strategy use among 300 first year college students in Philippine. BALLI and SILL were administered in this study to collect information on language learners' beliefs and their learning strategies. The researcher found out that language learning strategies in general were negatively correlated with language learning beliefs. Moreover, only the motivation subscale of beliefs was the significant predictor of speaking performance.

At the same time, administering two questionnaires (BALLI and SILL) to investigate the relationship between learners' learning beliefs and strategy use among 203 Iranian English undergraduate learners, Abedini, Rahimi and Zare-ee (2011) indicated learners with more positive beliefs use such strategies more in their learning

process.

Reviewing literature on the theme of learners' language learning beliefs and their strategy use, it seems still there is a need for further research as the available studies are mainly concerned with university students and there is a gap concerning Iranian EFL learners of private language schools. So, such a gap in the literature sparked off the researchers' urge to investigate this issue among learners of private language schools in an Iranian context.

1.3 Research Questions

The present study focused on the following research questions:

1) What are the Iranian EFL learners' beliefs about language learning?

2) What are the language learning strategies used by the Iranian EFL learners?

3) Is there a relationship between Iranian EFL learners' beliefs about language learning and their strategy use?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The researchers conducted the present study at seven private language institutes in Tabriz, a city in north-west of Iran. There were 200 EFL learners participated in the study. Among them 100 (%50) students were male and 100 (%50) were female. Moreover, they were all senior learners aged over 15. All the participants and institutes were selected randomly.

2.2 Instruments

In this study two paper-and-pencil instruments were used.

The first instrument was the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) developed by Horwitz (1987). It was translated into Persian by the researchers and its reliability as indicated by Cronbach alpha turned to be 0.67. BALLI (a Likert scale questionnaire) includes 34 items which assess learners' beliefs in five areas: 1) foreign language aptitude, 2) the difficulty of language learning, 3) the nature of language learning, 4) learning and communication strategies and 5) motivations and expectations.

And the second instrument was the Persian adaptation of Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language learning (SILL; ESL/EFL 7.0 version). It was translated and validated for Iranian learners by Tahmasebi (1999) (in Abedini et al, 2011) and the Cronbach alpha calculated for this instrument in the present study turned out to be 0.89. SILL includes 50 items and they are grouped into six categories: 1) memory-related strategies, 2) general cognitive strategies, 3) compensatory strategies, 4) metacognitive strategies, 5) affective strategies and 6) social strategies.

2.3 Procedure

The questionnaires were administered during winter 2012. Before administering the instruments, the study was explained to the participants and they were ensured that no one other than the researchers would have access to their responses. They were asked to take the study seriously and respond honestly. Then BALLI and SILL were administered and the participants were asked to choose a number on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1(strongly disagree) to 5(strongly agree) for BALLI and 1(never or almost never true of me) to 5(always or almost always true of me) for SILL.

The quantitative data collected through Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) were then analyzed by Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS – Version 11.5) including descriptive statistics, Pearson Correlation and Regression.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive Analyses of the BALLI

To address the first research question, descriptive analysis was conducted in order to analyze the learners' answers to the BALLI items. The results of the BALLI responses are described in table 1.

Table 1. BALLI categories and frequencies

Beliefs	Mean	Rank
Foreign language aptitude	3.30	3
Difficulty of language learning	3.21	5
Nature of language learning	3.28	4
Learning and communication strategies	3.62	2
Motivations and expectations	4.07	1

Table 1 presents the mean of each subcategory of BALLI and its rank in frequency. The highest mean goes to "Motivations and expectations" category while the lowest mean goes to "Difficulty of language learning".

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for overall BALLI responses

Beliefs about language learning	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
	3.49	0.30	2.29	4.26

In summary, the obtained results showed us that the overall "belief" mean fell within the medium range as shown in table 2 and can be concluded that a good number of participants have optimistic beliefs toward learning English language.

Table 3. Reported beliefs categorized by being most and least agreed

Beliefs	Max. mean	Min. mean
Foreign language aptitude (FLA)	2 (3.88)	5 (2.42)
Difficulty of language learning (DLL)	10 (3.76)	13 (2.65)
Nature of language learning (NLL)	19 (3.69)	16 (2.38)
Learning and communication strategies (LCS)	25 (4.22)	22 (2.68)
Motivation and expectations (MaE)	33 (4.48)	31 (3.54)

Table 3 presents the beliefs in each category with the maximum and minimum mean indicating which items are the most agreed or disagreed by the participants. The FLA item (item 2) "Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages" is the strongest beliefs in the category which is agreed by 77% of the participants and item 5 "People who are good at math or science are not good at learning foreign languages" is disagreed by 53%. The DDL item (item10) "Some languages are easier than others" is agreed by 72% of participants and (item13) "It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language" is disagreed by 51%. NLL item (item19) "Learning a foreign language is different than learning other academic subjects" is agreed by 65% while item 16 "It is best to learn English in an English speaking country" is disagreed by 61%. In LCS category item 25 "It is important to repeat and practice a lot" is agreed by 79% but item 22 "You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly" is disagreed by 52%. In the last category i.e., Motivations and expectations, strongest belief category held by the participants, the most agreed item is item 33 "I want to learn to speak English very well" agreed by 87% while the most disagreed item (item 31) "I would like to learn English so that I can get to know native English speakers better" is disagreed by only 19% of the participants.

3.2 Descriptive Analyses of the SILL

In order to answer the second research question, descriptive analysis was conducted on the participants' responses to the SILL in order to examine the most and the least favored strategies used by learners of English as a foreign language. Based on Oxford's (1990) SILL average analysis, mean scores are put in the ranges of the frequency of the strategy use into three levels: High (above 3.5), Medium (2.5 – 3.4), Low (below 2.4).

Table 4. SILL categories and frequencies

Strategies	Mean	Rank	Frequency
Memory-related	2.94	6	Medium
General cognitive	3.18	5	Medium
Compensation	3.32	3	Medium
Metacognitive	3.82	1	High
Affective	3.19	4	Medium
Social	3.41	2	Medium

Table 4 shows the mean of each strategy category and its rank in frequency of strategy use. The highest mean belongs to metacognitive strategies (M=3.82) followed by social strategies (M=3.41), compensation strategies (M=3.32), affective strategies (M=3.19), cognitive strategies (M=3.18) and the least mean belongs to memory-related strategies (M=2.94).

Table 5. Descriptive statistics related to overall SILL responses

Language Learning Strategies	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.	Frequency
	3.30	0.45	1.78	4.58	Medium

As it is shown in table 5, the overall frequency of strategy use (overall SILL mean) is 3.30 which indicate that participants use learning strategies moderately.

Moreover, close examining of each SILL items revealed that participants tended to use certain strategies much more frequently than others.

Table 6. Reported SILL items (the most and the least favored strategies)

Strategies	Max. mean	Min. mean
Memory-related	2 (3.62)	7 (2.07)
General cognitive	11 (3.69)	23 (2.64)
Compensation	29 (3.85)	27 (3.01)
Metacognitive	32 (4.24)	35 (3.44)
Affective	40 (3.77)	43 (1.87)
Social	45 (3.86)	48 (2.52)

Table 6 presents the most and the least used strategies in each category.

Among *memory* strategies item 2 "using new English words in a sentence to remember" is the most favored strategy while item 7 "physically acting out new words" is the least favored item. The most frequently used *cognitive* strategy is item 11 "trying to talk like native English speakers" but the least used one is "to make summaries of what is heard or read in English". The most used strategy among *compensation* strategies is item 29 "using a word or phrase that means the same thing when they can't think of a word" but the least one is item 27 "reading English texts without looking up every new word". Item 32 "paying attention when someone is speaking" among *metacognitive* strategies is the most favored and item 35 "looking for people to speak English with" is the least. Items 40 and 43 were the most and least used ones among *affective* strategies; while participants tend to "encourage themselves to speak English even when they're afraid of making mistakes", they are not much into "writing their feelings in a language learning diary. The most used strategy among *social* ones is item 45 "asking the other person to slow down or repeat if they can't understand something" but the least one is item 48 "asking for help from English speakers".

3.3 Relationship between BALLI and SILL

To answer the third question Pearson *r* Correlation was employed between the BALLI and the SILL subcategories and the overall scores. Based on the results, the present study revealed a significant positive relationship between participants' beliefs about language learning and their use of learning strategies (r=0.299, p=0.000).

Table 7. Correlations

SILL BALLI		Memory	cognitive	Compensatory	Metacognitive	Affective	Social	Overall SILL
FLA	P-Correlation	.317**	.355**	.186**	.118	.171*	.123	.307**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.008	.096	.016	.083	.000
	N	200	200	200	200	200	200	200
DLL	P-Correlation	.073	.081	-.122	.154*	.046	.012	.071
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.306	.255	.085	.030	.517	.865	.321
	N	200	200	200	200	200	200	200
NLL	P-Correlation	.198**	.113	-.142*	.089	.113	-.205**	.061
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.005	.110	.045	.211	.110	.004	.393
	N	200	200	200	200	200	200	200
LCS	P-Correlation	-.020	.271**	.324**	.300**	.202**	-.005	.253**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.777	.000	.000	.000	.004	.942	.000
	N	200	200	200	200	200	200	200
MaE	P-Correlation	-.040	.231**	.106	.473**	.123	.108	.248**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.574	.000	.134	.000	.082	.126	.000
	N	200	200	200	200	200	200	200
Overall BALLI	P-Correlation	.133	.323**	.081	.372**	.231**	.070	.299**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.061	.000	.232	.000	.001	.321	.000
	N	200	200	200	200	200	200	200

As shown in table 7, careful examination of each subcategory in both questionnaires indicates that the first category in BALLI "foreign language aptitude", had the strongest relationship with general cognitive strategies (r=0.355, p=0.000). The second category "the difficulty of language learning" is correlated with only metacognitive strategies (r=0.154, p=0.030). Beliefs about "the nature of language learning" has the highest negative correlation with social strategies (r=-0.205, p=0.004). The forth subcategory "learning and communication strategies" is highly correlated with compensation strategies (r=0.324, p=0.000). And the strongest linkage is between the last subcategory of BALLI "motivations and expectations" and metacognitive strategies (r=0.473, p=0.000). Finally, results reveal that there is a strong relationship between overall beliefs and metacognitive strategies (r=0.372, p=0.000) followed by cognitive strategies (r=0.323, p=0.000) and then affective strategies (r=0.231, p=0.001).

Moreover, regression analyses were employed in order to determine the strongest predictor of language learning strategy use among the subcategories of beliefs about language learning.

Table 8. Regression for SILL

Subcategories of BALLI	Beta	t value	Sig.
Foreign language aptitude	.236	3.308	.001*
Difficulty of language learning	.021	.315	.753
Nature of language learning	-.025	-.365	.716
Learning and communication strategies	.152	2.058	.041*
Motivation and expectations	.113	1.486	.139

Table 8 shows that there are only two subcategories of beliefs that had a significant predicting influence on the use of language learning strategies by the participants: the difficulty of language learning (p=0.001), learning and motivation strategies (p=0.041).

4. Discussion

Research questions being used as a framework, this section presents the discussion and interpretation of findings followed by pedagogical implications.

In order to answer the first research question, the "Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory" was used. Based on the results of the descriptive statistics, the strongest belief category was the category of "motivations and expectations". This category concerns the desire and expectation for language learning opportunities. Results

showed that learners expressed a high degree of motivation toward learning English. This was expected since the participants were learning English in private institutes by their own desire. Generally, participants yielded optimistic beliefs about language learning.

In order to reply to the second research question the questionnaire of the SILL was used. As the results demonstrated, the "metacognitive" strategies which involve planning and organizing were highly favored by the participants. This might be the result of the fact that the participants were all adult learners and adults keep monitoring and evaluating their learning more than the children, also, since Iranian EFL learners do not have enough exposure to English in their daily life they need to make their own efforts to create ample prospects to learn and practice the language they are learning. This finding supports Lightbown and Spada's (1999) claim that adult learners use planning strategies and adjustments as they do in learning other skills. Another considerable reason for this high use of metacognitive strategies might be a product of educational system and materials in language learning institutes. This finding is in contrast with the previous study which was done by Abedini et al (2011) among Iranian EFL university students where metacognitive strategies were the least favored ones. This contradictory finding maybe due to different educational systems where studies were conducted (private institutes Vs. University). The overall mean score of the SILL demonstrates that the participants of this study were medium toward high strategy users. This finding is in line with the results of other similar studies in EFL contexts (Chamot, 2005; Hong, 2006; Soleimani, 2008; Zare, 2010).

To give a response to the third research question 'whether there is a relationship between the EFL learners' beliefs and their strategy use' Pearson r correlations and Regressions were conducted. The results showed us that there is a significant positive relationship between participants' beliefs and their use of strategies. So, it can be inferred that learners with more positive and stronger beliefs use strategies more often. Further the most notable correlation was between the overall BALLI and metacognitive strategies.

In addition, multiple regression analyses demonstrated that learners' beliefs about "foreign language aptitude" and "Learning and communication strategies" are the stronger predictors of their strategy use. So, it can be concluded that students' beliefs about language aptitude and expectations or motivational beliefs are probably the most effective belief categories affecting the choice of language learning strategies. That is the more optimistic and stronger the students' beliefs in these categories are the more often and effectively they use learning strategies.

In summary, this study concluded that Iranian EFL learners' beliefs affected their language learning strategy use. It is expected that the findings of this study will provide guidelines for teachers, materials developers and students.

There are many factors to explain individual differences in strategy choice; among them are beliefs about language learning. While learners have already formed their perceptions or beliefs about language learning, it is recommended that teachers create such an atmosphere for learners so that they can develop a positive attitude toward language learning. Teachers should try to encourage learners' positive beliefs and not to stimulate their misconceptions or negative beliefs. This can be achieved through appropriate materials and task choice, and constructive feedback. It is important for teachers to raise learners' awareness about language learning strategies and their usefulness; this can help them to be more self-confident, autonomous and successful learners. Material developers can also benefit from the findings of this study by providing language learning materials which counteract learners' negative beliefs and misconceptions but compatible with their positive beliefs regarding language leaning.

To sum up, understanding learners' beliefs about language learning is fundamental to understanding learner strategies and planning appropriate language instructions.

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