

Beliefs about Language Learning in Asia: A Further Look at the BALLI

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Introduction

Interest in the topic of beliefs about language learning continues to gain momentum as evidenced by the growing body of research literature and expanding list of implications for the English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) classroom. Foremost among these implications is that a better understanding of students' beliefs will reduce the number and severity of blind spots experienced by language teachers. Important contributions have been made in the form of both qualitative and quantitative studies into the role of language learning beliefs and the complex relationship among beliefs and other variables in the affective domain (e.g. attitudes, motivation, anxiety) as well as a range of other constructs such as cognition, behavior, personality, autonomy and learning strategies. Much of the quantitative research into beliefs about language learning has been based on the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), developed by Elaine Horwitz (1987, 1988) and other similar psychometric instruments (Cotterall, 1999; Mori, 1999; Sakui & Gaies, 1999). Although questions have arisen regarding the reliability of BALLI results and the speculative nature of how statements have been grouped together (see Nikitini & Furuoka, 2006 for a summary of these criticisms), and the limited perspective offered by these types of survey studies (Bernat & Gvozdenko,

2005), the BALLI has endured as the instrument of choice for belief studies in a variety of context such as ESL in Australia (Bernat, 2006), and EFL in Korea (Park, 1995; Truitt, 1995), Taiwan (Yang, 1999) and Turkey (Kunt, 1997). There are also studies involving US students studying French, Spanish, German (Horwitz, 1988; Kern, 1995), Japanese (Oh, 1996) and a number of other languages (Rifkin, 2000). Nikitina and Furuoka (2006) also investigated the language-learning beliefs of multi-ethnic groups of students in Malaysia studying Russian. In addition, the BALLI has been used in a limited number of studies to explore beliefs about language learning held by language teachers (Kern, 1995; Peacock, 1999).

On the other end of the research spectrum, qualitative investigations have included approaches such as longitudinal studies (White, 1999), discourse analysis (Kalaja, 1995), and interview protocols (Wenden, 1986; Sakui & Gaies, 1999). We can now say with relative confidence that attitudes and beliefs influence language-learning motivation, which in turn impacts the level of personal investment in the language learning process as well as commitment to and persistence in target-language study. Attitude and motivation are likely the best overall predictors of success in language learning (Naiman, Frohlich, Stern & Todesco, 1995). Still, important questions remain. How amenable are beliefs to change? What factors contribute to belief formation and perpetuation? How can a better understanding of learner beliefs benefit language teachers? The current study was inspired by these questions as well as investigations into language learning beliefs among EFL learners in Japan (Burden, 2002; Sakui & Gaies, 1999) and other parts of Asia (Yang, 1999; Park, 1995; Truitt, 1995; Peacock, 1999; Tsai, 2003; Bernat, 2006). Specifically, we felt there was a need to follow up on cross-cultural comparisons made by Horwitz (1999) and look at similarities and differences in beliefs among distinct yet similar groups of EFL learners. Horwitz (1999) recognized the lack of studies looking at cultural influences on language-learning beliefs, and highlighted

the need to consider “the question of variety and uniformity of learner responses” especially “among groups of learners from different cultural backgrounds.”

English is studied in both Thailand and Japan as a foreign language and the typical EFL classroom in these countries consists of a homogeneous group of learners. Also, students entering tertiary-level education in both countries have studied English formally for roughly six years. For these reasons, we felt a comparison of EFL learners in these countries would add to our collective understanding and offer some hints for areas of further study.

Research Questions

Our research questions for this initial part of our study were: (1) How reliable is the BALLI for our contexts? (2) What generalizations can be made about the similarities and differences between Thai and Japanese EFL learners with regard to beliefs about language learning? (3) How are L2 learning attitudes/beliefs organized in these contexts?

Methods and Materials

Participants

Three groups of learners were surveyed for this study: Japanese non-English major undergraduates enrolled in required first or second-year EFL courses ($n=469$), Thai non-English major undergraduates enrolled in required first or second-year EFL courses ($n=312$), and Thai graduate students from several programs ($n=104$), including marketing, business administration, and English for careers (an advanced degree with modules covering a variety of professional topics and skill areas).

Questionnaire

The 26-item Japanese-version of the EFL BALLI used by Burden (2002) was adopted mostly as is. The same 6-point Likert scale was used with responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (and no middle point). The English version was translated into Thai by the second author and checked for accuracy by three colleagues in the same faculty. The questionnaire was administered during regular meetings of courses taught by the authors or the participants' regular EFL teacher from April 2005 to November 2007. Responses were tallied and computed for means and standard deviation.

Estimate of Reliability

To obtain an estimate of consistency of responses, the above questionnaire and a scrambled version were administered to one sub-group of learners ($n=26$) five weeks apart (the test-retest method). Items on the scrambled version were identical to those on the original version, only the order of the items differed. Answers for each response were compared in two ways: (1) the percentage of responses that were exactly the same on both versions, (2) the percentage of responses that were within one point of agreement on both administrations (i.e. *strongly agree and agree, agree and slightly agree, slightly agree and slightly disagree, or slightly disagree and disagree, disagree and strongly disagree*).

Factor Analysis

In order to investigate patterns of responses in our data, we conducted a principal components analysis with a varimax rotation. An inspection of the R-matrix along with the results of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity supported the analysis.

Results

Using the stricter criteria of perfect agreement (same point on the scale both times), the version of the BALLI used in our study yielded only 2 items (out of 26) for which 75% or more participants answered consistently (Table 1). Dropping this to 70% only increased the yield to 3 items.

Table 1. Reliability: test-retest

Consistency of responses: original and scrambled (n=26)	
1. Exact agreement (percentage of respondents who answered exactly the same on both versions).	
75% or more	2 of 26 items
70% or more	3 of 26 items
2. General agreement (percentage of respondents who answered within one point on both versions).	
75% or more	16 of 26 items
70% or more	23 of 26 items

With the more generous interpretation of agreement (answers within one point on the scale), we found that respondents answered consistently on 16 items (using the 75% criterion) and 23 items (using the 70% criterion). Further investigation is necessary to pinpoint causes of this variation, but as discussed in Sakui and Gaies (1999), some differences in responses can be accounted for by changes in learner beliefs and do not necessarily point to “inconsistency” or “unreliability.” Support for this argument can also be found in Kalaja (1995). The general agreement results at least partially convinced us that the BALLI is a sufficiently reliable instrument to investigate beliefs about language learning in our contexts.

Moving to our second question (*What generalizations can be made about the similarities and differences between Thai and Japanese EFL learners with regard to beliefs about language learning?*), we looked for obvious similarities and differences in a side-by-side comparison of descriptive statistics (Tables 2, 3 & 4). In general, the

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means for most items fell within a small range on the 6-point scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree (with no middle point). The exceptions (showing a difference of roughly one full point or more) were items 2 (I believe that ultimately I will speak English well), 5 (Some people are born with a special ability that helps them learn English), 8 (People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent), 10 (Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language), 12 (Learning English is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary), 13 (Learning English is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules) and 26 (the perceived difficulty of English compared to other foreign languages). Interestingly, with the exception of question 26, the difference was mostly between the Japanese undergraduates compared to the other two groups. Also, most of the difference can be found in two of the five categories differentiated by factor analysis (see discussion below).

Table 2: Descriptive statistics with side-by-side comparison for items 1-24.

	T—Grad	T—Under	J—Under
1. Some languages are easier to learn than others.	4.59(1.32)	4.46(1.02)	4.99(1.04)
2. I believe that ultimately I will speak English well.	4.68(0.96)	4.51(0.90)	3.56(1.25)
3. It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.	3.60(1.43)	3.88(1.20)	3.50(1.36)
4. It is easier for children to learn English.	4.97(1.06)	4.85(1.00)	5.06(1.12)
5. Some people are born with a special ability that helps them learn English.	4.15(1.26)	4.12(1.18)	3.17(1.48)
6. I have English aptitude.	4.16(0.94)	3.75(0.88)	3.11(1.14)
7. Women are better than men at learning English.	3.62(1.39)	2.96(1.24)	2.59(1.25)
8. People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent.	3.93(1.21)	3.67(1.21)	4.70(1.25)
9. Foreigners are good at learning languages.	2.98(1.22)	3.25(1.21)	3.34(1.31)
10. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	5.28(0.84)	5.41(0.66)	4.43(1.16)
11. It is better to learn English in an English-speaking country.	5.10(1.16)	5.08(0.94)	5.21(1.00)
12. Learning English is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary.	4.54(1.04)	4.47(0.94)	3.04(1.19)
13. Learning English is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules.	4.36(1.01)	4.20(0.97)	2.87(1.10)
14. Learning English is mostly a matter of translating from my mother tongue into English.	3.71(1.19)	3.58(1.13)	2.95(1.12)

15. Learning English is different from learning other school subjects.	4.21(1.03)	4.09(1.07)	3.95(1.25)
16. It is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent accent.	3.92(1.29)	4.36(1.11)	4.50(1.27)
17. You should not say anything in English until you can say it correctly.	1.90(0.86)	1.90(0.91)	1.80(0.89)
18. If I heard someone speaking English, I would go up to them so that I could practice speaking English.	3.51(1.25)	3.49(1.00)	3.16(1.24)
19. It is OK to guess if you do not know the word in English.	4.85(0.88)	4.77(0.87)	4.72(0.99)
20. I feel self-conscious speaking English in front of other people.	3.79(1.18)	3.86(1.05)	4.37(1.21)
21. If I get to speak English well, I can have many chances to use it in the future.	5.24(0.91)	5.24(0.84)	5.28(0.96)
22. If I learn English very well, it will help me get a good job.	5.39(0.80)	5.38(0.80)	5.44(0.69)
23. I would like to learn English so I can get to know its speakers better.	4.72(1.01)	4.70(1.01)	4.93(1.11)
24. In order to become a good speaker, it is important to repeat and practice a lot.	5.57 (0.83)	5.58 (0.71)	4.99 (0.97)

6=strongly agree, 5=agree, 4=slightly agree, 3=slightly disagree, 2=disagree, 1=strongly disagree.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics with side-by-side comparison for item 25.

	T—Grad	T—Under	J—Under
25. If someone were to spend one hour a day learning English, how long would it take to become fluent?	3.39(1.58)	3.13(1.49)	3.70(1.17)

6=less than a year, 5=1 to 2 years, 4=3 to 5 years, 3=5 to 10 years, 2=more than 10 years, 1=impossible with only one hour per day.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics with side-by-side comparison for item 26.

	T—Grad	T—Under	J—Under
26. English is:	4.18(0.66)	2.93(1.03)	4.51(0.77)

6=an extremely difficult language to learn, 5=a difficult language to learn, 4=of moderate difficulty, 3=an easy language to learn, 2=an extremely easy language to learn, 1=the easiest language to learn.

Factor Loadings

In order to investigate patterns of responses in our data (research question 3), we conducted a principal components analysis with a varimax rotation. An

inspection of the R-matrix along with the results of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity supported the analysis. The initial analysis yielded eight components; however, an inspection of the associated scree plot indicated that a five-component solution might be more appropriate. The analysis was rerun specifying a five-component solution. Loadings less than .40 were suppressed. These five components include 23 of the 26 items (Appendix).

Discussion

As mentioned above, we interpreted the results of test-retest as support for the proposition that this version of the BALLI is sufficiently reliable in our contexts. We are currently following up on this with interviews to get a clearer picture of why agreement is so limited between the two versions. We were encouraged that our results did not differ greatly from the Sakui & Gaies study (1999). They considered that the beliefs they were trying to measure may not be uniform and were better thought of as "situationally conditioned."

Items 2 and 10. The Japanese students expressed less confidence than their counterparts in Thailand about their ultimate success in learning English (item 2). This may be related to their lower estimation of their own language aptitude (item 6). They are also less convinced that some people have a special ability to learn language (5) or that everyone can learn a foreign language (item 10).

Interestingly, both groups of learners in Thailand agreed more strongly with the statements about English being mostly a matter of learning lots of vocabulary (12) and grammar rules (13) and translating from their mother tongue into English (14). This may point to an emerging difference between the two countries in terms of language teaching approach and methodology at the secondary level. This may also reflect the lingering emphasis on a grammar-translation approach in

Thailand despite recent efforts to implement more communicative approaches to language instruction.

The similarity in answers between the two groups of Thai students lend support to claims by Peacock (2001) that beliefs might not be so amenable to change. The one area where these two groups differed was the estimates of difficulty of English (item 26). The undergraduates were more likely to judge English as being of moderate difficulty where their seniors tended toward the difficult end of the spectrum. The tendency seems to be that initial optimism gives way to more realistic expectations. This may partly be because the English language used by Thai undergraduates in games, on-line chats, text messaging, or Netspeak is still quite simple as opposed to the more complicated and formal language used by Thai graduate students in report writing, presentations, conferences and seminars, and at their workplace.

Students in all three groups felt that learning English would help their job prospects (item 22). Taken together with earlier findings regarding the tendency toward instrumental over integrative motivational orientation (Mori, 1999), teachers in these contexts have an area of extrinsic motivation they may want to make use of. More on this can be found in investigations of attitudes and motivation among Japanese learners of English (Burden, 2002; Brown, Robson & Rosenkjar, 2001; Kimura, Nakata & Okumura, 2001).

In her comparison of EAP students in Australia and the United States, Bernat (2006) found similar responses for most BALLI items and concluded that beliefs were not context-specific, but are instead “due to the effects of individuals’ complex metacognitive structure (as affected by a number of social, cultural, contextual, cognitive, affective, and personal factors) that is responsible for the nature and strength of these beliefs.” This view was at least partially supported by the current study in that differences were more pronounced between Japanese undergraduate

EFL learners and the two groups in Thailand.

Factor loadings suggested groupings quite different from those outlined by Horwitz (1987) but there were some interesting exceptions. The top three items loading on factor one (21, 22, 23) were identical to those included under the heading Motivational Orientation by Horwitz. Other items loading on factor one were 24 (*In order to become a good speaker, it is important to repeat and practice a lot*), 11 (*It is better to learn English in an English-speaking country*), and 15 (*Learning English is different from learning other school subjects*). Two of these (11, 15) were grouped together under The Nature of Language Learning by Horwitz. We conclude that the Motivational Orientation is a suitable label for these six items.

The top two items loading on factor two were 2 (*I believe that ultimately I will speak English well*) and 6 (*I have English aptitude*). Other items loading here were 20 (*I feel self-conscious speaking English in front of other people*), 26 (the comparative difficulty of English), 19 (*It is OK to guess if you do not know the word in English*), and 18 (*If I heard someone speaking English, I would go up to them so that I could practice speaking English*). We decided on the heading Personal Strengths and Limitations for this factor.

Factor three included 3 items: 13 (*Learning English is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules*), 12 (*Learning English is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary*), and 14 (*Learning English is mostly a matter of translating from my mother tongue into English*). We retained Horwitz's heading of The Nature of Language Learning for these items.

Items loading on factor four were labeled Beliefs about Foreign Language Aptitude and Difficulty. These included 9 (*Foreigners are good at learning languages*), 8 (*People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent*), 1 (*Some languages are easier to learn than others*), 10 (*Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language*) and 5 (*Some people are born with a special ability which helps them*

learn English).

Factor five included item 3 (*It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it*), 25 (*length of time it would take to become fluent*), and 16 (*It is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent accent*). The label we assigned items loading on this factor was Beliefs about Fluency and Receptive/Productive Skills.

Conclusion

Despite the shortcomings of so-called 'soft evidence' from personal kinds of studies such as questionnaires (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005; McDonough, 1995), the incentive remains for language instructors to find out as much as possible about their learners' attitudes, beliefs and preconceptions regarding language study in general and their personal study habits in particular. This study succeeded in confirming earlier findings by Burden (2002) and has identified attitudes and beliefs that may have a detrimental effect on motivation, namely a slight tendency to lump language learning together with other school subjects, overemphasis on accent, and self-consciousness when speaking in front of other people.

One strand of follow up we will pursue is how beliefs and attitudes are influenced by past learning experiences and how amenable beliefs are to change. To gain a better understanding in these areas, we will continue to collect longitudinal data on sub groups of participants in these studies.

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Appendix: Factor loadings with reliability coefficient (alpha coefficient).

	Factor Loadings				
	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5
21 If I get to speak English well, I can have many chances to use it in the future.	.736				
22 If I learn English very well, it will help me get a good job.	.720				
23 I would like to learn English so I can get to know its speakers better.	.705				
24 In order to become a good speaker, it is important to repeat and practice a lot.	.692				
11 It is better to learn English in an English-speaking country.	.421				
15 Learning English is different from learning other school subjects.	.407				
2 I believe that ultimately I will speak English well.		.766			
6 I have English aptitude.		.754			
20 I feel self-conscious speaking English in front of other people.		-.588			
26 English is:		-.504			
19 It is OK to guess if you do not know the word in English.		.488			
18 If I heard someone speaking English, I would go up to them so that I could practice speaking English.		.440			
13 Learning English is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules.			.822		
12 Learning English is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary.			.806		
14 Learning English is mostly a matter of translating from my mother tongue into English.			.726		
9 Foreigners are good at learning languages.				.641	
8 People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent.				.618	
1 Some languages are easier to learn than others.				.602	
10 Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.				-.501	
5 Some people are born with a special ability which helps them learn English.				.439	
3 It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.					.665
25 If someone were to spend one hour a day learning English, how long would it take to become fluent.?					.526
16 It is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent accent.					.461