

Assessing Saudi Learners' Beliefs about English Language Learning

Dr. Abdulaziz Saleh Alsamaani

Qassim University, Saudi Arabia
alsamani2000@yahoo.com

Abstract

Learners' beliefs about foreign language learning have been stressed in educational research because they are regarded as fundamental to learners' progress. This paper deals with the results of a research project conducted among first-year English language majors studying the Intensive English Language Program at Qassim University. A total of 250 students volunteered to participate in this study. The instrument employed in the study is a modified Arabic version of Horwitz's (1987) BALLI (Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory). Students' beliefs were investigated in order to collect background information needed for exploring the overall beliefs of Saudi university students about learning English as a foreign language. Results reveal that Saudi university students have positive and realistic beliefs about foreign language as regard the nature of language learning, communication strategies, and motivation and expectations about learning English as a foreign language. The study recommends an identification of Saudi EFL teachers and learners' beliefs on a wider scale, so as to provide guidelines to EFL teachers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to tailor their teaching methods to meet learners' beliefs.

Introduction

Nowadays, Knowledge of English has become an essential part of everyday life of the global world. Many people are using English in nearly every sector and for international relations. Ehrlich (2008) estimates that more than 300 million people are speaking English as their native language and more than 400 million are speaking it as a second or foreign language. Altan (2012) argues that the importance of English as a worldwide language has been increasing rapidly and more people are aware of the fact that at least some knowledge of English is necessary to get ahead in life since it brings high social status to the individual, as well as extending job opportunities. One variable which has received a lot of attention recently in the language learning process is beliefs about language learning which Horwitz (2007) considers as central constructs in every discipline which deals with human behavior. Learners' beliefs about themselves and about foreign languages and their learning have been in the focus of educational research because they are considered fundamental to learners' progress (e.g. Kormos et al, 2008;

Bernat, 2006; Dörnyei, 2005; Richards & Lockhart, 1996; Hosenfeld, 2003; Wenden and Rubin, 1987).

As the global economy continues to develop, so too does the need for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) to prepare itself to be able to participate on an international level. One factor that seems to play a sizeable role in how well KSA can continue to flourish in the 21st century is the ability of its population to learn the language(s) necessary for efficient communication with other nations. Daif-Allah (2010) observes that KSA has recently begun to recognize the need to promote multilingualism in the context of globalization since it cannot participate in the new economy through the medium of Arabic only. Everything shows that the future of KSA requires mastering at least one or two foreign languages besides the Arabic language. In such a framework, the Saudi Ministry of Education has sent big numbers of graduate and undergraduate students to study in famous foreign universities worldwide. Locally, it has attempted to introduce foreign language teaching in primary classrooms (mainly English), besides the current mandatory study of English in both middle and high school. Accordingly, the English language in the Saudi educational system today is fitting to present an overview of the role of English in KSA (Al-Hajailan, 2003). Foreign language classes in KSA start at the fourth grade (10-year-old) and English is one of the subjects taught in nearly all government-sponsored and private elementary education. Such an initiative responds to the growing concern for international participation as well as to the growing recognition of English as an international language.

To this end, understanding Saudi learners' beliefs has become a key element in developing foreign language proficiency because, as stated by Pajares (1992), identification of beliefs could help learners understand themselves and others as well as adapt to the world around them. In addition, beliefs have been linked with other learner variables, such as learning strategies (Horwitz 1987, 1988; Wenden 1986) and foreign language anxiety (Horwitz 1988, 1989; Kunt 1997; Young 1991). In this context Cohen and Dörnyei (2002) concluded that certain beliefs about language learning have significant effect on learners' motivation to learn the target language; for example, unrealistic beliefs regarding the amount of time required to become proficient in a second language could obviously result in frustration. Also, Horwitz's (1985) groundbreaking study showed that learners enter the language class with many preconceived ideas about language learning, some of which may be unrealistic; therefore she recommends a systematic assessment of such beliefs to increase learning and satisfaction in the foreign language (FL) class. Recently, Rad (2010) and Dörnyei (2005) found that learners' beliefs and viewpoints influence not only the way that they attempt to learn English but also the method that will be used by them. Bernat & Gvozdenko (2005) have emphasized the importance of studying foreign language learners' beliefs as a push or a pull factor to help learners' ultimate success in attainment of new language in a shorter time.

Research Problem

The previous introduction shows a real need to investigate Saudi students' beliefs about foreign language learning. Such investigation will be an extension of what has been done in this regard in other international cultural contexts (Horwitz,1988; Bacon & Finnemann,1992; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Cortazzi, & Jin, 1996; Peacock, 1999, 2001; Barcelos, 2003 ; Tercanlioglu, 2005; Ali & Ismail, 2005; Ismail, & Abdel-Majeed, 2006 Nathalie& Renaud, 2006; Bernat and Lloyd, 2007; Oz, 2007; Rieger, 2009; Diab, 2009; Rad, 2010; Altan ,2012). Although numerous studies have investigated learners' beliefs about foreign language learning in different countries, yet little is known about learners' beliefs about learning English as a foreign language in the Saudi context. Therefore, the present study seeks to fill a gap in locally situated research through identifying the overall beliefs of novice university students about language learning in Saudi Arabia in relation to gender.

Research Questions

The current study is an attempt to tackle Saudi learners' beliefs about learning English as a foreign language through answering the following question:

What beliefs do novice university students in Saudi Arabia have about learning English as a foreign language as regard....

- 1) English language aptitude?,
- 2) the difficulty of language learning?,
- 3) the nature of language learning?,
- 4) learning and communication strategies? And,
- 5) motivation and expectations?

Hypotheses of the study

The present study seeks to examine the validity of the following hypotheses:

1. Saudi learners will show negative aptitude to English language learning.
2. Saudi learners believe that English language learning is difficult.
3. Saudi learners have unrealistic beliefs about the nature of English language learning.
4. Saudi learners are aware of the influence of English language learning strategies on their EFL achievement.
5. Saudi learners are not motivated to learn English as a foreign language.

Purpose of the Study

As the researcher indicated earlier, studying the beliefs of learners is vital to have a clear understanding of their learning expectations. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the overall beliefs Saudi novice university learners have about learning English as a foreign language.

Significance of the Study

The current study is significant for both theoretical and practical reasons. At the theoretical level, this study is important in two ways. First, it sheds light on an area of research in foreign language learning beliefs addressed extensively by applied linguists worldwide. Second, it provides information concerning Saudi students' beliefs about English language learning. At the practical level, the proposed study would help teachers understand learners' approaches to studying English and the type of goals they adopt in their language learning. Also, identification of learners' beliefs will provide guidelines to EFL teachers to tailor their teaching methods to avoid mismatches between classroom practices and learners beliefs.

Literature review

Beliefs about language learning

In the context of second/foreign language acquisition, beliefs are defined by Kuntz (1997) as "notions about language learning that students have acquired" (p.4). Likewise, Victori and Lockhart (1995) define beliefs as "general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing learning and about the nature of language learning" (p.224), whereas Banya and Cheng (1997) define beliefs as an individual's opinions about language learning. Also, Ehrlich (2008) describes beliefs as opinions and viewpoints which attend in every discipline of human behavior to say that something is true or right and vice versa. Beliefs are also defined as 'psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true' (Richardson, 1996 p. 102). Dewey (1993) explained that beliefs are matters of which we have no sure knowledge, but feel confident to act upon, and matters that we accept as true, but which may be questioned in the future. In this context, Sakui and Gaies (1998) propose three characteristics of beliefs about language and language learning: 1) beliefs are subjective understandings; 2) beliefs are relatively stable and 3) beliefs are idiosyncratic. First, beliefs are subjective; therefore, they do not necessarily reflect external reality. Beliefs reflect "truths" held by individuals and, therefore, are potentially facilitative for language learning (e.g., everyone can learn a language) or debilitating (e.g., boys are not good language learners). Second, beliefs about language learning should be stable over time, which indicates that beliefs are formed and maintained by a complex social and cultural system. Finally, Sakui and Gaies assert that belief systems are unique to individuals. This last point has been emphasized by many researchers such as Mohebi (2011), Rad (2010), and Horwitz (2007) who have attempted to

investigate all aspects of English language learning beliefs. They found that each individual student has his/her own beliefs about foreign language learning and cognition about the strategies that has been used by teachers

Accordingly, based on the extensive survey of literature, it can be concluded that beliefs guide action, but they are also affected by action(Richardson,1996); Beliefs are difficult to change if they are formed early in life (Pajares,1992); Beliefs are socially constructed and culturally transmitted (Bernat,2005); Beliefs have to be inferred from statements, intentions and actions (Pajares,1992) ; and they are dynamic in the sense that they not only change over time , but may be expressed differently in different situations (Yang, 1999).

Evidence shows that these beliefs play a decisive role in language learners' success, failure and experiences (Cotterall, 1999). Pintrich and De Groot (1990) point out, for example, that learners who perceive their studies as important or interesting show higher degrees of perseverance in their work. Thus, knowledge of students' beliefs about language learning may provide language educators with a better understanding of their students' "expectations of, commitment to, success in and satisfaction with their language classes" (Horwitz, 1988, p.283). Consequently teachers can make more informed choices about teaching (Bernat, & Gvozdenko, 2005) and adopt "a more sensitive approach to the organization of learning opportunities" (Cotterall, 1999, p.494) in their lessons. In addition, Nash (2001) has provided more evidence for the influence of beliefs on learners' acquisition ability by concluding that learners who have positive and realistic beliefs about learning English reached higher proficiency in English compared to those who did not have.

Previous Studies

Investigation of learner beliefs has evolved out of a growing interest in individual learner characteristics with a particular focus on learners' affective and cognitive contributions to the language learning process. Beliefs about foreign language learning have been attracting considerable research interest in the past two decades. Horwitz is the first researcher trying to determine the beliefs of learners about foreign language learning. Horwitz (1988) has looked at the beliefs of American undergraduate students studying commonly taught languages. She developed a 34-item scale called Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI). She found that learner beliefs change very little over the whole semester, learner beliefs do not automatically change when learners are merely exposed to new methods, and learner beliefs were "quite well entrenched" (pp. 76). Since then the BALLI has been extensively used by many researchers worldwide to describe, among others, the language learning beliefs of different language learners in different cultural contexts (Altan ,2006; Oz, 2007; Nathalie & Renaud, 2006; Rad, 2010; Buyukyazi, 2010), the impact of gender on beliefs (Bacon & Finnemann, 1992; Siebert, 2003; Tercanlioglu, 2005; Bernat and Lloyd, 2007) and pre-service EFL teachers' beliefs (Mattheoudakis, 2007; Diab, 2009).

In relation to the identification of learners' beliefs, Altan (2006) administered BALLI to a total of 248 foreign language major university students at five universities in Turkey. His findings confirm that pre-service teachers arrive at the task of language learning with definite preconceived notions of how to go about it. He suggested that foreign language teacher educators and teacher trainers should take these beliefs into account if they expect their students to be open to particular teaching methods and to receive the maximum benefit from them. Knowledge of learner beliefs about language learning should also increase teacher educators' understanding of how the future teaching of these people would be. Beliefs of learners have been investigated by Oz (2007) who searched beliefs about language learning of 470 Turkish EFL learners in secondary education. He concluded that learners' metacognitive knowledge or beliefs about language learning have variability in terms of social and educational contexts, age, gender, and stages of language learning.

In the French context, Nathalie & Renaud's study (2006) surveyed 1,305 university students enrolled in English and other foreign-language classes across year levels in four major universities. It explores the factors that promote or hinder multilingualism. The results suggest that the reasons first-year students typically have for studying a foreign language have more to do with internal factors (e.g., personal attitude) than with external factors (e.g., social value). Moreover, this trend becomes more pronounced with upper-year students whose motivation to learn a foreign language compared with that of first-year students is influenced less by perceived societal beliefs and more by intrinsic reasons. Rad's study (2010) is developed to probe what will be English Language Major Student's beliefs about learning English as foreign not second language. The results of this study showed that extend independent variables (age, gender and field of study) affect dependent variables (students' beliefs about English leaning) and that language learning strategies that have been applied by teachers influence students' learning.

Buyukyazi (2010) investigated the beliefs about language learning of 156 English as foreign language (EFL) students and 19 EFL teachers in the Department of Foreign Languages at Celal Bayar University of Manisa. The primary aim of the study was to explore what beliefs the students in prep classes held about learning EFL. The study also intended to determine if the beliefs of the learners and their teachers displayed a change. Data were collected using a 34-item Likert-Type scale (Horwitz's BALLI - Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory), modified for the Turkish EFL learners and their teachers. The results of this study demonstrated that EFL learners have a broad range of conceptions both similar to and different from those reported by their teachers.

As regard the impact of gender on learners' beliefs, Bacon and Finnemann (1992) investigated gender differences in self reported beliefs about foreign language learning and authentic oral and written input. Bacon and Finnemann (1992) found that women in their study were more open to

authentic input and possess a higher level of motivation and strategy use in language learning in addition to a higher level of social interaction with the target language (Spanish). Siebert's (2003) BALLI based study, examining international university students in the United States, showed significant gender-related differences. The author found males rated their own fellow citizens' abilities more highly, and believed that a language could be learnt in a shorter time than women did. More male than female students also believed that the learning of grammar was the most important part of language learning, and that practicing with audio-visual material was crucial. In contrast, Tercanlioglu (2005), found no significant differences in beliefs about language learning of 45 male and 73 female full-time undergraduate EFL teacher trainees at a Turkish university. She concluded age, stage of life, and contextual differences in the language-learning situation may also be important sources of group variation in learner beliefs. Correspondingly, Bernat and Lloyd (2007) found that the males and females differed significantly in only two BALLI items, as women were more likely to perceive multilingualism as a feature of intelligence than men were, and also enjoyed talking to natives less than their male counterparts did. Since the role of gender is context specific and the results of previous studies yielded such a variety of different results, the effect of gender seems to be an area worth examining in the Hungarian context. Also, through using multiple-item scales, the results are less likely to be subject to extraneous influences.

Other studies have explored pre-service EFL teachers' beliefs about foreign language learning and teaching. For example, Mattheoudakis (2007) investigated pre-service EFL teachers' beliefs about learning and teaching in Greece, explored possible changes in those beliefs during a three-year teacher education program, and examined the effects of teaching practice on these teachers' beliefs. Findings revealed that the pre-service teachers' engagement in the teaching practice did not have a high impact on the development of their beliefs, even though there was a gradual development in their beliefs during the program. Similarly, Diab (2009) also explored the beliefs about language learning of prospective Lebanese EFL teachers as well as university EFL teachers and concluded that the teachers hold a variety of beliefs about language learning, some of which may be conducive to the language learning and teaching situation while others may constitute an impediment to successful language learning and teaching.

At the Saudi Arabian context, Ismail, & Abdel-Majeed (2006) examined the epistemological beliefs of gifted EFL students compared to non-gifted ones. Four tools were used for data collection, including an Epistemological Beliefs Questionnaire, a Goal Orientation Questionnaire, a Cognitive Engagement Questionnaire, and a Perceived Linguistic Competence Questionnaire. Students' achievement was assessed by their GPAs. These tools were administered to a cohort of 163 (37 gifted, 126 non-gifted) EFL students in the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth levels at Riyadh Teachers' College. Findings of the study indicated that gifted EFL students possess sophisticated epistemological beliefs along the six epistemological belief dimensions. Variance in development among belief dimensions did exist with beliefs in

the “integration of knowledge” being the most sophisticated and beliefs in the “source of knowledge” the most naive. Findings of the study also indicated that gifted EFL students hold more sophisticated epistemological beliefs than their non-gifted peers. Statistically significant differences were found between gifted and non-gifted students in five of the six dimensions under investigation. No significant difference was found between the two groups in the “source of knowledge” dimension. Further, findings of the study indicated that some epistemological dimensions can potentially predict given psychological constructs but not others.

Through the previous studies discussed above, it is clear that more research is needed to investigate beliefs about foreign language learning in other cultural contexts specially the Saudi context. Therefore, this study tries to identify novice Saudi university female/male learners' beliefs about English language learning and the relationships between such beliefs and English language learning outcomes.

Method

Participants

English major students of the Intensive English Language Program (IELP) at Qassim University were invited to participate in the study. The students were given a brief, informative oral overview of the nature and purpose of the study before implementing the questionnaire. A total of 250 first-year English language major students volunteered to participate in this study. Of these, 130 were males (52%) and 120 were females (48%). The mean age of the participants was 20.2 years, ranging from 19-22 years. The students' average experience in studying English was six years. The participants included in this study share important common characteristics with most English language major students in Saudi Arabia. They all belong to state university, they all belong to the same level of education, and they follow the same curriculum.

Instrument

The instrument used in this study is called the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) that is initially created by Horwitz to collect data regarding the beliefs of adult learners about frequently taught languages. Three distinct BALLIs are in use today: one for ESL students (Horwitz, 1984, Horwitz, 1987), another for foreign language teachers (Horwitz, 1985), and a third for foreign language students (Horwitz, 1988, Horwitz, 1999). The foreign language students' BALLI consists of 34-items which are related to five areas: 1) English language aptitude; 2) the difficulty of language learning; 3) the nature of language learning; 4) learning and communication strategies; and, 5) motivation and expectations. The questionnaire designed based on five point Likert scale which measures respondents' interest according to their level of agreement or disagreement from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). The statements on a Likert scale should be either expressing a positive/favorable or a negative/unfavorable attitude towards the object of interest. Although the Likert-scale was originally developed to measure

attitudes, its scope has been extended to wider cognitive and affective variables, including beliefs (Altan, 2012; Buyukyazi, 2012; Rad, 2010; Diab, 2009; Horwitz, 1988). The inventory was almost not changed since the purpose of this study was to reproduce and expand on Horwitz's 1988 study in a Saudi context. Only two items were modified so that they could be expressed in KSA and be suitable for the Saudi context. The Saudi version was translated into Arabic by the present researcher so that students would understand items easily and their responses to the questionnaire items would reflect their true beliefs. To assess the level of reliability of the adapted questionnaire, a pilot test was conducted on twenty students. The feedback from the pre-administration showed that the questionnaire was completely appropriate for research aims. Also Cronbach alpha of this study is 0.74 which shows acceptable consistency of reliability.

Data collection and analysis

Data were obtained by distributing the questionnaire to 250 male/female students studying the Intensive English Language Program at Qassim University during 2011/12. The forms were completed anonymously in class. However, only 236 questionnaires (125 males-111 females) were eligible to be used in the study. After summarizing and tabulating the information obtained from the background questionnaire, data were analyzed using SPSS 15.0 package program. Frequencies, mean scores and percentages were used to analyze single BALLI items. The differences between male and female learners were determined via a t-test for independent samples. Significant levels were set at $p < 0.05$.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is that there was an imbalance of the number of the females and males students (111 females and 125 males). In addition, the total number should have been bigger to be representative for a wider range of Saudi learners.

Results and Discussion

The purpose of the present study is to explore the overall beliefs of Saudi university students about learning English as a foreign language. The discussion for the data presented in tables 1-6 and figures 1-6 below provides the answer to the research Question "What beliefs do novice university students in Saudi Arabia have about learning English as a foreign language as regard English language aptitude, the difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation and expectations?" In the study aiming to investigate the learners' beliefs about foreign language learning, the researcher analyzed the frequencies, and the results were given as percentages in the following tables. Two positively worded points (agree and strongly agree) and two negatively worded points (disagree and strongly disagree) were grouped together so as to find out whether the participants had positive or negative beliefs on one item. The categories suggested by Horwitz (1988) were used for data categorization. In each category, the beliefs of learners were presented in percentages and the

significance value was given. The results are presented in areas as categorized in the following tables:

Table (1): Foreign language aptitude

Statements	Total Agree		Total Disagree		Undecided	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.	189	80%	32	14%	15	6 %
2. Some people are born with a special ability which helps them learn a foreign language.	104	44%	61	26%	71	30%
10. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.	127	54%	56	24%	53	22%
15. I have foreign language aptitude.	186	79%	20	8%	30	13%
22. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.	61	26%	85	36%	90	38%
29. People who are good at math and science are not good at learning foreign languages.	54	23%	112	47%	70	30%
32. People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent.	117	50%	72	30%	47	20%
33. Saudis are good at learning foreign languages.	171	72%	254	108 %	47	20%
34. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	161	68%	22	9%	53	22%

The items 1, 2, 10, 15, 22, 29, 32, 33 and 34 shown in the above table are related to the foreign language aptitude (FLA) and focus on the broad existence of specific abilities for language learning and beliefs about the traits of successful and unsuccessful language learners. First, 80% of the respondents in this study either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that 'It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language', consistent with the common wisdom

that children are better language learners than adults. Thus, participants hold beliefs consistent with many research studies showing a positive effect of young age on language acquisition, especially pronunciation (Donato, Antonek, and Tucker 1996). Nevertheless, the popular belief that children are more successful language learners than adults is an unrealistic one that may discourage many adult language learners. Participants also supported the concept of foreign language aptitude or special abilities for foreign language learning. 79% believed that they possess a special aptitude for foreign language learning. This language aptitude was stressed as culture specific because 72 % of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that Saudis were good at learning foreign languages. The results indicate that the participants have positive evaluations of their own language learning abilities since they are all English major students, not just students studying English as a foreign language. For this reason 68 % either strongly agreed or agreed that everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.

Moreover, the participants hold moderate opinions regarding the importance of gender in language learning: 26% believed that women are better than men at learning foreign languages, while 36% disagreed and another 38 % were uncertain with this statement. With reference to the effects of intelligence on language learning, 50% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that ‘people who speak more than one language are very intelligent’; however, 30% were unsure about the effects of one’s intelligence on acquiring additional languages. Also, 44% of the participants indicated that some people are born with a special ability to learn a foreign language, while 26 either strongly disagreed or disagreed with this opinion. Additionally, 54% agreed that it is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one. Finally, 47% of respondents did not believe that being good at mathematics or science meant that one would not be good at learning foreign languages. This shows that the majority of respondents do not make a distinction between aptitudes for the sciences versus an aptitude for foreign language learning. These results are clearly illustrated in Figure 1 below.

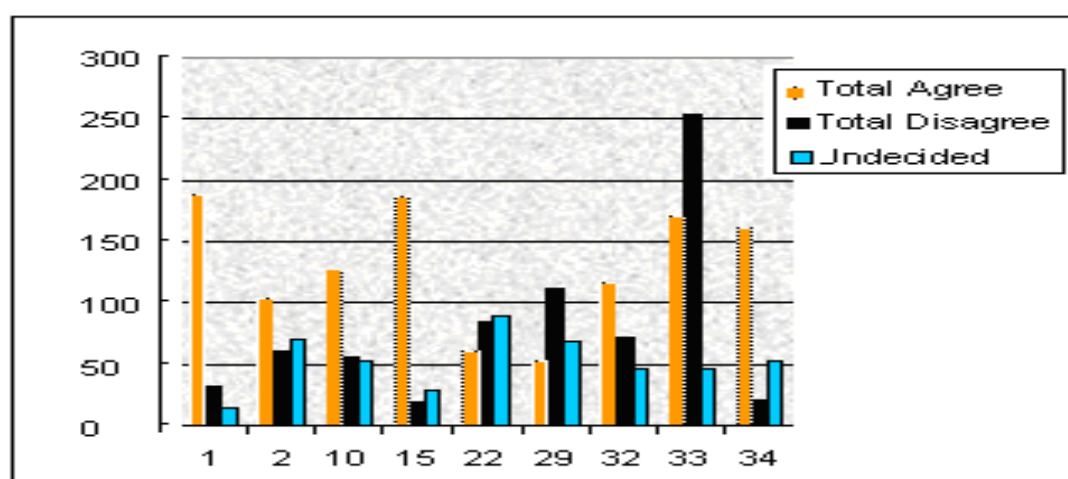


Figure (1): Foreign language aptitude

Table 2 below provides information about items 3, 4, 6, 14, 24 and 28 that show the common difficulty of learning a foreign language.

Table (2): Difficulty of language learning

Statements	Total Agree		Total Disagree		Undecided	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
3. Some languages are easier to learn than others	186	79%	20	8%	30	13%
4. The language I am trying to learn is very difficult.	61	26%	86	36%	89	38%
6. I believe that I will ultimately learn to speak this language very well.	173	73%	30	13%	33	14%
14. A language learner needs at least four years to learn about the language and use it fluently.	148	63%	22	9%	66	28%
24. It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language.	97	41%	82	35%	57	24%
28. It is easier to read and write this language than to speak and understand it.	75	32%	84	36%	77	33%

The above table shows that the majority of the students (79%) agreed that some languages are easier than others. In response to item 6, students were very optimistic and showed a high level of self-confidence in learning English as a foreign language and explained that they will learn that language well as seen by 73% of the sample. The issue of the length of time it would take to learn a foreign language well was clear in students' minds. It was very positive for most of them (63%) to believe that learning foreign language well needs at least four years of intensive study to learn about the language and to be able to use it fluently. This realistic belief is based on the respondents' awareness of the requirements of their future occupation as English teachers. In terms of the difficulty of the English language, 36% disregarded English as a language of extreme difficulty. Only 26% of respondents regarded English as a very difficult language to learn. With respect to the difficulty of the language skills, mainly speaking and understanding, 41% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that it is easier to speak than to understand a

foreign language, and 35% of respondents believed that it is easier to understand than to speak a foreign language, while 24% were unsure. Additionally, 36% of respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed that it is easier to read than write in a foreign language; however, 32% agreed. A further 33% neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement. These results are clearly illustrated in Figure 2 below.

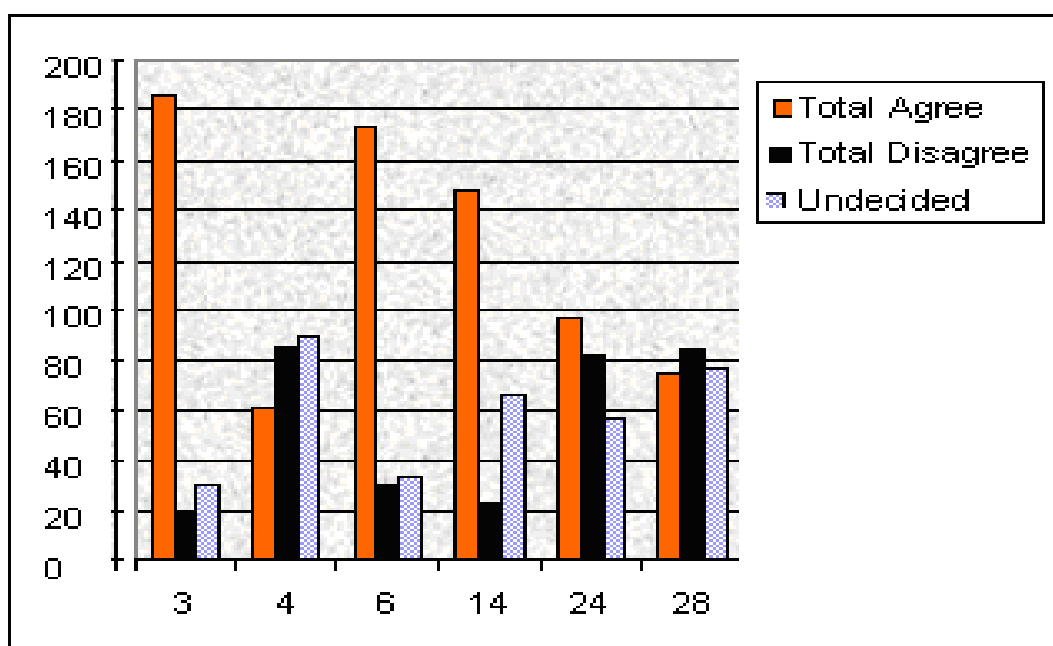


Figure (2): Difficulty of language learning

The following table illustrates participants' beliefs about the nature of language learning through presenting their responses to items 5, 8, 11, 16, 20, 25 and 26.

Table (3): The nature of language learning

Statements	Total Agree		Total Disagree		Undecided	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
5. The structure of English is different from that of Arabic.	131	56%	52	22%	53	22%
8. It is necessary to know the foreign culture in order to speak the foreign language. .	162	69%	31	13%	43	18%
11. It is better to learn a foreign language in	130	55%	62	26%	44	19%

the foreign country.						
16. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words.	184	79%	22	9%	30	12%
20. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of a lot of grammar rules.	186	79%	50	21%	0	0%
25. Learning a foreign language is different from learning other school subjects.	172	73%	31	13%	33	14%
26. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of translating from English.	138	59%	46	19%	52	22%

Table 3 above indicates that the majority of the respondents (79%) believed that learning new words and a lot of grammar rules are the most important parts of language learning. In addition, 59% emphasized the role of translation in fostering English language acquisition. Such students hold a specific belief that translation is a valued learning strategy. These results can be referred to respondents' previous experience of studying English for six years in the middle and high school and taking theoretical courses emphasizing the importance of developing linguistic competence over communicative competence. They are very much affected by the grammar-translation method used by their school teachers and for this reason they have developed the belief that both vocabulary and grammar are necessary for building fluency. An additional majority of respondents, 73%, agreed that 'learning a foreign language is different from learning other school subjects'. BALLI items 8 and 11 emphasize the role of cross-culture awareness in the language learning acquisition. Students are of the opinion that learning a language away of its culture is a waste of time. 69% believed that it is necessary to know the culture of the people whose language they are studying in order to speak the language and understand those who use it as a mother tongue. Another 55% either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that 'it is best to learn English in an English-speaking country', where there is a greater exposure to the foreign language, its culture and its people. Finally, 56% of the respondents stated that the structure of English is very different from that of Arabic. This result is expected since Arabic and English do not belong to the same language family. These results are clearly illustrated in Figure 3 below.

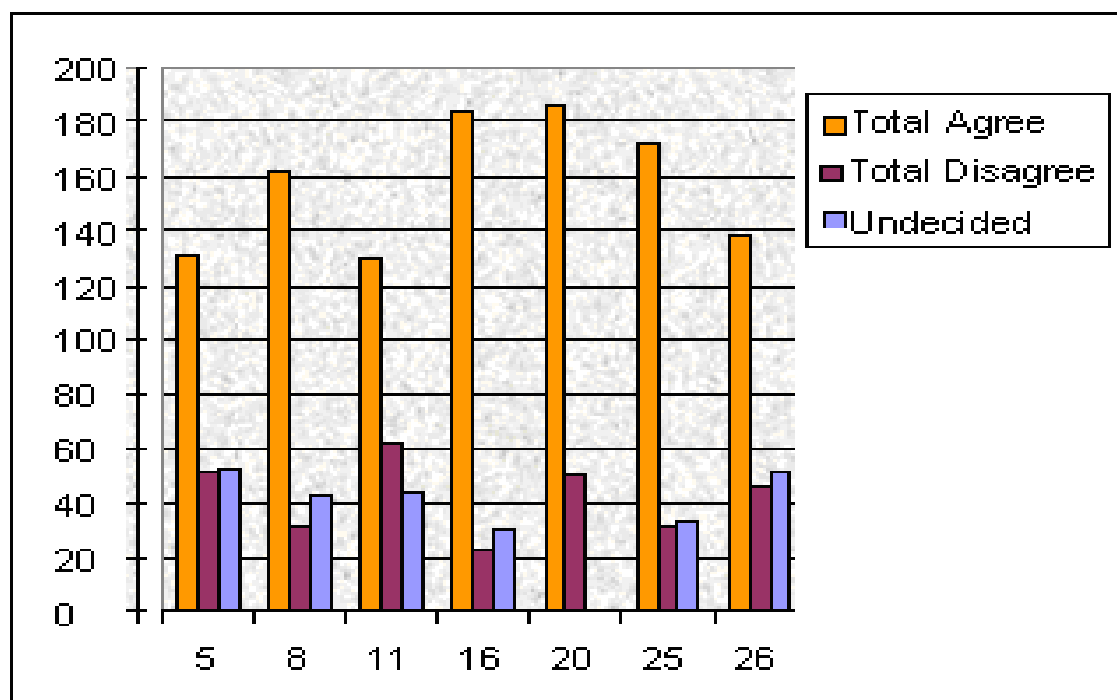


Figure (3): The nature of language learning

The items (7, 9, 12, 13, 17, 18, 19 and 21) shown in the Table 4 below deal with learning and communication strategies and are directly related to a learner’s actual language learning practices.

Table (4): Learning and communicating strategies

Statements	Total Agree		Total Disagree		Undecided	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
7. It is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent pronunciation and accent.	153	65%	47	20%	36	15%
9. You shouldn't say anything in the foreign language until you can say it correctly.	52	22%	131	56%	53	22%
12. If I heard some people speaking the	193	82%	11	5%	32	13%

language I am trying to learn, would go up to them so that I could practice speaking the language.						
13. It's o.k. to guess if you don't know a word in the foreign language	138	59%	45	19%	53	22%
17. It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	196	84%	20	8%	20	8%
18. I feel self-conscious speaking the foreign language in front of other people.	168	71%	30	13%	38	16%
19. If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning it will be hard to get rid of them later on.	110	47%	71	30%	55	23%
21. It is important to practice in the language laboratory	178	76%	31	13%	27	11%

In the above tables, items 17 and 21 refer to learning strategies, and items 7, 9, 12, 13, 18 and 19 concern communication strategies. First, with reference to 'traditional' learning strategies most of the respondents (76%) acknowledged the benefit of technology for conducting repetition drills and practicing English in language laboratories. A further 84% of the participants agreed that it is 'important to repeat and practice a lot'. Although these results reflect the learning strategies that participants used to practice at the pre-university levels, yet 82% of them realized the importance of practicing English with the English speaking people they meet.

As regard participants feeling when they use English in real life situations, 71% of respondents feel embarrassed when they communicate with native speakers of the language. However, this result depends on participants' educational level and their familiarity of meeting people who speak a foreign language. Guessing meaning from oral and written context is a necessary skill for foreign language learners. For this reason, more than half of the participants (59%) believed that 'it is OK to guess if you don't know a word in English'. This belief would help participants feel relaxed and unworried about vague words in communication. It would also encourage them not to rely on dictionaries all the times and to depend on themselves in getting the meaning of

unfamiliar words from the context confidently without being nervous about having to understand each single word. Therefore, 56% of the participants disagreed with the notion that one should not say anything in English until one can say it grammatically correctly. This belief shows that participants are acknowledging fluency over accuracy. However, 65% of respondents believed that it is important to speak English with ‘excellent pronunciation’. This last result indicates that the participants view pronunciation correctness as more important than grammatical accuracy. In addition, 47% strongly agreed or agreed that ‘If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning, it will be hard to get rid of them later on’, while 30% disagreed. These findings indicate that participants of the study seem to hold unrealistic beliefs regarding accuracy and error correction, which, if not challenged, may negatively affect their learning process in the language classes. These results are clearly illustrated in Figure 4 below.

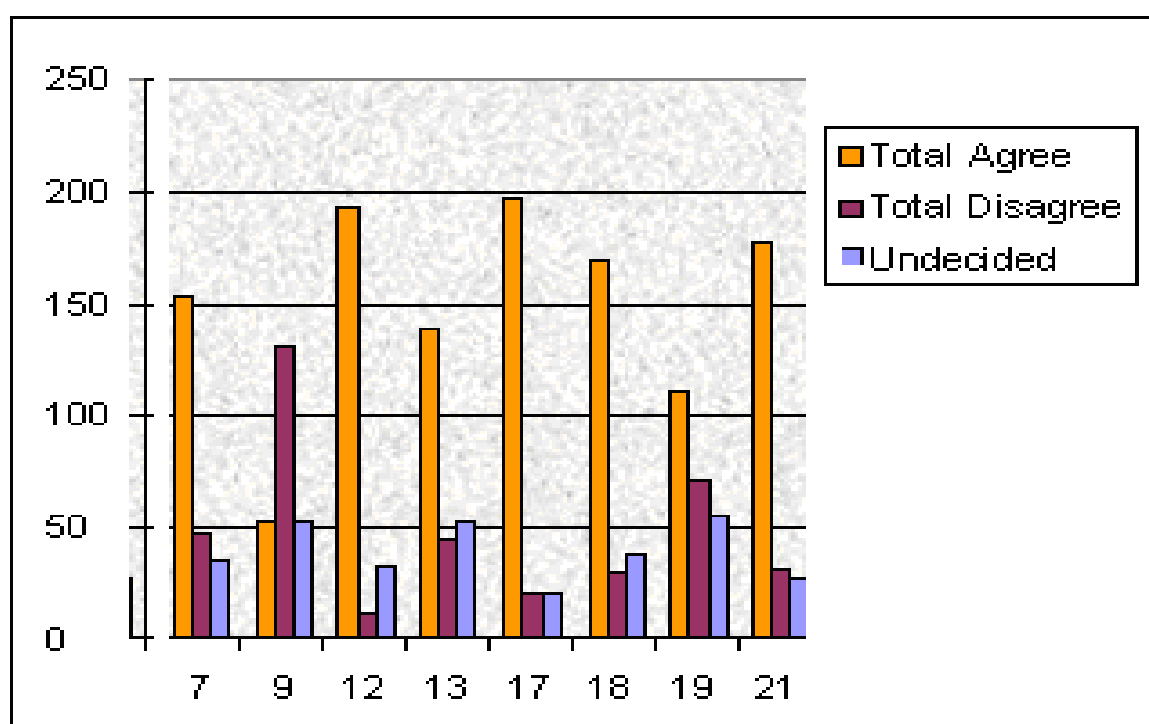


Figure (4): Learning and communicating strategies

BALLI items 23, 27, 30 and 31 in Table 5 below deal with participants' motivation and expectations of learning English as a foreign language.

Table (5): Motivations and Expectations

Statements	Total Agree		Total Disagree		Undecided	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
23. If I get to speak this language very well, I will have many opportunities to use it.	211	90%	15	6%	10	4%
27. If I learn to speak this language very well, it will help me get a good job.	187	80%	14	6%	35	14%
30. Saudis think that it is important to speak a foreign language.	178	76%	33	14%	25	10%
31. I would like to learn this language so that I can get to know its speakers better	201	85%	11	5%	24	10%

The above table shows that almost all the participants (90%) are instrumentally motivated to learn English. Also, 80% realize that if they learn to speak English well, they will be able to get a good job. Another 85% of the participants are interactively motivated to learn to speak English as a foreign language because they are highly interested in getting to know its speakers better. In addition, 76% either strongly agreed or disagreed that Saudis hold a belief that learning a foreign language has become a necessity. These realistic beliefs reflect participants' awareness that learning a foreign language has become a key factor which helps to cope with the requirements of globalization. Participants came to appreciate that accuracy of English and linguistic abilities are necessary tool that might determine the nature of their future careers as well as their social status in worldwide communities.

To assess the participants' general beliefs about learning English as a foreign language, statistical analysis was conducted in order to measure the five-Likert mean of respondents rating. According to Likert scale, 5 represents high level of agreement and 1 indicates high degree of disagreement. To make results more understandable, mean analysis will be categorized into 4 parts representing levels of students' beliefs where 1.00-1.99 indicates weak belief, 2.00-2.99 points to neutral belief, 3.00-3.99 shows strong belief, and 4.00-5.00 illustrates very strong beliefs. These results are clearly illustrated in Figure 5 below.

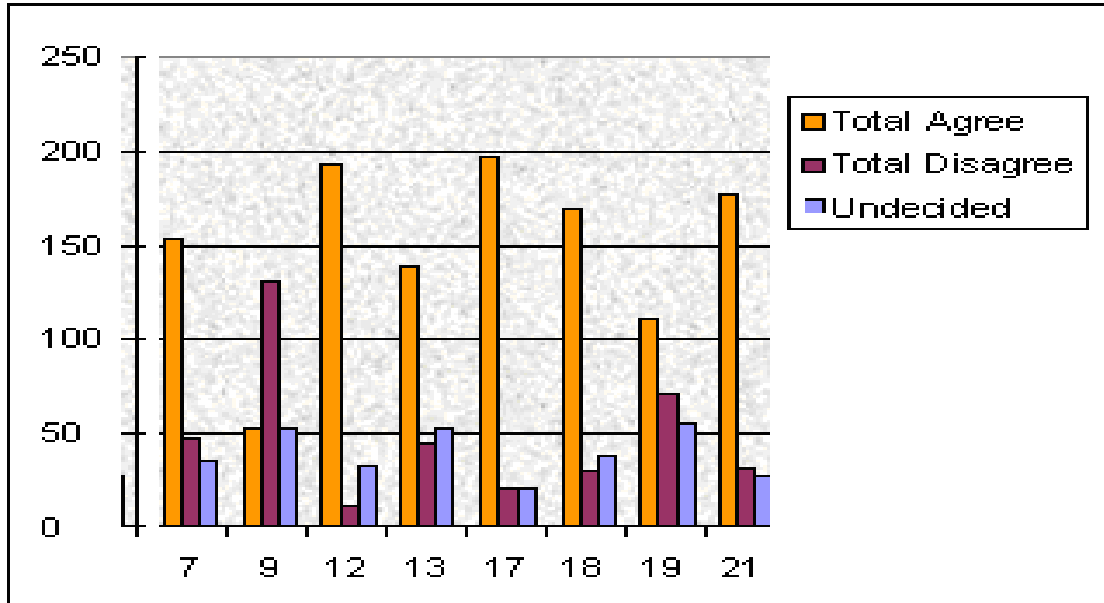


Figure (5): Motivations and Expectations

The following table, Table 6, provides Analysis of students’ general beliefs about learning English as a foreign language.

Table (6) Analysis of students’ general beliefs about learning English as a foreign language

Area	Mean	Standard deviation
English language aptitude	3.501412	0.548099
The difficulty of English language learning	3.346751	0.363414
The nature of language learning	3.727603	0.247494
Learning and communication strategies	3.81303	0.424463
Motivation & expectation	4.191737	0.241398

The mean of Students’ beliefs about learning English illustrated in Table 6 above and Figure 1 below shows that Saudi university students' beliefs ranges from strong to very strong. Participants' demonstrated a very high level of motivation and expectations about learning English as a foreign language since this area tops all other four areas with an average weighted

mean of 4.19. This finding shows that Saudi EFL learners believed that the motivation factors have a great role on their learning process. Therefore, developing students' motivation and understanding their expectations will significantly affect students' English language learning. This result, therefore, disproves the validity of the fifth research hypothesis " *Saudi learners are not motivated to learn English as a foreign language* ". However, participants showed strong beliefs that English language learning is a difficult task to accomplish and accordingly confirms the validity of the second research hypothesis " *Saudi learners believe that English language learning is difficult* ". Also, disproving the validity of the first research hypothesis " *Saudi learners will show negative aptitude to English language learning* ", Saudi students show positive aptitude to English language learning with weighted mean of 3.5 .

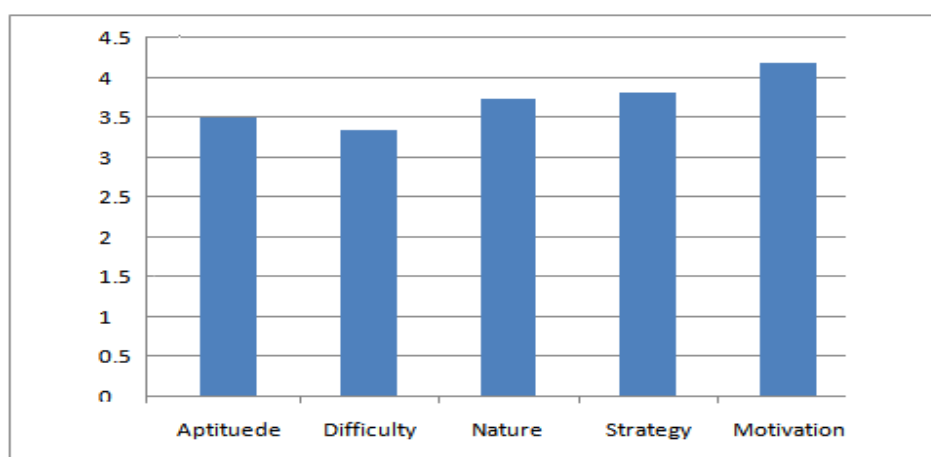


Figure (6): Means for the five areas of students' beliefs about learning English as a foreign Language

Also, as illustrated in Figure 1 above, the results demonstrate strong realistic beliefs about the nature of language learning as the weighted mean for participants' belief exceeded 3.7 which indicates strong significant belief and therefore disproves the validity of the third research hypothesis " *Saudi learners have unrealistic beliefs about the nature of English language learning* ". Moreover, participants expressed a strong belief that learning and communication strategies will influence their endeavors to achieve success in the English language learning process and hence validates the fourth research hypothesis " *Saudi learners are aware of the influence of English language learning strategies on their EFL achievement* " .

Conclusion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore the overall beliefs Saudi novice university learners have about learning English as a foreign language. Using a modified Arabic version of Horwitz's (1987) BALLI, the results reveal that Saudi university students have positive and realistic beliefs about foreign language as regard motivation and expectations about learning English as a foreign language, the nature of language learning and communication strategies.

A number of pedagogical implications can be gleaned from the present study. Firstly, identification of learners' beliefs and reflection on their possible effect on language learning may lead to increased awareness and even adjustment of their expectations. Secondly, the identification of Saudi learners' beliefs might provide guidelines to EFL teachers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to tailor their teaching methods to avoid mismatches between classroom practices and learners' beliefs. Finally, educators might take learners' prior beliefs about EFL learning into account when designing language learning syllabi because any material taught in the EFL program will have to correspond with those prior beliefs and other gender, social, personal, cultural, cognitive and affective factors.

Due to the small size of population in the present study, it appears difficult to generalize the findings of this research to the entire population of English language students in Saudi Arabia. Accordingly, future research is needed to be carried out on a wider scale so as to investigate the role learners' beliefs across different populations, contexts, majors and age groups. Additional studies are also necessary to get a better understanding of the nature and development of language beliefs among EFL teachers and learners. Research as such will develop teachers' awareness of learners' beliefs of language learning as well as their own so as to assist less successful language learners to become successful. Finally, a careful investigation of language teachers' beliefs about language learning might develop the design and content of EFL teacher education programs in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

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