

College learner's English learning beliefs in Taiwan EFL context

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Abstract

Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages (Wenzao) in Kaohsiung, Taiwan has run the 36-credit General English courses for seven years. Although it has collected information about the students' language proficiency, it has not, until now, collected information about students' beliefs about language learning. This paper reports on a survey of the beliefs about English language learning (ELL) of a group of tertiary level students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at Wenzao. The survey instrument, the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) developed by Horwitz (1987), was designed to collect information about students' beliefs in the following areas: language learning aptitude, difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation and expectations. Data were collected from the 38 freshmen attending one of one of Wenzao's 36-credit English program classes. The data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), a t-test being performed in the analysis of the learners' responses. The findings reveal that survey participants overall have a strong instrumental motivation for learning English and that most of them believe that they will ultimately succeed in speaking it very well. Even so, many of them appeared to have unrealistic expectations, with as many as 37% reporting believing (or strongly believing) that it is possible to become fluent in English in less than one year if you spend one hour a day learning the language. Among the most surprising findings were the fact that as many as 34% reported believing (or strongly believing) that learning English as a foreign language is mostly a matter of translation, and as few as 39% reporting believing (or strongly believing) that learning vocabulary is essential to learning English.

Keywords: Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory; 36-credit English program

Introduction

Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages (Wenzao), the only foreign language college in Taiwan, has a particular interest in ongoing language curriculum review, and faculty members are encouraged to experiment with new approaches to teaching and learning and to conduct classroom-based research. In 2003, Wenzao began to offer a 36-credit General English program in its four-year college, with students who are not majoring in English taking a number of courses in English (each associated with a number of credits) over a four year period. The overall aims of the 36-credit program are to improve students' English proficiency and to broaden their learning horizon. Although students following the program have 572 hours of class contact in English (380 hours more than students in some other institutions in Taiwan), many of them fail to achieve the graduation English language proficiency benchmark.

Although Wenzao has offered a 36-credit General English program for seven years, and although it has collected information relating to the proficiency achievements of

students, it has not conducted any empirically-based studies relating to students' beliefs about language learning although there is a considerable body of evidence that suggests that beliefs can influence expectations and motivation (Bernat, 2004; Chuo & Yen, 2008; Horwitz, 1987; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003; Victori & Lockhart, 1995; Yang, 1993, 1998). In particular, Horwitz (1987) has claimed that erroneous beliefs about language learning can lead to less effective language learning strategies. Since beliefs can impact on approaches and, therefore, on degrees of success in learning, it is important that there should be awareness of students' beliefs (and their change, or resistance to change over time), exploration of the relationship between these beliefs and teaching and learning practices, and consciousness of the role that this knowledge and understanding can play in curriculum development.

Literature Review

Victori and Lockhart define beliefs as "general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing learning and about the nature of language learning" (1995, p. 224). In the context of foreign language learning, beliefs held by students can relate to many things such as, the nature of the language under study; the perceived difficulty of learning a language and the time that it takes; the effectiveness of different learning strategies, the role of aptitude; and the impact of age and gender (Bernat & Gvodenko, 2005; Bernat & Lloyd, 2007, p. 80). Several researches have argued that beliefs about language and language learning can have an impact on achievement (Banya & Chen, 1997; Bernat, 2006; Bernat & Gvodenko, 2005; Siebert, 2003; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003; Wen & Johnson, 1997). Indeed, it has been argued that they can play a decisive role not only in the successes of language learners in language learners' success, but also in their failures and their responses to their language learning experiences (Cotterall, 1999, p. 597). Thus, for example, negative beliefs about language learning can lead to negative attitudes towards learning and learner autonomy and to the adoption of strategies that are less effective (Victori & Lockart, 1995). They can also lead to classroom anxiety (Hortwitz, Hortwitz, & Cope, 1986; Miyuki, 2000), and to poor cognitive performance (Reid & Hresko, 1981). Knowledge of students' beliefs about language learning may provide language teachers with a better understanding of their students' "expectations of, commitment to, success in and satisfaction with their language classes" (Horwitz, 1988, p. 283). This, in turn, can equip teachers to adopt "a more sensitive approach to the organization of learning opportunity" (Cotterall, 1999, p.594).

The Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) developed by Horwitz (1987), was designed to collect information about students' beliefs in the following areas: language learning aptitude, difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation and expectations. It has been widely used to gain a better understanding of learner beliefs and their role in second/foreign language acquisition. Recent studies have focused on differences in terms of beliefs among and within various nationality groups, including, American undergraduate students (Horwitz, 1987, 1988), Yemen students and teachers (Kuntz, 1996); EFL learners in Taiwan (Banya & Cheng, 1997; Yang, 1992); Japanese students (Sakui & Gaies, 1999); EFL learners in New Zealand (Cotterall, 1995; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003); Korean students (Kim-Yoon, 2000; Truitt, 1995) and groups from a variety of ethnic backgrounds (Siebert, 2003)¹. The findings of these studies suggest that learner beliefs about language learning are context-specific (Bernat, 2004; Nikirin & Furuoka, 2006).

Aim

The aim of the study reported here is to identify overall trends in beliefs about language learning held by 38 college freshmen students involved in a tertiary-level 36-credit English program offered by Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages (Wenzao) in Taiwan.

Participants

The participants in this study were 38 freshmen (M=2; F=36) who were attending one of the classes in the 36-credit English program at Wenzao. They were from a number of different departments: Foreign Language Instruction (N=10); Translation (N=1); and Applied Chinese (N=27). Their overall average CSEPT score was 100.

Instrument

In this study, a Chinese language version of the *Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory* (BALLI)² developed by Horwitz (1987), was administered in order to collect information on language learners' beliefs in the EFL context in five major areas: (a) language learning aptitude; (b) difficulty of language learning; (c) the nature of language learning; (d) learning and communication strategies, and (e) motivation and expectations. Participants are asked to rate their agreement with 34 items on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree), to 5 (strongly agree).³ Data were collected in autumn 2009, at the beginning of the participants' first semester at Wenzao. Before the survey was conducted, participants were informed about the overall aims of the study and guaranteed that their names would remain confidential.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 13.0). Descriptive statistics reveals participants' responses, with frequencies and means being calculated in order to provide a summary of the data. For ease of viewing, the BALLI item ratings have been collapsed into three categories, representing agree (agree; strongly agree), neutral and disagree (disagree; strongly disagree) and difficult (difficult; very difficult), neutral and easy (easy; very easy) (Bernat & Lloyd, 2007; Peacock, 1998; Tercanlioglu, 2005).

Results and Discussion

The findings are presented by frequency of response and means in the tables below in relation to the five main areas covered in the BALLI. Note that values represent percentages and that percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number (and thus may not add up to 100).

A = collapsed scores for Strongly Agree and Agree; N = Neutral; D = collapsed scores for Strongly Disagree and Disagree. *A = A very easy or easy language; N = language of medium difficulty; D = A very difficult language. **

Table 1: *Foreign Language Aptitude*

Items		A	N	D
1	It is easier for children than adults to learn English.	92	0	8
2	Some people are born with a special ability that helps them learn English.	89	11	0
8	It is easier for someone who already speaks English to learn another language.	45	21	34
12	I have an English language aptitude.	47	34	18
19	Women are better than men at learning English.	3	18	79
26	People who are good at math and science are not good at learning English.	13	21	66
29	People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent.	47	24	29
30	Taiwanese are good at learning English.	37	55	8
31	Everyone can learn to speak English.	97	3	0

As indicated in the table above, a large majority (92%) reported believing that it is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language. Eighty-nine percent (89%) of participants indicated that they believed some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages. A vast majority (97%) agreed that everyone can learn to speak English. Forty-five percent (45%) participants agreed it is easier for someone who already speaks English to learn another language. Forty-seven percent (47%) of participants believed that they have special ability for language learning and people who speak more than one language well are very intelligent. However, a majority (79%) of participants disagreed women are better than men at learning English. Sixty-six percent (66%) of participants disagreed with the statement that people who are good at math and science are not good at learning English. Also, over half (55%) of participants neither agreed nor disagreed that Taiwanese are good at learning English.

Table 2: *Difficulty of Language Learning*

Items		A	N	D
3	Some languages are easier to learn than others.	58	16	26
25	It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.	26	26	47
32	Learning English is easy	63	5	32
33	If someone spent one-hour a day learning English, how long would it take him/her to become fluent?			
	- Less than 1 year			37
	- 1-2 years			26
	- 3-5 years			5
	- 5-10 years			11
	- You can't learn a language in 1 hour a day			21

These questions (see *Table 2*) concern perceptions of the general difficulty of learning a foreign language and the specific difficulty of learning English. More than half of the respondents (58%) agreed the statement of some languages are easier to learn than others. A significant portion of participants (47%) disagreed with the statement that it

is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it, which indicated that students either believe that it is easier to understand than speak English or that they may be both difficult. In addition, sixty-three percent (63%) participants believed it would take less than 2 years to learn English, and they also believed learning English is easy (63%).

Table 3: Nature of Language Learning

Items		A	N	D
6	It is necessary to know English culture in order to speak English	66	21	13
9	It is better to learn English in an English country.	74	13	13
13	Learning vocabulary is essential to learn English.	39	24	37
17	Learning English is mostly a matter of learning the grammar rules.	24	26	50
22	Learning English is different from learning other school subjects.	42	29	29
23	Learning English as a foreign language is mostly a matter of translation.	24	34	42

In this category (see *Table 3*), questionnaire items cover a broad range of issues related to the nature of language learning process. A majority of respondents (66%) agreed with the statement that it is necessary to learn about English cultures in order to speak English. Seventy-four percent (74%) of participants indicated that it is best to learn English in an English speaking country. Forty-two percent (42%) of participants believed that learning English is different from learning other school subjects. Nevertheless, only thirty-nine percent (39%) of participants agreed learning vocabulary are essential to learn English; Thirty-seven percent (37%) disagreed placing a great emphasis on learning vocabulary. Two rather surprising findings are noted that 50% of participants disagreed learning English is mostly a matter of learning the grammar rules; 42% of participants also disagreed learning English is mostly a matter of translation.

Table 4: Learning and Communication Strategies

Items		A	N	D
5	It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.	97	0	3
7	You should not say anything in English until you can say it correctly.	13	13	74
10	If I heard someone speaking the language I am trying to learn, I would go up to them so that I could practice speaking the language.	45	26	29
11	It is okay to guess if you do not know a word in English.	39	37	24
14	It is important to repeat and practice often.	97	3	0
15	I feel self-conscious speaking English in front of other people.	68	21	11
16	If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning, it would be hard to get rid of them later on.	47	16	37
18	It is important to practice in the language laboratory.	89	8	3

Learning and Communication Strategies reported (see *Table 4*) are probably most directly related to students' actual language learning practices. An overwhelming majority of respondents (97%) believe that it is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation. In addition, 97% of participants indicated it is important to

repeat and practice often. Many believed the statement that if they heard someone speaking the language one is trying to learn, they would go up to them so that they could practice speaking the language (45%), with small proportion disagreeing with this statement (29%). Sixty-eight percent (68%) of participants agreed that they feel self-conscious speaking English in front of other people. Forty-seven percent (47%) respondents believed that if they are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning, it would be hard to get rid of them later on, with thirty-nine percent (39%) disagreeing with this statement. A large majority of respondents (89%) believed that it is important to practice in the language laboratory. Responses for item 11 were fairly evenly spread over the response categories. However, seventy-four percent (74%) respondents disagreed with the statement that one should not say anything in English until one can say it correctly.

Table 5: Motivation and Expectations

Items		A	N	D
4	I believe that I will ultimately learn to speak English very well.	89	8	3
20	If I speak English very well, I will have many opportunities to use it.	100	0	0
24	If I learn to speak English very well it will help me get a good job.	92	5	3
27	Taiwanese think that it is important to speak English.	97	3	0
28	I would like to learn English so that I can get to know its speakers better.	40	34	26

Responses on items for motivations and expectations reflect the learners desire for and optimism in achieving their language goals (see *Table 5*). For example, in item 20, one hundred percent (100%) of respondents agreed that if they speak English very well, they will have many opportunities to use it. Eighty-nine percent (89 %) of the participants indicated that they want to learn to speak English very well and in item 24, ninety-two percent (92%) believed that if they learn to speak English very well, they will have better job opportunities. In addition, ninety-seven percent (97%) of the participants agreed the statement that Taiwanese think that it is important to speak English. The lowest positive response was obtained for learning English so that they can get to know native speakers better (40%).

Comparison of the scales

With the help of the principal component analysis, five scales were established, each corresponding to one of Horwitz's (1988) themes (see *Table 6*). In this section, the means of these five scales will be discussed.

Table 6: The means of the established components

Components		Mean Average
5	Motivation and Expectations	4.29
4	Learning and Communication Strategies	3.62
2	Difficulty of Language Learning	3.56
1	Language Learning Aptitude	3.41
3	Nature of Language Learning	3.15

Component 5 had the highest mean average, 4.29 (N = 38) of the five the components, indicating that the respondents reported high degrees of motivation. They believe that they will ultimately learn to speak English well and that if they learn to speak English very well, they will not only have many opportunities to use it, but also to get a good job.

The averages for components 1, 2 and 4 were very close. The mean average of Component 4 was 3.62 (N = 38), indicating that the respondents believed that repeating and practicing the English is an important part of language learning and that excellent pronunciation is important in speaking English. The second component deals with the perceived difficulty of language learning and the relative difficulty of mastering speaking and listening skills over reading and writing skills in English. The average for this component was 3.56 (N = 38), indicating that overall the respondents believe that that English is of medium-level difficulty. The results for the first component (M = 3.41) indicate that overall the respondents believe in the existence of language aptitude and believe not only that some people are born with a special ability that helps them learn English but also that is easier for children than adults to learn English.

The mean average of Component 3 was 3.15, the lowest mean, indicating that overall respondents lean towards disagreeing with the propositions that there are certain approaches, such as focus on learning vocabulary or grammar rules that make learning successful.

Conclusion

Some of the findings of this survey were surprising. Thus, for example, 37% of the respondents reported believing (or strongly believing) that it is possible to become fluent in English in less than one year if you spend one hour a day learning the language. In view of this, it is hardly surprising that so many learners appear to become disappointed with their own achievements (and, sometimes, also with those of their teachers). Also surprising is the fact that only 39% of respondents reported believing (or strongly believing) that learning vocabulary is essential to learning English and as many as 24% reported believing (or strongly believing) that learning English as a foreign language is mostly a matter of translation. Furthermore, 68% reported that they felt (or felt strongly) self-conscious when speaking English in front of other people. Even so, the vast majority (89%) reported believing (or strongly believing) that they would ultimately learn to speak English very well and that, if they did so, it would help them to get a good job.

The aim of the study was to investigate the beliefs about language learning of a sample of freshman students studying the 36-credit English program at Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages. Although the survey was a relatively small-scale one, the findings are sufficiently interesting to indicate that conducting a larger, longitudinal study would be worthwhile.

Endnotes

1. Siebert's (2003) USA-based study involved 22 nationalities.
2. The inventory was translated into Chinese by the researchers in order to ensure that the students fully understood the questions.

3. Although there is no evidence of any attempt to establish empirically the degree of stability/ consistency of responses to the BALLI, (Sakui & Gaies, 1999), it has been found it has a Cronbach alpha of .79 (Sakui & Gaies, 1999), with, according to Hair, Anderson, Tatham, and Black (1998), an acceptable value being at least .70.

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