رابطه‌ی بین باورهای زبان خارجی، سطح مهارت زبانی و استفاده از روش‌های یادگیری زبان (مطالعه موردی: دانشجویان زبان انگلیسی در شیراز)

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چکیده

این مقاله به کشف و بررسی رابطه‌ی بین باورهای زبان خارجی، سطح مهارت زبانی، و استفاده از روش‌های یادگیری زبان می‌پردازد. تعداد ۲۸۳ دانشجوی دختر ایرانی که در رشته زبان انگلیسی مشغول به تحصیل هستند در این مطالعه شرکت کردند. هدف اصلی این تحقیق بررسی: الف. رابطه‌ی باورهای مربوط به یادگیری زبان و سطح مهارت زبانی و تاثیر آن‌ها در اتخاذ روش‌های یادگیری زبان ب. چگونگی مشخص شدن باورهای زبانی توسط سطح مهارت زبانی، می‌باشد. موارد استفاده شده در این تحقیق شامل ترجمه‌ی فارسی SILL آکسفورد (پرسشنامه‌ی مربوط به روش‌های یادگیری زبان) و BALLI هورویتس (پرسشنامه‌ی مربوط به باورهای فراگیری زبان) به‌علاوه یک آزمون سطح، نتایج به‌دست آمده از این تحقیق گویای آن است که باورهای دانشجویان در مورد سختی یادگیری زبان با روش‌های زبان‌آموزی که آن‌ها استفاده می‌کنند رابطه دارد. علاوه بر این، باورهای مربوط به انگیزه و انتظارات فراگیران با روش‌های حسی و فراذهنی آن‌ها رابطه دارد. همچنین یک رابطه مهم دیگری بین سطح مهارت زبانی و استفاده از روش‌های ذهنی، سازگاری و فراذهنی در این تحقیق مشاهده شده است.

ضمنا، دانشجویان با مهارت زبانی بیشتر نظر منفی نسبت به روش‌های سنتی متداول مانند حفظ کردن یا یادگیری گرامر داشتند.

واژه‌های کلیدی: روش‌های یادگیری زبان، باورهای زبانی، نگرش، متغیرهای فراگیر، سطح زبان.

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Relationship between Foreign Language Beliefs, Proficiency Level and the Use of Language Learning Strategies (Case Study: Female English Majors in Shiraz)[1]

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Abstract:

This paper reports on a study that explores the relationship between the beliefs about language learning, proficiency level and the use of language learning strategies. A number of 283 Iranian female university students of English participated in the study. The primary goal of the study was to investigate: a) to what extent language learning beliefs and proficiency level would

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relate to the choice of language learning strategies, and b) how language proficiency would determine language learning beliefs. The instruments used in this study were Persian translations of Oxford's SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) and Horwitz's BALLI (Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory) as well as a placement test. The findings of the study revealed that learners' beliefs about the difficulty of language learning correlated with the use of all strategy categories. Furthermore, beliefs about motivation and expectations significantly correlated with the use of Affective and Metacognitive Strategies. Moreover, a significant relation was observed 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.

Key Words: *language learning strategies, language beliefs, attitude, learner variables, proficiency*

Introduction

Strategies have been defined as "specific 'attacks' that we make on a given problem" (Brown, 2000: 122). Language learning strategies (LLSs), therefore, must involve attacks at language learning problems. They are, in fact, "techniques that students use to improve their progress in developing

L2 skills" (Oxford, 1992/1993: 18). Research on language learning strategies is now advocated by researchers in the field, language teachers, syllabus designers, language planners, and material developers. The growing interest in the concept of LLSs has led to the study of a number of factors determining the choice of LLSs. Within these factors, learner variables including age, gender, learning styles, language learning experience, ethnicity, motivation and so on have proven to be very important in the learning process and the process of strategy use. One of these learner variables is the belief system of language learners. Wenden (1987b) defines language learning beliefs as what learners think about how best to approach the task of learning a second language. In cognitive psychology, beliefs are viewed as a construct of metacognitive knowledge (Flavell, 1987, cited in Wenden, 1987a), Metacognitive knowledge in second language learning "refers to the general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning, and about the nature of language learning and teaching" (Victori and Lockhart, 1995: 224). Beliefs have also been defined as mental constructions of experience (Sigel, 1985 as cited in White, 1999).

Beliefs about language learning & proficiency level and their relation to the use of language learning strategies are what the present study is concerned with. An attempt is also made to show if learners at different proficiency levels differ in their beliefs about language and language learning.

Overview

Literature on the relationship between language learning strategies and language learning beliefs (LLBs) is not very rich. The first researcher to investigate this area was Wenden (1986), who claimed that learners' beliefs about language learning explained their choice of language learning strategies. Wenden (1987a) studied a group of 25 adult language learners at Columbia University using semi-structured interviews to investigate learners' ideas about how best one can approach the task of learning a foreign language. She identified three main groups of beliefs: beliefs about the use of language, beliefs about learning a language (grammar, vocabulary ...), and beliefs about personal factors. The results showed that learners who emphasized on the importance of using the language would utilize communication strategies more frequently while learners who emphasized on the importance of learning about the language tended to use cognitive strategies which would helping them to understand and remember specific items of the language beter. However, those who stressed the importance of personal factors were not distinguished from others in terms of the choice of strategies.

Abraham and Vann (1987) studied fifteen subjects in order to identify what background factors students brought to the learning situation, how they used learning and communication strategies, and what strategies they employed to develop language proficiency. They found that a learner's philosophy or beliefs about how language was learned determined the approaches and subsequent strategies they took when learning a foreign language. It was the combination of philosophy (beliefs), approach, and

strategies that determined success or failure in language learning. They concluded that background factors like intelligence, personality, education, and cognitive styles along with the environmental factors determined a learner's philosophy or belief system.

In a comprehensive study, Wen and Johnson (1997) used several measures of L1 and L2 proficiency and belief system finding a causal, direct relationship between belief and strategy variables. Language learning beliefs were reported to correlate positively with form-focused, management of learning, meaning focused and mother-tongue-avoidance strategies. They concluded that the positive relationship between LLBs and their operationalization in strategy use was potentially important for strategy training. They asserted 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).*

Finally, Yang (1999) studied the relationship between language learning beliefs and language learning strategies of 290 Taiwanese learners of English. He found that language learners' self-efficacy beliefs were strongly related to their use of all types of strategies, especially functional-practice strategies. Also, learners' beliefs about the value and nature of learning spoken English were closely linked to the use of formal oral-practice strategies. The results suggested a cyclical relationship between learners' beliefs and strategy use.

Method

1. Participants

The participants were 283 female EFL students at Shiraz University and Shiraz Islamic Azad University majoring in Teaching English, English Literature and English Translation. They were selected out of 403 respondents based on their performance on a placement test and were divided into two groups of proficiency: high-intermediate and low-intermediate. The students whose scores fell within one standard deviation plus and minus the mean were put aside and those whose scores were outside this range were put into the high and low groups. In other words, the students who scored higher than the mean plus one standard deviation were included in the high group and those who scored lower than the mean minus one standard deviation formed the low group.

2. Instrumentation

Three instruments were used in this study. The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning or SILL (version 7.0 designed for ESL/EFL learners with 50 items), developed by Oxford (1986-1990) (Appendix A) used to measure the use of language learning strategies. The SILL is a five-choice Likert scale questionnaire which has enjoyed reliability coefficients ranging from .91 to .94 (Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995). There are six strategy categories as follows:

(1) Memory strategies (9 items). These items deal with strategies used to remember and retrieve aspects of the target language. Strategies such as retention, association, grouping, elaboration, contextualization, etc. are among them.

(2) Cognitive strategies (14 items). Strategies for the use and manipulation of language: repetition, practice, analyzing and reasoning, translation, transfer, note-taking, etc

(3) Compensation strategies (6 items) These items check strategies for overcoming limitations and incomplete knowledge of the target language. They include guessing, inferencing, substitution, getting help and so on.

(4) Metacognitive strategies (9 items). These strategies are used for planning, organizing, and evaluating learning. Attention, organization, planning, evaluation, self-assessment are examples of such strategies.

(5) Affective strategies (6 items). Strategies for managing emotions, motivations, attitudes and approaching language learning positively. Encouraging, lowering anxiety and fear, discussing feelings and emotions are but some examples.

(6) Social strategies (6 items). Strategies for working with others to get input and practice: Cooperation, clarification, asking questions, emphasizing, etc.

The second instrument was the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory or BALLI consisting of 34 items developed by Horwitz (1983-1987) in several stages to assess students' opinions about language learning (Appendix B). The BALLI is also a questionnaire based on the Likert scale. Horwitz (1999) confirms its reliability and validity and reports on its use in more than 15 studies, dissertations, and theses. There are 34 items measuring five major areas as follows:

(1) Difficulty of language learning: items 3, 5, 28, 30, and 34 (5 items). These items ask for the respondents' opinion about the difficulty of foreign

language learning in general and whether they feel they will be able to accomplish the job. The participants are also asked whether they believe speaking, reading, writing and understanding the foreign language to be difficult or not.

(2) Foreign language aptitude: items 1, 2, 4, 8, 15, 18, 19, 20, and 21 (9 items). These items are intended to find out if the respondents believe that learning another language requires a special talent or not, and if it does, whether they believe to themselves possess such talent.

(3) The nature of language learning: items 12, 22, 24, 25, 26, 27, and 33 (7 items). These items deal with the respondents' opinions about how one learns a foreign language. They include items about the environment in which one may learn the language, whether learning grammar or vocabulary would be very important, whether translation would help and whether learning a foreign language would be different from other academic subjects.

(4) Learning and communication strategies: items 6, 7, 10, 14, 17, 29, 31, and 32 (8 items). These items seek information about what one should do to learn a foreign language. The respondents are asked if they enjoy learning the language, whether they feel timid in speaking, whether they believe repetition and practice are necessary and whether they believe correct pronunciation is important. They are also asked if error correction is needed and whether one can guess if one does not know something.

(5) Motivation and expectations: items 9, 11, 13, 16, and 23 (5 items). These items seek information about the attitude of the respondents towards learning a foreign language. They are asked whether they want to learn the

language, whether they are instrumentally motivated, and whether they believe it is important to learn a foreign language.

Finally, a placement test was given to the participants to divide them into high-intermediate and low-intermediate proficiency levels. The test was Oxford Placement Test 1 B1 (Allan, 1985) with 74 multiple-choice items.

3. Procedures

For the ease of administration to Iranian students, both questionnaires were translated into Persian. The Persian versions were then back-translated by three graduate students at the Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics at Shiraz University. Accordingly, some items whose translations needed modifications were corrected and after a pilot study, the questionnaires were used for data collection purposes. The order of administration of the questionnaires was counterbalanced in each class. That is, in each class half of the students received the BALLI first and the SILL next and the other half received the questionnaires in the reversed order. At the beginning of each questionnaire, there were instructions in Persian which gave students enough information on to how answer the items. All the students sat for the placement test two days after completing the questionnaires.

4. Analysis

In order to find out the relationship between LLB and LLS variables, a Multiple Regression Analysis was applied. Moreover, to see if there existed an interaction between the independent variables, the data were subjected to a series of two-way ANOVA. Finally, some independent t-tests were run to

explore the relationship between students' proficiency level and their language learning beliefs.

Results and Discussion

1. Regression Analysis

To determine how much of the variance in the dependent variable is explained by each of the independent variables, the *Enter* method of Multiple Regression Analysis was used. Table 1 shows the R2 values for different strategy groups.

Table 1: Multiple Regression Analysis: R2 for Strategy Categories

Strategy Group	Multiple R	R2	F	Sig. of F
Affective	.25	.06	3.10	.005
Cognitive	.26	.07	3.385	.0031
Compensation	.29	.08	4.247	.0004
Memory	.22	.05	2.400	.028
Metacognitive	.36	.13	7.282	.000
Social	.35	.12	6.600	.000

As the table indicates, the highest value of R2 (R2 =.13) is observed for Metacognitive strategies, and the next highest value (R2 = .12) belongs to Social strategies. However, to determine the significance of the findings, one needs to refer to Table 2.

Table 2: Multiple Regression Analysis for Strategy Categories

Strategy	MRA	Aptitude	Commu.	Diff.	Motiv.	Nature	Level
Affective	Beta	.015	-.047	.140	.206	-.054	.035
	t-value	.249	-.763	2.359	3.234	-.887	.580
	t sig.	.803	.446	.019*	.001*	.386	.558
Cognitive	Beta	.055	.075	.140	.093	.002	.137
	t-value	.893	1.216	2.370	1.471	.048	2.293
	t sig.	.372	.225	.018*	.142	.961	.02*
Compensation	Beta	.112	-.069	.189	-.032	.050	.140
	t-value	1.817	-1.128	3.211	-.514	.826	2.369
	t sig.	.070	.260	.001*	.607	.409	.018*
Memory	Beta	-.014	.068	.174	.048	.023	.100
	t-value	.-.230	1.089	2.908	.752	.372	1.657
	t sig.	.818	.277	.003*	.453	.710	.098
Metacognitive	Beta	.109	-.046	.167	.166	.050	.207
	t-value	1.830	-.771	2.932	2.718	.848	3.394
	t sig.	.068	.441	.003*	.007*	.397	.0004*
Social	Beta	.094	.078	.239	.107	.036	.110
	t-value	1.555	1.298	4.158	1.732	.603	1.903
	t sig.	.121	.195	.000*	.084	.546	.058

MRA = Multiple Regression Analysis, Commu. = Communication, Diff. Difficulty, Motiv. = Motivation

As Represented, beliefs about the difficulty of language learning showed a significant relationship with the use of all strategy categories. This can be understandable, because when one feels the difficulty of a task, one tries different strategies to cope with it. In the case of language learning, our participants have chosen to make use of different language learning strategies. The use of these strategies enhances their learning. They utilize their cognitive and memory powers together with their ability to organize, plan and make up for limitations to overcome the difficulty. An interesting point here is that the Social Strategies have demonstrated the highest correlation with the belief about the difficulty of language learning. As already mentioned, these strategies are related to working with others to get input and practice. This shows that the participants believe they can cope with the difficulty of language learning through cooperation with others, asking questions and receiving input and practice. Of course, this is done in conjunction with the use of other strategies as well. The use of Affective Strategies is also well understood, as the difficulty of the job can create anxiety and fear of learning.

The belief category of the difficulty of language learning consists of 5 items as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Agreement on beliefs about the difficulty of language learning

Items and their numbers	Agreement
3. Some languages are easier to learn than others.	85%
5. I believe that I will learn to speak English very well	45%
28. It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.	74%
30. It is easier to speak than to understand a foreign language.	37%
34. English is an easy language that can be learned by practicing one hour a day in less than one year.	63%

Eighty five percent of the respondents agreed that some languages are easier to learn than others. Forty five percent of the students believed that they would ultimately learn to speak English. On the other hand, 63% disagreed with the statement, "It is easier to speak than to understand a foreign language," and a larger group (74%) agreed that reading and writing English is easier than speaking and understanding it. Finally, 63% percent of the respondents agreed that English was an easy language and they could learn it in less than one year by practicing in one hour classes day.

A point noticed from the results mentioned above is that students do not hold realistic beliefs about the task of language learning. The answers to the item, "English is an easy language which can be learned by practicing one hour a day in less than one year." indicate that students consider the task of language learning as something easy which can be rapidly accomplished;

they are not aware of the relative difficulty of the task of learning a foreign language. These misconceptions about language learning cause the students to be frustrated when their progress is not rapid. This is in line with reports given by other researchers like Horwitz (1988), and Mantle-Bromley (1995). Horwitz (1988) emphasizes the importance of this belief category by asserting that "because students' judgments about the difficulty of language learning are critical to the development of their expectations for and commitment to it, the responses to the items in this section are practically important" (p. 286).

The highly significant value obtained for Social Strategies can be interpreted as a switch from traditional form-focused beliefs to the new communicative interaction-based approaches. However, the nonsignificant value obtained for the relationship of beliefs about communication and learning strategies to Social Strategies might be explained by the fact that most language learners are not consciously aware of the strategies which they employ and cannot verbalize them, although they emphasize the importance of social and communicative methods in language learning.

Another belief category showing significant correlation with some strategy groups was beliefs about motivation and expectations. This belief category was found to relate to Affective ($t = 3.234$, $p = .001$) and Metacognitive ($t = 2.718$, $p = .007$) Strategies. This category is related to the learners' attitude toward language learning. When learners have positive attitudes toward the job and are motivated enough, they will try to learn the language. In doing so, they may also feel anxious and have fear. This explains the highest correlation between this belief category and Affective

Strategies. The correlation between motivation and Metacognitive strategies also represents that positive attitudes and motivation can function as an inner drive to approach the learning task with high attention, using advanced organizers, planning, self-assessment and so on. These findings support Gardner and Lambert (1972), Oxford and Nyikos (1989), and Nyikos and Oxford (1993). Nyikos and Oxford (1993) claim that "From a social psychology perspective, motivation emerges as a key determinant of frequency and type of strategies used" (p. 12). Among the respondents, 98% agreed that learning English was important for Iranians, 78% wanted to speak English well, and 72% agreed with the item "I would like to have English-speaking friends". These percentages show that motivational beliefs play an important role in determining students' behavior in choosing certain language learning strategies.

The two belief categories mentioned above were the only ones that revealed significant correlation with the use of strategies. For other belief categories, no significant correlation was observed. Proficiency level, however, the other independent variable of the study significantly correlated with the use of Cognitive ($t = 2.293$, $p = .02$), Compensation ($t = 2.369$, $p = .018$), and Metacognitive ($t = 3.394$, $p = .0004$) Strategies. This positive correlation indicates that the increase in the level of proficiency is associated with the increase in the use of these three strategies. Affective strategies, for instance, are no more relevant here as the increase in proficiency will eliminate anxiety and fear of learning.

2. Analysis of Variance

The results of the Analysis of Variance revealed no significant interaction between the independent variables in their relation to the strategy use. Total belief scores, however, exhibited a significant relationship with the use of Cognitive, Metacognitive, and Social Strategies. The F-ratio obtained for Cognitive Strategies was 9.13 [F (1, 231) = 9.13, p<.03], for Metacognitive Strategies 18.258 [F (1, 231) = 18.258, p<.0001] and for Social Strategies 13.474 [F (1, 231) = 13.474, p< .001]. The highest F-ratio belongs to Metacognitive Strategies. This is related to the nature of the belief system which is a mental construct and part of metacognitive knowledge. These findings are in line with other research results which identify beliefs as part of the metacognitive system (Flavell, 1979, cited in Goh, 1997; Wenden, 1987a; Victori and Lockhart, 1995; and Yang, 1999). The correlation of the total belief scores with the use of Cognitive Strategies can also be explained in this way. Cognition is also a mental process and cognitive strategies together with metacognitive ones are among the direct learning strategies. The third strategy category correlating with total belief is an indirect learning strategy. As already mentioned, the use of Social strategies indicates the tendency toward new communicative approaches which emphasize the importance of social interaction in language learning.

3. t-tests

In order to find out whether beliefs held about language learning were related to students' level of proficiency, some independent t-tests were run. Table 4 presents the t-values obtained for the differences between high-intermediate and low-intermediate proficiency groups on belief categories.

Table 4: t-values on Belief Categories for High- and Low- intermediate Levels

Variable	Mean	t-value	2-tail Sig.
Total Belief	H 122.056 L 124.169	-1.78	.077
Aptitude	H 32.3548 L 31.6855	1.04	.298
Communication	H 30.2984 L 30.8952	-1.82	.070
Difficulty	H 14.4758 L 14.4758	.00	1.00
Motivation	H 21.1452 L 21.2500	-.42	.678
Nature	H 24.2339 L 26.0565	-.40	.001*

H= High-intermediate, L= Low-intermediate

As the table indicates, only the t-value obtained for beliefs about the nature of language learning was statistically significant for high- and low-intermediate proficiency groups ($t = -.40$, $p = .001$). From among the responses to the 7 items in this section, 82% agreed that the best way to learn a foreign language was to acquire it in an English-speaking country. But only 23% of the students agreed that it was necessary to know the foreign language culture in order to speak it. Forty seven percent agreed that learning a foreign language was a matter of vocabulary learning, 42% considered it as a matter of learning grammar rules, and 39% as a matter of translating from Persian into English. More than half of the respondents

(59%) agreed with the statement that "learning a foreign language needs a lot of memorization". And 51% stated that learning English was different from learning other school subjects. This shows that some students still have tendencies toward traditional language learning approaches like memorization and learning a lot of grammar rules, though in general they approve of new communicative approaches. However, this tendency decreases as proficiency goes up. This is evident from the mean scores obtained for this belief category. It is higher for low-intermediate group (26.0565) than for high-intermediate group (24.2339). This means that students change their belief about the nature of language learning as they develop their proficiency. They move away from the traditional ways of language learning. This relationship can be bilateral; that is, positive beliefs about new approaches lead to higher levels of proficiency and higher levels of proficiency foster positive beliefs about the nature of language learning. This is in line with Abraham and Vann's (1987) language learning model in which there is a relationship between beliefs and LLSs that in turn leads to success and achievement.

Conclusion

For this group of learners, beliefs about the difficulty of language leaning and motivation correlate with the choice of LLSs. Learners' great favor over Social Strategies indicates a switch towards the new communicative, interaction-based approaches to language learning. To respond to this demand, appropriate syllabi should be designed and more emphasis should be laid on communicative activities and social interactions. Persuasive

communication and group discussion (Wenden, 1991, cited in Goh, 1997; and Yang, 1999) can be used, and diary-keeping, process-based discussions, and pre- and post- discussions (Goh, 1997) may be employed to raise students' metacognitive awareness which can be very effective in their learning.

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