

# The effects of beliefs about language learning and learning strategy use of junior high school EFL learners in remote districts

Ching-yi Chang  
Leader University, Taiwan

Ming-chang Shen  
Leader University, Taiwan

## ABSTRACT

The present study used the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) and the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) to investigate a sample of 250 Taiwanese remote junior high school EFL learners' language learning beliefs, their learning strategies, and the relationship between learners' beliefs and their use of strategies. Additionally, the study examined if learner variables would influence learners' language learning beliefs and their language learning strategies. The results revealed that the participants in the present study endorsed various beliefs and language learning strategies and a moderate correlation was found between them. Pearson Correlation revealed a moderate, significant relation not only in overall BALLI and SILL, but also in each pair of subcategories. Learner variables influenced language learning beliefs and strategies in uneven ways. In terms of gender, female students had higher means in the BALLI and the SILL. However, the results of *t*-test indicated that gender had a significant influence only upon participants' beliefs about language learning. By contrast, learners with extracurricular English learning had higher means in both the BALLI and the SILL, and an independent *t*-test confirmed this significant difference. Further, the participants' length of time learning English influenced their beliefs about English learning and their use of English learning strategies; the descriptive analysis indicated that participants who had longer lengths of English learning had higher means in both the BALLI and the SILL. As to the relationship between participants' beliefs and learning strategies, Pearson Correlation revealed a moderate, significant relation not only in overall BALLI and SILL, but also in each pair of subcategories.

Key words: language learning beliefs; language learning strategies; remote districts

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background and Motivation

In Taiwan there is currently a salient difference in English proficiency between city and country students. Students in remote districts must cope with inferior learning environments caused by a lack of facilities for language teaching, financial constraints, and a lack of English teachers (Lin, 2004). These problems have prompted the formation of compensating policies by the Ministry of Education, which is trying to improve English teaching and learning in remote districts. For example, the Ministry of Education is recruiting local and foreign English teachers to teach English in remote districts, calling for college students to do extracurricular English teaching in remote districts, holding summer camps for English learning for students in remote areas and holding in-service teacher English education for teachers in remote areas.

However, the year level at which English is introduced in elementary schools is not consistent. Some urban schools start the English curriculum in first grade, and some may begin in third grade, but most remote elementary schools begin English in fifth grade. Many scholars believe that this is causing the gap in English proficiency between city and country to become bigger and bigger (Lin, 2004; Shen, 2001).

In this inferior environment, students in remote areas may have formed some erroneous beliefs about language learning. As Horwitz (1987) stated, second language learners often hold different beliefs or notions about language learning, some of which are influenced by students' previous experiences as language learners, and others that are shaped by their own cultural backgrounds. In her review of representative studies based on her questionnaire, BALLI (Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory), she further claims that individual differences, such as age, stage of life, learning style, educational experiences, and learning circumstances, including instructional levels, family, language learning contexts, likely account for as much variation as cultural differences (Horwitz, 1999). Based on the assumption that individual differences and learning circumstances likely account for as much variation as cultural differences, the researcher decided to conduct the present study to investigate and understand the students in remote districts' beliefs about language learning.

Research on beliefs about language learning also has proven that learners' beliefs may have the potential to influence both their experiences and actions as language learners, and there are links between beliefs, motivation, and strategy use (Abraham and Vann, 1987; Horwitz, 1988, 1999; Wenden 1986a, 1987; Yang, 1999).

As to the research on relationships between learner beliefs and language learning strategies, many researchers have provided direct or indirect evidences on the connection between these two variables. Wenden (1986a) found that students could not only distinctly describe their beliefs about language learning but also adopt consistent learning strategies, and she also indicated that these learners' explicit beliefs about how best to learn a language seemed to provide the logic for their choice of learning strategies. Horwitz (1988) argued that some preconceived beliefs are likely to restrict learners' range of strategy use. Abraham and Vann (1987) also suggested that learner's beliefs about how language operates and, consequently, how it is learned may affect the variety and flexibility of strategy use.

In Taiwan, Yang (1992) studied the relationship between Taiwanese university students' beliefs and learning strategy use and Liu (2004) conducted a similar study on senior high school students. They both found that subjects in their studies generally endorsed the concept of foreign language aptitude and most of them were optimistic and highly motivated about learning English.

However, these correlation studies were mainly carried out on college and senior high school students. There are few studies conducted at the junior high school level. This reason also encourages the researchers to conduct the present study to investigate the relationship between beliefs about language learning and the use of learning strategies in junior high

school English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in remote districts.

## 1.2 Research Questions

More specifically, the present study focused on four research questions:

1. What are the beliefs about English learning held by junior high school EFL learners in remote districts?
2. What learning strategies do junior high school EFL learners in remote districts prefer to use?
3. Do learner variables (gender, extracurricular English learning and length of time learning English) influence the learners' beliefs about English learning and their use of English learning strategies?
4. What is the relationship between the beliefs about language learning held by junior high school EFL learners in remote districts and their use of learning strategies?

## 2 METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 The Characteristics of the Subjects

The researchers conducted a survey at four remote junior high schools which were randomly selected from remote junior high schools in Pingtung and Kaohsiung County. Moreover, three classes of each school were randomly selected from seventh, eighth and ninth grade. As the result, there were 317 EFL learners participated in the present study. After receiving 317 questionnaires, the researchers discarded 67 invalid questionnaires which were either incomplete or failed to follow the instructions of the questionnaire. Accordingly, the valid response rate was 78 % and a total of 250 questionnaires were identified as valid data for statistical analysis in the present study.

### 2.2 The Instruments of the Study

The present study employed quantitative research methods. The instruments for data collection included a survey of three sets of questionnaires: background questionnaire, the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) (Horwitz, 1987) and the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning questionnaire (SILL) version 7.0 (Oxford, 1990).

### 2.3 The Method of Data Analysis

The statistical procedures utilized in the present study were operated by means of the SPSS program, including descriptive statistics, independent *t*-test, one-way ANOVA, the Scheffe post-hoc test and Pearson product-moment correlation. Moreover, the statistical significance was set on the level of .05 for all statistical procedures.

## 3 CONCLUSIONS

### 3.1 Results and Discussions

#### **Research Question 1: What are the beliefs about English learning held by junior high school EFL learners in remote districts?**

Based on the result of descriptive statistics, present study indicated that participants held various beliefs about language learning. Among five subcategories of BALLI, the beliefs of "Motivation" ( $M = 3.79, SD = 0.72$ ) were the strongest belief followed by "Nature of Language Learning" ( $M = 3.40, SD = 0.57$ ), "Difficulty of Language Learning" ( $M = 3.41,$

$SD = 0.51$ ), “Communication Strategies” ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ) and Foreign Language Aptitude” ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 0.46$ ). In other words, the results indicated that participants in present study generally believe that motivation is the strongest factor influencing the success of their English language learning.

The first category of the BALLI, “Foreign Language Aptitude”, concerns the general existence of special ability for language learning and beliefs about the characteristics of successful language learners. In the present study, 44% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that language learning required a special ability while about one third of the participants (32%) indicated neutral and 24% of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with the concept. This result was in line with previous research showing that Taiwanese EFL learners endorsed the concept of language aptitude (Yang, 1999; Liu, 2004).

The second category, “Difficulty of Language Learning”, concerns the general difficulty of learning a foreign language. In the present study, 46% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that there was a hierarchy of language difficulty while 36% of participants stayed neutral and only 18% of participant disagreed or strongly disagreed. The finding was in accordance with previous studies that Taiwanese EFL learners generally accepted the concept of language a difficulty hierarchy (Yang, 1999; Liu, 2004).

The third category, “Nature of Language Learning”, concerns relevant issues related to the nature of language learning process. The result indicated that nearly half of the participants (49%) endorsed various opinions about language learning while 35% of participants neither agreed nor disagreed, and only 16% of the participants disagreed or strongly disagreed. The current study revealed that EFL learners in remote school hold various opinions about the nature of language learning which was consistent with either in Taiwan and other countries. (Abraham and Vann, 1987; Horwitz, 1988, 1999; Liu, 2004; Wenden 1986a, 1987a; Yang, 1999).

The fourth category, “Learning and Communication Strategies”, refers to various strategies learners use to master a second or foreign language. The result showed that nearly half of the participants (48%) believed in the use of various types of strategies while more than one third (35%) of the participants expressed no opinion and 21% of the participants neither disagreed nor strongly disagreed with the concept. Again, this finding was generally consistent with previous studies, which showed that Taiwanese EFL learners possessed various thoughts about how to learn English (Yang, 1999; Liu, 2004).

The last category, “Motivation”, concerns the desire and expectation for language learning opportunities. The result indicated that more than a half of the participants (59%) expressed the motivation for learning English while one third indicated no opinion, and only 10% of the participants disagreed or strongly disagreed the desire. Generally, this is consistent with previous studies that Taiwanese EFL learners were optimistic about learning English (Yang, 1999; Liu, 2004).

Overall, the findings of the present study were generally consistent with previous research efforts. However, as prior studies have suggested, possible conflicts may exist in learners’ beliefs, which could weaken claims of robust data linkages. For example, a student who believes that everyone can learn to speak a foreign language may not believe that he has foreign language aptitude. As a result, he might blame his failure on his talent, not his efforts. Thus, teachers and educators should try to help their students clarify such conflicts in their beliefs by encouraging a healthy learning attitude.

### **Research Question 2: What learning strategies are preferred by junior high school EFL learners in remote districts?**

The result of descriptive statistics showed that the participants in the present study were at medium level of learning strategy usage ( $M = 3.06$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ). Moreover, the descriptive analysis found that compensation strategies were most frequently used strategies ( $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ) followed by cognitive strategies ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ), memory

strategies ( $M = 3.08$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ), affective strategies ( $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ), social strategies ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ) and metacognitive strategies ( $M = 2.90$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ). In other words, the participants in this study preferred to employ compensation strategies for their English learning most frequently, which was also consistent with previous studies (Chang, 2003; Liu, 2004) while they seemed to use metacognitive strategies the least often.

**Research Question3: Do learner variables (gender, extracurricular English learning and length of time learning English) have significant difference in learners' beliefs about English learning and their use of English learning strategies?**

Based on the result of descriptive statistics, the present study found that female learners had higher means than male learners in both the BALLI and the SILL (See Table1). In other words, female learners generally had stronger overall beliefs and a higher frequency of overall strategy use. However, a significant difference between female and male learners was only found in overall beliefs about language learning.

When the five subcategories of the BALLI were examined, female learners had higher means in all subcategories. However, only the subcategory, "Motivation", achieved the significant difference level in  $t$ -test. In six subcategories of the SILL, female learners had higher means in five of six subcategories: memory, cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social strategies. Moreover, no significant difference was found in  $t$ -test (See Table1).

**Table 1 Summary of descriptive statistics and  $t$ -test results on the BALLI and the SILL for male and female learners**

	Male ( $n=105$ )		Female( $n=145$ )		$t$	$p$
	$M$	$SD$	$M$	$SD$		
Aptitude	3.23	0.45	3.31	0.46	1.366	.173
Difficulty	3.34	0.53	3.46	0.49	1.803	.073
Nature	3.45	0.50	3.49	0.61	0.646	.519
Learning	3.37	0.42	3.42	0.51	1.025	.306
Motivations	3.61	0.76	3.93	0.68	3.412	.001*
BALLI	3.38	0.39	3.48	0.40	2.209	.028*
Memory	2.90	0.69	2.94	0.75	0.431	.667
Cognitive	2.85	0.71	2.89	0.81	0.466	.642
Compensation	2.91	0.71	2.83	0.82	0.834	.405
Metacognitive	3.06	0.79	3.14	0.88	0.790	.431
Affective	2.92	0.76	2.97	0.85	0.536	.592
Social	3.00	0.77	3.10	0.93	0.816	.415
SILL	2.93	0.62	2.97	0.72	0.504	.614

\*  $p < .05$

In brief, although female learners generally had stronger overall beliefs about language learning and higher frequency of language learning strategy use than male learners, a significant difference was only found in the overall beliefs about language learning and motivation. This finding was generally consistent with other gender correlations in research (Siebert, 2003, Oxford & Nyikos 1989). Siebert found a number of significant belief differences among males and females in relation to language learning and strategy use, while Oxford & Nyikos claimed that female learners, compared with their male counterparts, used a wider range of strategies.

As for the next individual difference variable, the amount of learners' extracurricular English learning, the descriptive analysis showed that learners who had received extra English instruction had higher means in both overall beliefs about language learning and language learning strategies. Moreover, the independent  $t$ -test showed significant difference in both the BALLI  $t(248) = 2.03$ ,  $p = .044$  (two-tailed) and the SILL,  $t(248) = 3.51$ ,  $p = .044$  (two-tailed). After analyzing each subcategory of the BALLI, the results showed that learners

who had experience of receiving extracurricular English learning had higher means in all subcategories. Additionally, significant differences were found in the two subcategories dealing with language learning difficulty and motivation.

In terms of the SILL, the results revealed that learners who had experience of receiving extracurricular English learning had greater means in all subcategories. Moreover, significant differences were found in five of six subcategories: Memory strategy,  $t(248) = 2.757, p = .006$  (two-tailed), Cognitive strategy,  $t(248) = 4.116, p = .000$  (two-tailed), Metacognitive strategy,  $t(248) = 3.291, p = .001$  (two-tailed), Affective strategy,  $t(248) = 2.298, p = .028$  (two-tailed) and Social strategy,  $t(248) = 2.347, p = .020$  (two-tailed).

Evidently, learners who have had extracurricular English study show significant differences in overall beliefs about English learning, language learning difficulty, motivation, and in their overall use of language learning strategies. This correlation supports Horwitz's (1999) assumption that individual differences and learning circumstances likely account for as much variation as cultural differences and Rubin's (1975) assumption that strategy uses vary with the task, learning stage, age, context, individual styles, and cultural differences.

The last individual difference variable to be considered was the length of learners' English learning and its effect upon their beliefs about English learning as well as their use of English learning strategies. In the present study, the descriptive analysis indicated that learners who had studied English for a longer period of time held stronger beliefs about language learning and reported a higher frequency of language strategy use. Additionally, the results of one-way ANOVA and the Scheffe post-hoc test illustrated a significant difference in overall the BALLI,  $F(4, 246) = 3.218, p = .014$ . However, no significance was found in the SILL. The result of Scheffe post-hoc test indicated that there was a significant difference between two groups: "More than one year, but less than three years" and "More than five years, but less than seven years". In other words, the participants who had studied English more than five years, but less than seven years had significantly stronger beliefs than participants who had studied English more than one year, but less than three years. These findings are consistent with Rifkin's (2000) 3-year BALLI study in which she found that the level of language instruction played a role in shaping learner's beliefs and Oxford and Nyikos' (1989) study in which students with more years of language study tended to use strategies more often than less experienced students.

#### **Research Question 4: What is the relationship between the beliefs about language learning held by junior high school EFL learners in remote districts and their use of learning strategies?**

Based on the result of Pearson correlation, the current study displays a moderate association ( $r = 0.444, p = .000$ ) between participants' beliefs about language learning and their use of learning strategies. When each subcategory of the BALLI and the SILL, was examined the result of Pearson correlation also indicated a significant linkage in each subcategory of the BALLI and the SILL. Among these significant correlations, the first subcategory in the BALLI, "Foreign Language Aptitude", had the strongest relationship with compensation strategy ( $r = .231, p = .000$ ). The second subcategory in the BALLI, "Difficulty of Language Learning", had the highest correlation with memory ( $r = .427, p = .000$ ), cognitive and affective strategy ( $r = .387, p = .000$ ). The last subcategory in the BALLI, motivation, had the most notable correlation with overall SILL ( $r = 0.422, p = .000$ ) and three SILL subcategories: cognitive strategy ( $r = .387, p = .000$ ), metacognitive ( $r = .455, p = .000$ ), social strategies ( $r = .340, p = .000$ ).

In summary, based on the result of Pearson correlation, the present study found that there was a moderate relationship between participants' beliefs about language learning and their use of learning strategies. Further, learners who endorsed the beliefs of foreign language aptitude seemed to use compensation strategies most often, while learners who believed in a hierarchy of language learning seemed to use memory, cognitive and affective strategies most

frequently. Finally, the current study's data revealed that learners who had motivation for language learning seemed to use language learning strategies, specifically cognitive, metacognitive and social ones, most often. This moderate relationship between participants' beliefs about language learning and their use of learning strategies accords with prior research; Abraham and Vann (1897), Horwitz (1987, 1988), Liu (2004), Wenden (1986a, 1986b, 1987), and Yang, (1999) have all established possible links between learners' beliefs about language learning and the effects of these beliefs upon learning strategy usage.

### 3.2 Pedagogical Implications

According to the results of present study, four pedagogical implications were provided. Firstly, with better understanding of the beliefs about language learning held by junior high school EFL learners in remote districts, and their use of learning strategies, teachers and educators can better understand the situation of rural EFL learners. Moreover, by encouraging appropriate beliefs and providing effective instruction of learning strategies according to learners' situation, teachers and educators can teach English more effectively.

Secondly, in order to understand learners' beliefs about language learning and their preference of learning strategies in the process of English learning, some materials and methods can be used in their regular curriculum. For example, the use of the BALLI and the SILL in classrooms not only could help teachers gather the information of learners' beliefs and their use of strategies, but also could help learners promote their awareness of their existing language learning beliefs and learning strategies. Moreover, methods like classroom observation, diary keeping, questionnaires (such as the BALLI and the SILL), interviews, and group discussions are useful for teachers and educators to understand learners' beliefs and their use of strategy systematically.

Thirdly, students in Taiwan need to memorize a lot of information to pass many exams, thus effective use of memory strategy is especial important (Chen, 2000). However, previous studies, including the present one, found that memory strategies have been lacking and not used effectively. Thus, teachers and educators can integrate the training of memory strategy more often into their regular instruction.

Finally, the present study found significant a relationship between beliefs and strategy use. Teachers and educators should try to help students develop positive beliefs that lead to effective learning strategy use and minimize negative beliefs that might hinder learning. For example, teachers and educators can remove learners' misconceptions by providing knowledge or illustrations concerning the nature and process of language acquisition (Yang, 1998).

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