

Language Learning Strategies and Beliefs about Language Learning in High-School Students and Students Attending English Institutes: Are They Different?

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Abstract

This paper reports a comparative study exploring language learning strategy use and beliefs about language learning of high-school students and students attending English institutes. Oxford's (1990) strategy inventory for language learning (SILL) and Horwitz's (1987) beliefs about language learning inventory (BALLI), were used to collect data. One-way multivariate analysis of variance was used to analyze the data. The results revealed significant differences between the two groups regarding their strategy use and beliefs about language learning. Institute students used significantly more memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive and social strategies. Also they held stronger beliefs about the difficulty of language learning and motivation and expectation than their peers in high school. The conclusions of the study along with related pedagogical implications are also discussed.

Keywords: language learning, language learning strategies, beliefs about language learning, high school students, English institute students

1. Introduction

Since the mid 1980s, an increasing interest in the role of individual learners' in language learning led researchers to explore learner variables as a method of analyzing diversities in students' command in learning a foreign or second language. Learners' use of learning strategies and their beliefs about language learning are among these variables which have been explored and investigated as heated topics in the realm of second language acquisition. Some studies have shown that students' perceptions, beliefs and attitudes are important contributive factors in the learning process and in the final achievement (Breen, 2001). For instance, second/foreign language learners may have firm beliefs and opinions about the nature and the process of the language learning, its difficulty, the efficacy of learning strategies, their own assumptions about success and teaching approaches. Horwitz (1987, 1988) found that prior exposure to language learning situations along with cultural backgrounds can influence learners' beliefs about language learning. Also, the possible relationship between the learners' beliefs about language learning and their choice of learning strategies has been suggested in some studies (Abraham & Vann, 1987; Horwitz, 1987, 1988; Chang and Shen, 2005; Yang, 1999). According to Hong (2006), investigating students' beliefs and their relationship with more specific areas such as language learning strategies, can provide us with valuable sources of insight into the language learning process.

Learners' beliefs about the nature and process of language and learning and the use of learning strategies have been investigated and studied by some Iranian researchers in recent years (Fazeli, 2011; Nikoopour & Farsani, 2010; Pishghadam & Pourali, 2011; Dehghan Harati, 2011; Yamini & Dehghan, 2005). However, very few studies have compared different proficiency groups in terms of their language learning strategies and beliefs (Ghavamnia et al., 2011; Abedini et al., 2011; Yamini & Dehghan, 2005). English language learning and teaching in Iran has a special status: although English is a compulsory subject from the first grade in junior high school and the students study English for at least two hours a week during seven years, many of them lack basic communicative abilities at the end of their education in senior high school. Their limited proficiency in English which is mostly due to a dominance of the grammar-translation method in high schools (Dolati & Seliman, 2011) also negatively affects their performance in English courses in university. Some students, however, have the chance of attending

English institutes outside the school. These are private, usually well-equipped schools for teaching English which are, for the most part, concentrated on teaching listening and speaking skills through more scientific and modern methodologies. Students attending these institutes often have a better command in the classes of high school and are outstandingly more proficient, more successful language learners compared to their peers who do not attend English institutes. Seeking solutions for problems of this sort, Chamot (2004) believes that an important reason supporting research into language learning strategies is that less successful language learners can be taught new strategies, and become better language learners. Therefore, in order to improve language instruction in high school to an efficacy level comparable to that of the English institutes, an understanding of the two groups' language learning strategies and beliefs seems necessary. As Horwitz (1999) asserted, an integral part of appreciating learner strategies and devising effective language instruction is identifying learner beliefs about language learning; nevertheless, so far there has been no investigation of how these beliefs and strategies may vary across public high-school students and private English institutes. Thus, the aim of the present study is to start compensating for this lack of research attempt, by examining the difference between language learning strategies and beliefs of high-school students and students attending English institutes.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1 Learners' Beliefs about Language Learning

Language learning beliefs have been defined in the literature as "general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning, and about the nature of language learning and teaching" (Victori & Lockhart, 1995, p. 224). Beliefs about language learning are regarded as a constituent of metacognitive knowledge, which involve the conceptions that individuals hold about themselves as language learners, inclusive of their objectives and demands (Flavell, 1987; cited in Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005). Barcelos (2000; cited in Aragao, 2011) suggested that language teachers should take account of their students' beliefs as tools the students use in understanding their learning context and in dealing with it. Horwitz (1999) also deemed it critical to be conscious about learner beliefs in order to better appreciate their approaches to language learning, and their practice of learning strategies to improve language education.

So far, belief studies have been mostly concentrated on English language learners' beliefs using BALLI as the instrument in different ESL and EFL contexts. These studies have investigated the link between beliefs and gender (Bernat and Lloyd, 2007; Tercanlioglu, 2005; Siebert, 2003), language proficiency (Abedini et al., 2011), language learning strategies (Yang, 1999), the effect of culture on beliefs (Horwitz, 1999), and the latent aspects of language learners' beliefs (Sakui & Gaines, 1999).

Regarding the effect of proficiency level on learners' beliefs, the findings of some studies have revealed a link between beliefs and proficiency and that they differ in more and less proficient learners (Samimy & Lee, 1997; cited in Manzanarasis & Murphy, 2010; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995; White, 1999; Abedini et al., 2011). Oxford & Ehrman's study of learner variables and proficiency ratings found a relationship between beliefs and ability to learn languages and proficiency in both speaking and reading. Samimy and Lee (1997) also conducted a study of EFL Chinese learners in which they correlated learner beliefs with proficiency. They found that learners with higher grades had more confidence in their ability to learn foreign languages and were more willing to practice with native speakers. Along the same line, Abedini et al. (2011) discovered a significant positive correlation between belief and language proficiency. EFL learners who possessed more constructive and plausible beliefs typically had higher level language proficiency.

2.2 Language Learning Strategies

Oxford (1990) defined language learning strategies as "... specific actions, behaviors, steps or techniques that students use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval or use of the new language" (p. 8). Different classification systems have made the effort to classify single strategies in broader categories. The most repetitively cited and comprehensive classification of learning strategies hitherto, is that of Oxford (1990) who developed the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL).

Oxford (1990) drew a general distinction between direct and indirect strategies, which are broken down into 6 groups: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. Direct strategies encompass "strategies that directly involve the target language" meaning that they "require mental processing of the language" (1990:37). whereas the indirect strategies "provide indirect support for language learning through focusing, planning, evaluating, seeking opportunities, controlling anxiety, increasing cooperation and empathy and other means" (1990:151). Oxford's classification was used as a framework for this study because of its systematicity and comprehensiveness.

Studies of language learning strategies, so far, have investigated the ways in which the selection of learning strategies is influenced by diverse factors like gender (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Yilmaz, 2010), age (Purdie & Oliver, 1999; Chesterfield & Chesterfield, 1985), second language proficiency (Liu, 2004), academic specialization (Peacock & Ho, 2003), bilingualism/monolingualism (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2007), cultural background (Oxford, 1996), motivation (Schmidt & Watanabe, 2001), and beliefs about language learning (Hong, 2006; Yang, 1999, Chang & Shen, 2005).

Many studies have been conducted investigating the correlation between strategy use and language proficiency in most of which a strong relationship was found between the two variables (Su, 2005; Griffiths, 2003; Wharton, 2000; Yang, 2010; Peacock & Ho, 2003). Su (2005) arrived at a meaningful difference in strategy use by self-evaluated English language proficiency which established a linear correlation between learning strategies and levels of self-rating proficiency. The results of Peacock and Ho (2003) and Abu Radwan (2008) also made it clear that higher proficiency learners habitually exercised more cognitive and metacognitive strategies. In another study, Yamini and Dehghan (2005) investigated the relationship between strategies, beliefs and proficiency level. The results revealed a significant relation between the proficiency level and the use of cognitive, compensation, and metacognitive strategies. Besides, more proficient students expressed negative views about traditional ways of language learning like memorization and learning grammar rules.

3. Research Questions

This study was conducted to answer the following questions: 1) Do high-school students differ in their use of language learning strategies from students attending English institutes? 2) Are high-school students' beliefs about language learning different from those of students attending English institutes?

4. The Study

4.1 Participants

Two hundred and sixty-two high-school students from different cities in Iran participated in this study. One-hundred and fifty-two students were female and one-hundred and ten students comprised the male group. One hundred and twenty-seven students were attending English institutes outside the school and one hundred and thirty-five were studying English only in the public high-school classes. Their age ranged from 14 to 18 years. The sample included students of the first to the fourth grade in high school. The high-school students' proficiency level ranged from beginner to lower-intermediate, and the institute students ranged from lower to upper intermediate.

4.2 Instrumentation

The instruments in this study were two questionnaires: the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL, ESL/EFL 7.0 version) developed by Oxford (1990), and the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI, ESL/EFL version) developed by Horwitz (1987). Both questionnaires were translated into Persian, pilot tested and modified for the study. A few questions regarding demographic information were also added.

The BALLI assesses learners' beliefs within five factors: the difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation and expectations. Items are scored on a five-point Likert scale: 1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neither agree nor disagree, 4= agree, 5= strongly agree. Cronbach alpha reliability for the translated version was found to be .66.

The SILL is divided into six categories of strategies: memory- storing and retrieving information (9 items), cognitive- understanding and producing the language (14 items), compensation- overcoming limitations in language learning (6 items), metacognitive- centering and directing learning (9 items), affective- controlling emotions, motivation (6 items), and social-cooperating with others in language learning (6 items). It employs a five-point Likert-scale: 1= never or almost never true of me, 2= generally not true of me, 3= somewhat true of me, 4= generally true of me, and 5= always or almost always true of me. The Cronbach alpha for the Persian version of the SILL was estimated to be .91.

4.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaires were administered during the students' regular class time by their English teachers. Before the administration procedure, a brief explanation on the purpose of the study was given to the students. The gathered data were analyzed using SPSS version 18.0. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were computed to summarize the students' responses to the SILL and BALLI items. To identify the significance of the difference between beliefs and strategy factors of high-school students and students attending

English institutes, a one-way between groups multivariate analysis of variance was conducted.

5. Results

5.1 Differences in Strategy Use

To answer the first research question concerning the difference between the two groups' strategy use, the data were submitted to a one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). The six factors of the SILL were used as the dependent variables and the type of school was used as the independent variable. There was a statistically significant difference between high-school students and students attending English institutes regarding their use of language learning strategies, $F(6, 257) = 7.25, P = .000$; Wilks' Lambda = .85; partial eta squared = .14. The results for each dependent variable were also considered separately (Table 1).

Table 1. One-way MANOVA for the effect of school type on the six strategy factors

Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Memory	598.476	1	598.476	16.956	.000	.061
Cognitive	2479.679	1	2479.679	37.885	.000	.126
Compensation	147.623	1	147.623	8.554	.004	.032
Metacognitive	1145.099	1	1145.099	21.763	.000	.077
Affective	3.831	1	3.831	.181	.671	.001
Social	242.148	1	242.148	14.021	.000	.051

As shown in Table 1, the difference of five strategy factors including memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive and social strategies, reached statistical significance, using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .008. The only factor which was not significantly different between the two groups was the factor of affective strategies. An investigation of mean scores of the two groups in the six strategy factors (Table 2) indicated that students attending English institutes used more strategies than their peers in high school.

Table 2. Mean scores of high-school and institute students in the six strategy factors

Dependent Variable	School	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
S1 memory	public school	25.259	.511	24.252	26.266
	Institute	28.271	.523	27.241	29.301
S2 cognitive	public school	38.652	.696	37.281	40.023
	institute	44.783	.712	43.380	46.186
S3 compensation	public school	16.163	.358	15.459	16.867
	Institute	17.659	.366	16.939	18.379
S4 metacognitive	public school	29.578	.624	28.348	30.807
	Institute	33.744	.639	32.487	35.002
S5 affective	public school	16.681	.396	15.902	17.461
	Institute	16.922	.405	16.125	17.720
S6 social	public school	14.859	.358	14.155	15.564
	Institute	16.775	.366	16.055	17.496

5.2 Differences in Language Learning Beliefs

To examine whether attending English institutes has any effect on the students' beliefs about language learning, a one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was done. The five belief factors and the type of school

were used as the dependent and the independent variables respectively. The MANOVA results revealed a statistically significant difference between high-school students and students attending English institutes in terms of their beliefs about language learning, $F(5, 256) = 7.02, P = .000$; Wilks' Lambda = .87; partial eta squared = .12. The results for each of the five belief factors were also obtained separately (Table 3).

Table 3. One-way MANOVA for the effect of school type on the five belief factors

Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Aptitude	9.127	1	9.127	.582	.446	.002
Difficulty	69.902	1	69.902	18.249	.000	.066
Nature	.931	1	.931	.075	.784	.000
Strategy	6.914	1	6.914	.670	.414	.003
Motivation	103.509	1	103.509	13.097	.000	.048

As seen in Table 3, the difference of two belief factors including beliefs about the difficulty of language learning, and motivation and expectations was statistically significant, using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .01. The factors of beliefs about foreign language aptitude, the nature of language learning, and learning and communication strategies were not significantly different between the two groups. An examination of mean scores of the two groups in the five belief factors (Table 4) revealed higher means of institute students in the factors of motivation and language learning difficulty.

Table 4. Mean scores of high-school and institute students in the five belief factors

Dependent Variable	School	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Aptitude	Public school	31.696	.341	31.025	32.368
	Institute	31.323	.351	30.631	32.015
Difficulty	Public school	10.407	.168	10.076	10.739
	Institute	11.441	.174	11.099	11.783
Nature	Public school	26.519	.303	25.921	27.116
	Institute	26.638	.313	26.022	27.254
Strategy	Public school	26.785	.276	26.241	27.330
	Institute	27.110	.285	26.549	27.672
Motivation	Public school	20.341	.242	19.864	20.817
	Institute	21.598	.249	21.107	22.090

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The data analysis revealed a number of significant findings. Regarding language learning strategy use, it was found that students attending English institutes used significantly more memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive and social strategies. The most significant difference between the two groups was in the cognitive strategies followed by metacognitive and memory strategies. This result is consistent with the findings of previous studies (Peacock & Ho, 2003; Abu Radwan, 2008; Yamini & Dehghan, 2005) in which more proficient learners were found to use more cognitive, metacognitive and memory strategies. The reasons for this difference in students' use of strategies might be sought in the difference of the teaching methodologies and teaching materials in high school and in institutes. The high-school textbooks were written more than two decades ago and are used almost unchanged till now. Naturally they reflect teaching approaches and principles of the past, and they don't have the potentials of strategy-based instruction which might have a contribution in high-school students' different pattern of using strategies.

The difference of the two groups was not statistically significant in affective strategies where high school and institute students had very close mean scores. A possible explanation for this result can be sought in the cultural background of the students. Affective strategies refer to learners' emotions, attitudes, motivation and values toward learning language (Oxford, 1990) and some affective strategies require expressing one's feelings, however, there is a reluctance among Iranians to communicate their feelings and emotions, a trait common in eastern cultures (Gudykunst et al., 1996).

In language learning beliefs part, the differences between the two groups were significant only with regard to beliefs about the difficulty of language learning, and motivation and expectations, where institute students held stronger and more positive beliefs than high-school students. This means that institute students were more motivated to learn English and possessed a more sophisticated concept of language learning difficulty. This result is in agreement with the results of Samimy and Lee (1997) and Yamini and Dehghan (2005).

Putting all things together, as institute students in this study were found to have higher motivation to learn English, it seems logical to conclude that their higher level of motivation led them to more conscious engagement in the process of language learning, and along with their higher level of proficiency, made them more aware of their language learning needs, thus they resorted to employing language learning strategies more than their peers in high school did. The association between language learning motivation and the strategy factors has been investigated and confirmed in previous studies (Yang, 1999; Chang and Shen, 2005; Abedini et al., 2011; Saeb, 2012).

The results of the present study demonstrated that attending English institutes outside the school had a main effect on the students' learning strategy use and their beliefs about language learning. As Chamot (2004) believed one of the major reasons encouraging research into language learning strategies is that less successful language learners can be trained new strategies, and become more efficient language learners, it is suggested that future research in this area focus on detecting the possible unique features of language instruction that institute students receive and the successful students' characteristics in order to improve language instruction in public high schools through applying these features, fostering positive beliefs about language learning, and introducing strategy-based instruction.

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