



INVESTIGATING GENDER INFLUENCE ON LANGUAGE LEARNING BELIEFS

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Abstract:

This paper reports part of a study that examines undergraduate English as second language (ESL) students' English language learning beliefs, English language anxiety and learning outcome in a university of Pakistan. As a pilot of the study, this paper uses Horwitz's Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) to collect data from 404 undergraduate ESL students, and explores the effects of gender on Pakistani undergraduate ESL students' English language learning beliefs. The results indicate that males and females held similar beliefs in the factor Motivations and Expectations, but significantly differed in the factor Nature of Language Learning. There were gender differences in the other three factors as well, but those were statistically insignificant. Possible explanations are provided for the differences. Based upon the findings, pedagogical implications are provided for the improvement of teaching and learning of English in Pakistan and worldwide.

Keywords: language learning beliefs, gender, BALLI, ESL learner

1. Introduction

Learner variables such as learning beliefs, learning strategies, attitudes, motivations and anxiety are considered important and influential in foreign/second language learning process and are the subject of a large body of research on individual differences in learners of second/foreign languages (Dorney, 2005; Diab, 2006). Learners'

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metacognitive knowledge and beliefs have also been found to have a strong influence on their learning, thinking, reasoning and problem solving abilities (Kardash & Sholes, 1996).

Beliefs in general are defined by Richardson (1996, p 103) as: “psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true”. In the context of second/foreign language learning, beliefs can be considered as general assumptions held by the learners about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning, and about the nature of language learning and teaching (Victori & Lockhart, 1995).

Language learning beliefs are crucial to learning foreign/second language. Researchers and theorists of language argue that language learning beliefs affect learners’ learning outcome and behavior (White, 1999; Hall, 2011; Yaman, 2012); for example, Abdolazadeh and Nia (2014) used Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) and Key English Test (KET) to study the beliefs and proficiency of Iranian students of four public schools in Tehran, and found positive correlation between their language learning beliefs and language proficiency.

Language learners with positive and realistic beliefs about language learning tend to behave in a more productive manner in learning a language than those who have negative and unrealistic beliefs (Mantle-Bromely, 1995). Mori (1999) is of the view that learners’ weaknesses can be compensated for by positive and realistic beliefs about language learning. On the other hand, beliefs can negatively affect learning outcome if they are unrealistic or erroneous (Horwitz, 1987).

According to Horwitz (1987, 1999) understanding learners’ beliefs helps language teachers in becoming familiar with the learners’ strategies and approaches to language learning. Research shows that language learning beliefs are connected to and influenced by other factors like self-concept and identity, self-efficacy, personality traits, anxiety, motivation, learning strategies and socio-economic status (Epstein, 1990; Siebert, 2003; Bernat, 2006; Zarei & Rehmani 2015; Ariani & Ghafournia, 2016).

Psychologists have long been interested in investigating gender-related differences in social behavior, cognitive activity, and general verbal ability. In the field of second language acquisition, researchers have been studying gender effects on second and foreign language learning (Bacon & Finnemann, 1992). Two independent studies have found sex-related differences in learners’ motivation and attitude towards the target language (Gardner & Lambert 1972; Muchnick & Wolfe 1982). Bacon (1992) found men significantly more confident about their performance than women on a listening comprehension test.

Beliefs are also found to be influenced by gender differences (Bacon & Finnemann, 1992; Oz, 2007; Siebert, 2003; Yaman, 2012). Among studies confirming

gender differences in language learning beliefs, a study was conducted in Saudi Arabian context wherein Daif (2012) investigated the language learning beliefs of 250 university students at a university and reported statistically significant gender differences in beliefs related to Motivations and Expectations, Learning and Communication Strategies, and Language Learning Aptitude. He also reported that the overall beliefs held by the students were positive and realistic. In another study, Nahavandi and Mukundan (2014) examined the language learning beliefs of 369 Iranian Engineering English as foreign language (EFL) students, and by using Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) found significant differences in students' beliefs about language learning with regard to gender and proficiency levels.

One of the earliest studies on gender differences in language learning beliefs was conducted by Bacon and Finnemann (1992). They investigated self-reported beliefs about language learning and authentic oral and written input. They developed their own 109 item questionnaire in 5-point Likert scale to elicit responses from 938 Spanish students from two state universities. They found a higher level of motivation and strategy use in females than males. They also found significant gender differences in the use of global strategies in dealing with authentic input, and level of social interaction in the target language with females dominating the males in both cases. In another study reporting females' stronger beliefs about language learning, Oz (2007) studied the beliefs of 470 EFL students in Turkish context, and found group differences related to gender and educational level in learners' beliefs about language learning in secondary education. Oz found Female students holding stronger beliefs than males about social interaction, learning spoken English and foreign language aptitude. Besides, females attached more importance than males to vocabulary, pronunciation and the use of audio-visual aids. They were also of the view that women are better than men at learning foreign languages.

Contrary results are found in Siebert's (2003) study that used Horwitz's (1987) BALLI to study students' and teachers' beliefs about language learning. The study was conducted on 91 male and 64 female language learners of 22 different nationalities studying English as a second language at a higher education institution in the United States of America. Male students in Siebert's study rated their language learning abilities higher than the females. Male and female students also significantly differed in their views about how long it would take them to learn English. The females believed that spending one hour daily would require 5-10 years; male students, on the other hand, believed it would require 1-2 or 3-5 years to learn English. Gender differences were also found in students' responses to the importance of practicing with audio-visual aids, and the importance of learning grammar in learning a language.

There are some studies, nevertheless, which did not find any significant gender differences in language learning beliefs of the learners (Tercanlioglu, 2005; Bernat & Lloyd, 2007). The researchers concluded that other factors like culture, learning context, age and level of learning may be responsible for group differences in language learning beliefs (Tercanlioglu, 2005; Bernat & Lloyd, 2007). These studies are in contradiction to a large number of studies which confirm gender differences in language learning beliefs, thus require more research that gives evidence for their validation.

Despite their different participants and cultural contexts, the studies above show the importance of positive and realistic beliefs for language learning. They also reveal that males and females may differ in their approaches and beliefs about language learning, which, as a result, may affect their learning outcome. Most of the studies confirmed the idea of between-groups variations on the basis of factors like gender and educational level; however, these studies also showed mutual differences in findings such as males in Siebert's (2003) study rated their abilities to learn language higher than females, but Oz (2007) found exactly opposite results of language aptitude in his study. Such variations in studies on language learning beliefs need further validation by providing results from different cultures and contexts.

The purpose of the current study is to replicate the previous studies on language learning beliefs from gender perspective in Pakistani English as second language (ESL) context, thus adding to the body of research on language learning beliefs conducted from gender perspective in different contexts of the world. The studies reviewed above show different patterns of gender differences in language learning beliefs depending on different cultures, educational levels and contexts. Pakistan is a multilingual country with more than 60 regional languages, a national language 'Urdu' and Official language English (Rahman, 2005). Both English and Urdu are used in the domains of power such as government, education, law, corporate sector, research, and media; whereas the regional languages do not enjoy the same prestige (ibid). Furthermore, it is a country where females get fewer opportunities to higher education and good jobs; therefore, it is worthwhile to study the role of gender on language learning beliefs of Pakistani ESL learners. Furthermore, most of the studies quoted in the literature review were conducted on language learning beliefs from English as a foreign language perspective, whereas, the present study treats English as a second language since it is the official language of Pakistan.

Following are the objectives of the current study:

- To identify the English language learning beliefs of Pakistani students.
- To identify the influence of gender on the language learning beliefs of Pakistani ESL students.

The purpose of the study is to investigate gender related differences in Pakistani ESL undergraduate university students' language learning beliefs. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- What are the language learning beliefs of Pakistani ESL students?
- What effect does gender have on the language learning beliefs of Pakistani ESL students?

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The participants for the present study were the undergraduate university students of a university which is situated in a less developed area of Pakistan. 404 students of different majors learning English as a compulsory subject in their first two years of Bachelor (BS) Program participated in the study. Out of 404 students, 258 were males and 146 females. The unequal number is indicative of the social reality that females have fewer opportunities to receive higher education due to the backwardness of the area. The age of the participants varied from 18 to 26 with mean age 20 years and standard deviation of 1 year. All the participants belonged to the same ethnic group; that is, Pashtun, and had Pashto as their mother tongue. The respondents were taken from different majors including English, Business, Chemistry, Physics, Biotechnology, Education and Islamic Studies.

2.2 Instrument

The instrument used was based on Horwitz (1987) BALLI. The BALLI was widely used by many researchers for studying the language learning beliefs of learners (Horwitz, 1989; Siebert, 2003; Bernat & Lloyd, 2007; Daif, 2012; Nahavandi & Mukundan, 2014).

The BALLI measures the beliefs of language learners in five different domains of language learning, which include: (1) Foreign Language Aptitude (2) Nature of Language Learning (2) Difficulty of Language Learning (4) Learning and Communication Strategies (5) Motivations and Expectations. All items are rated on a 5-point Likert Scale with 32 items ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The item related to the difficulty of English language ranged from *very difficult* (1) to *very easy* (5), while the other item asking about the duration to learn to speak English ranged from *less than one year* (1) to *you cannot learn a language in one hour a day* (5). A background information questionnaire was also used to collect data from the participants.

2.3 Data Collection

The data were collected from the students in spring semester, 2017. The students were briefed about the purpose of research and about how to respond to the questions in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was filled during the class time. The students were assured that the information they had provided would be kept confidential and used for research purposes only.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data obtained through BALLI were quantitative in nature and were analyzed via Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS Version 22.0). Descriptive statistics; that is, means and standard deviations were calculated for each of the five factors of BALLI.

3. Findings

The findings of the study are presented in tabular form. Descriptive statistics are provided for all the five factors of language learning beliefs (See table 1). These factors are based on Horwitz's (1987) theoretical assumptions, and the 34 items of the inventory are grouped into these five factors according to their relevance. Motivations and Expectations factor shows the highest mean value (4.28) followed by Nature of Language Learning (3.91), Learning and Communication Strategies (3.66), Difficulty of Language Learning (3.58) and Language Aptitude (3.29). These statistics show that Pakistani ESL learners believe that strong motivations and high expectations guarantee the success in English language learning more than the natural ability to learn a language. The high mean value for the factor Nature of Language Learning compared to Learning and Communication Strategies shows that students believe in a more formal approach to language learning as compared to reliance on learning and communicative strategies. The maximum standard deviation is shown by Nature of Language Learning (.492) and the minimum by Language Aptitude (.416). The standard deviations show homogeneity in student's beliefs.

The independent samples t-test was run to find significant gender differences in the language learning beliefs of the students (see Table 2). The gender differences in the three factors, namely, Language Aptitude ($t=-.85$, $df=402$, $p=.39$), Difficulty of Language Learning ($t=1.48$, $df=346$, $p=.13$) and Learning and Communication Strategies ($t=1.52$, $df=402$, $p=.12$) wherein females show higher mean values than males, are statistically insignificant since the alpha value is greater than 0.05. The only factor showing males' higher mean value than females' is Nature of Language Learning ($t=2.58$, $df=402$, $p=.01$), which is the only factor that shows statistically significant gender differences with alpha

value smaller than 0.05. The factor Motivations and Expectations shows similar beliefs of males and females.

Interestingly enough, the standard deviations shown by males in all the five factors are greater than that of females, which shows that females were more homogeneous in their beliefs compared to males.

4. Discussion

The purpose of the study was to examine the influence of gender on the language learning beliefs of Pakistani ESL students. The overall beliefs held by the Pakistani ESL students about language learning were positive in that they mostly agreed with the BALLI items. The mean values shown in table 1 for all the factors of language learning beliefs are above 3.2, which shows that Pakistani ESL students agreed with the items of the inventory. The mean values for two factors show very strong agreement (Nature of Language Learning 3.91, Motivations and Expectations 4.2), which shows that students have very strong and positive beliefs about these two factors. The beliefs held by the students are conducive to language learning with Motivations and Expectations showing highest degree of agreement on part of the students. This result is in line with the findings of Sioson (2011), Jafari & Shokrpour (2012), Bagherzadeh (2012) and Hayati (2015) who also found motivations and expectations factor of language learning beliefs showing highest mean values in their studies. Motivation is a great impetus in any form of learning, and is one of the most influential factors affecting language learning. Gardner and MacIntyre (1991) found motivated students behaving very actively in language class activities and tasks, and were least likely to drop out of language study. Strong beliefs regarding the factor Nature of Language Learning, however, may lead, at times, to overemphasis on the formal aspects of language learning such as grammar, vocabulary and translation, which hinders the more communicative aspects of language and, as a result, may cause problems in language learning (Horwitz, 1988; Sadeghi & Abdi, 2015). Language aptitude is also an important factor in second language learning; however, the current study shows language aptitude reflecting lesser agreement as compared to the other factors, which shows that the students did not believe language aptitude a factor as important for English language learning as the other factors. This again is supported by the findings of Sioson (2011), Jafari and Shokrpour (2012), Bagherzadeh (2012) and Ariani and Ghafournia (2016) who also found it to be the factor with lowest mean value in their studies.

The factor Language Aptitude shows higher mean values for females than males indicating that females rated their language learning abilities higher than did males. This finding is in line with Oz (2007) and Barkhordar and Rastegar (2012) who found

women showing stronger aptitude for learning foreign language in their studies; at the same time, it is contrary to Siebert's (2003) findings in which males showed stronger language aptitude than did females. The gender differences shown in factor Language Aptitude, however, are statistically insignificant in the current study. The other two factors wherein females tend to agree more than males are Difficulty of Language Learning, and Learning and Communications Strategies, but the t-test statistics show that these differences are also statistically insignificant. The only factor showing statistically significant gender differences is Nature of Language Learning. This finding is contrary to Oz (2007) who found women emphasizing the importance of new vocabulary items more than did men. The root-causes of these gender differences in language learning beliefs may be located in the socio-cultural behaviors of the two genders (Baker, 1992).

There are a few explanations for the differences found in the various studies given above including the current study with regard to the influence of gender on language learning beliefs. Firstly, culture is believed to influence the perception of people (Alexander & Dochy, 1995). The studies about gender differences quoted above were conducted on subjects from different cultures ranging from the United States to Australia, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. The differences in cultures might have impacted the perceptions of the subject regarding their beliefs about language learning. Secondly, the said studies were conducted in different contexts that might well explain for the differences in students' views regarding language learning as Rifkin (2000) found in a large scale study conducted in various institutions of the U.S that language learning beliefs of the learners differed according to the different contextual settings. Thirdly, other factors such as motivation, anxiety, experiences of the past, self-efficacy have also been reported to influence language learning beliefs (Truit, 1995; Huang & Tsai, 2003).

5. Conclusion and Implications

The aim of the study was to examine the effect of gender on Pakistani ESL students' language learning beliefs. The language learning beliefs of Pakistani ESL students were very positive and conducive for language learning; besides, significant gender differences were found in language learning beliefs of Pakistani ESL learners, which support the claims made by researchers like Bacon and Finnemann (1992), Siebert (2003) and Oz (2007) that gender is responsible for variation in learners' language learning beliefs.

The current study was limited to the ESL students of one university of Pakistan owing to time and financial constraints. For better results, it can be replicated taking

sample from a number of universities in Pakistan. Besides self-report questionnaire such as BALLI, other means of data collection can be used such as the use of interviews for data validation. Teachers' perspective on language learning beliefs can also be included in the studies in future. Other influential factors such as grade level and major can also be studied for group variation in language learning beliefs of Pakistani students.

Pedagogical implications offered by the study are: 1. Learners' beliefs about language learning can be identified and their effects on language learning can be envisaged such as students' beliefs about the nature of language learning and their impact on their language learning process. 2. ESL/EFL teachers can adapt their methodologies to bridge the gap between classroom practices and language learners' beliefs of the learners for better results. As Horwitz (1988) states that knowledge of the relationship of learners' beliefs about language learning and strategy use enables teachers to better understand students' expectation of, commitment to, success in, and contentment with their language classes. 3. Educators and policy makers can take into consideration learners' beliefs and gender differences while designing syllabus.

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Appendix

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Factor	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Language Aptitude	404	2.00	4.89	3.29	.416
Difficulty of Language Learning	404	1.20	4.80	3.58	.487
Nature of Language Learning	404	2.33	5.00	3.91	.492
Learning and communication Strategies	404	2.25	4.88	3.66	.425
Motivations and Expectations	404	2.83	5.00	4.28	.426

Table 2: Group Differences and Independent Samples t-Test Statistics

Factor	Male (N=258)		Female (N=146)		Levene's Test		t-Test for Equality of Means		
	Mean	Std. Devia- tion	Mean	Std. Devia- tion	F	Sign.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Language Aptitude	3.28	.43	3.32	.38	.98	.32	-.85	402	.39
Difficulty of Language Learning	3.55	.51	3.63	.43	4.03	.04	1.48	346	.13
Nature of Language Learning	3.96	.50	3.83	.45	2.41	.12	2.58	402	.01
Learning and Communication Strategies	3.63	.43	3.70	.41	.16	.68	1.52	402	.12
Motivations and Expectations	4.28	.43	4.28	.03	.20	.64	.01	402	.98

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