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AN INVESTIGATION ON BEGINNERS' BELIEFS ABOUT FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING
IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

Since 1970's, the subject of foreign language teaching and learning has shifted from teachers to students; the research has also shifted from how to teach to how to learn accordingly. The individual learner differences, especially learners' beliefs about learning, as the most significant factor in language learning process has been studied by more and more researchers. However, most of them have stressed the description of adults' beliefs or the correlations between beliefs and other variables, and therefore neglected the study of the beginners' beliefs. This study sought to investigate the beliefs that beginners hold about language learning. Furthermore this paper aims at the teachers' attention to their student's beliefs in terms of a questionnaire so that they can guide correctly in children's beliefs and autonomy. One hundred pupils from the fourth to sixth grades were selected for the study. They were requested to complete a questionnaire containing the Beliefs About Language Learning Instrument (BALLI) by Horwitz and participate in an interview.

Key words: beginners; beliefs about language learning; motivation; strategies

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1. INTRODUCTION

English, as the most popular language in the world, is playing an important role in people's learning and life. In China, more and more learners are learning English, even the students in elementary school have to begin learning it. The number of language learners is larger and larger, which makes the teachers have to think about what to teach and how, especially how to help the beginners establish the favorable English knowledge and fundamental skill for their further learning, how to help them shape the beneficial beliefs and how to help them form the ability of autonomy.

Since 1970's, the emphasis has also shifted from the teaching to learning. The learner individual differences have become the most important problems studied by many researchers, in which the influence of learners' beliefs about learning on learning process and results has allured more and more scholars and much quantitative work has been done on (Xu Jingfen & Tang Fang, 2004). This paper aims at teachers' attention to beginners' beliefs about language learning so that they guide effectively in learners' learning and autonomous learning.

2. A brief review of literature

Terms such as knowledge and beliefs are differently within the research community, depending on various theoretical orientations. In cognitive psychology, learner's beliefs about the nature of knowledge and learning or epistemological beliefs have been investigated with the idea that they are part of the underlying mechanism of meta-cognition, form the building blocks of epistemology, and are driving force in intellectual performance. From this perspective, beliefs about language learning are viewed as a component of meta-knowledge, which include all their individual understanding about themselves as learners and thinkers including their goals and needs. Apart from being seemed as a component of meta-cognitive knowledge, other definition of beliefs- depending on one's theoretical perspective- have identified them as: mini- theories, insights, culture of learning, learner assumptions, implicit theories, self- constructed representational systems, conception of learning and general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning and about the nature of language learning and teaching. Beliefs are a central construct in every discipline that deals with human behavior. Given the significant role that beliefs can play in determining behavior, beliefs relating to language are important.

In the classroom context, the perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and meta-cognitive knowledge that students bring with them to the learning situation have been recognized as a significant contributory factor in learning progress and ultimate success. For example, second or foreign language students may hold strong beliefs about the nature of language study, its difficulty, the process of its acquisition, the success of certain learning strategies, the existence of aptitude, their own expectations about achievement and teaching methodologies. Existing research suggests that learners' beliefs have been the potential to influence both their experiences and actions as language learners.

Although a considerable amount of research has so far been conducted in the language acquisition area, foreign and second language learner beliefs, so far, have been neglected variable. Language educators have long recognized that learners bring to the language classroom a context web of attitudes, experiences, expectations beliefs and learning strategies. As a result, research reveals that attitudes toward learning, and the perceptions and beliefs determine them, may have a profound influence on learning behavior and on learning outcomes. They are also central to the learner's overall experience and achievements. Furthermore, some note that successful learners develop insights into beliefs about the language learning process, their own abilities, and the use of effective learning strategies.

In the past decades, the body of research literature on language learning beliefs has grown greatly, beginning in the 1970s. As these studies have investigated within various research paradigms, researchers have recently attempted to classify them. A typical research strategy involved completing an inventory of different belief statements (BALLI), to which learners indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement (Horwitz, 1987). In this questionnaire, Horwitz classified the beliefs about language learning into five groups--- the language aptitude, the difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, learning and communicative strategies, motivation. Another popular strategy employs interviews and focus group discussions (Wenden, 1986). Wenden reported a study of 25 adults enrolled in a part-time advanced level class at an American university. She elicited their views about language learning in a semi-structured interview and then summarized them in terms of twelve explicit statements, grouped into three general categories: (1) use of language, (2) learning about the learning, (3) importance of personal factors. These approaches, as mainstream, are used in many studies relating to beliefs, such as beliefs and strategies; beliefs and proficiency. The following research question is addressed in this study: What beliefs do beginners hold about language learning?

3. Method

Instrument

In this investigation, the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) was administered to collect information on learner's beliefs about language learning. A couple of BALLI items were modified slightly for beginners. This quantitative self-report questionnaire investigated 31 different learner beliefs in five major areas: (1) foreign language aptitude, (2) the difficulty of language learning, (3) the nature of learning, (4) learning and communication strategies, and (5) motivations. Subjects were asked to read the statements and decide if they: strongly agree (Scale=5), agree (Scale=4), neither agree nor disagree (scale=3), disagree (scale=2), or strongly disagree (scale=1) with each statement. Students indicate their opinion on the items using a 5-point scale. The scales are anchored at one end by "strongly agree" and at the other end by "strongly disagree". A high score on one item (Maximum=5) indicates a positive attitude towards this item.

Subjects

One hundred students from the fourth to the sixth grades were chosen randomly to participate in this study. Of the 100 students, 40 were male and 60 were female.

Statistical analysis

The SPSS software package (version 12.0) was used to compute calculations and conduct analysis involving descriptive statistics including frequencies, means, standard deviations, etc.

Results

This study aimed to investigate the beliefs that the beginners have about language learning. This research questions were organized by frequencies and means. Table 1 shows the response frequency and means for foreign language aptitude.

Table1. Response means and frequency (in percentage) for FLA

item	Mean	Strongly agree & agree (%)	Neither agree & nor disagree (%)	Disagree & strongly disagree (%)
It's easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language	3.92	75	11	14
Some people have a special ability for learning foreign language	3.03	34	36	28
Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language	3.39	49	26	25
You have a special ability for learning foreign language	2.66	20	36	44
Girls are better than boys at leaning foreign language	2.14	10	27	63
People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at languages	2.10	12	20	68
You believe that you will learn to speak English very well	4.18	83	13	4

The common belief that it is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language was also supported by children (75%). Though the majority of students were not sure whether everyone can learn to speak English well and someone have a special ability for learning foreign language or not, they were self-confident to learn to speak English very well (83%). The statement "people who are good at mathematics or science are not good at language" was agreed with by only 12% students. More than half of the students (68%) disagreed with it.

Table2. Response means and frequency (in percentage) for the nature of FLL

item	mean	Strongly agree	Neither agree &	Disagree &
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		& agree (%)	nor disagree (%)	strongly disagree (%)
It is necessary to know about English-speaking culture in order to speak English	3.92	70	22	8
It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country	2.45	18	22	60
The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning grammars	3.50	53	24	23
The most important part of learning English is learning vocabulary	2.86	32	28	40
The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from your native language	3.16	41	25	34
Learning a foreign language is different from other academic subjects	3.19	43	23	34

Many students believe that it is necessary to know about English-speaking. Seventy percent students agreed with this statement. However only eighteen percent students agreed with this opinion "It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country". Obviously, children have noticed the important role culture plays in foreign language learning progress. It is, at the same time, found that majority of students have hold this belief that grammar and translation are most important part of learning English (53% and 41%). It indicates that traditional culture of learning has been influencing children's beliefs about language learning.

Table3. Response means and frequency (in percentage) for difficulty of FLL

Item	Mean	Strongly agree & agree (%)	Neither agree & nor disagree (%)	Disagree & strongly disagree (%)
It is easier to speak than to understand a foreign language	3.62	56	25	19
It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it	2.74	34	20	46
English is a very difficult language	2.69	12	52	36
If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, he could learn it well over a period of one to five years	3.36	42	42	16

It was showed that the majority of students were not sure the difficulty of language learning at the beginning stage of language learning, but they believed that English could be learned over a period of one to five years (42%) and they were quite self-confident about their ultimate achievement. Among four skills, majority of students regarded speaking as the easiest than the other three ones. This indicates that the teachers in elementary school abide by this rule: speaking and listening goes before reading and writing.

Eighty-nine percent students observed the importance of good pronunciation, but they don't think it's necessary to correct the errors the beginners made. Regarding the question of how to practice spoken English, eighty-one percent students prefer to practice with cassette and tape and read loudly (69%). Since English is a foreign language in China, there were no more opportunities for learners to speak English outside the classroom; fifty-four percent students enjoyed practicing English with the native speakers they met.

Table4. Response means and frequency (in percentage) for learning and communication strategies

item	means	Strongly	Neither agree &	Disagree &
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		agree & agree (%)	nor disagree (%)	strongly disagree (%)
It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation	4.38	89	5	6
Memorization is important for language learning	3.22	44	23	33
It is important to repeat and practice a lot	3.81	84	9	6
It is important to read loudly	3.88	69	15	16
It is important to practice with cassette or tapes	4.12	81	9	10
You feel timid speaking with other people	2.39	19	24	57
You enjoy practicing English with the native speakers you meet	3.48	54	24	22
It's OK to guess if you don't know a word in English	2.74	36	17	47
You shouldn't speak anything in English until you can say it correctly	2.64	31	16	53
If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on	3.00	42	19	39

Table5. Response frequency (in percentage) for motivations

Item	Means	Strongly agree & agree (%)	Neither agree & nor disagree (%)	Disagree & strongly disagree (%)
You learn English because of tests	1.57	6	9	85
If I learn English very well, I will have better opportunity for good job	3.21	60	15	25
I would like to learn English so that I can get know native speakers of English better	3.06	60	23	17
I would like to learn English because I love English teachers	1.44	4	5	91

Sixty percent of the students agreed with the item "If I learn English very well, I will have better opportunity to for good and sixty percent of the students agreed with the item "I would like to learn English so that I can get know native speakers of English better". This finding indicated that these participants are not only instrumentally oriented and but also integrated, and the former is more significant than the later.

4. Conclusion

In this study we found that the beginners have had their own understanding about the nature and characteristics of language learning. This important information told that teachers should not neglect the development of students' thoughts and should help them hold the correct and beneficial beliefs. Meanwhile, teachers should also reflect on whether their beliefs about language learning are correct or not. It is said that teacher's beliefs about language learning will affect his or her teaching practice which will influence students' beliefs forming. In all, the students' correct beliefs about language development depend on teacher's correct beliefs.

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