

Relationship between learners' beliefs system and the choice of language learning strategies: A critical study

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Abstract

The study explored the relationship between college EFL students' beliefs and their choice of language learning strategies. The participants were 80 first-year college students (39 males and 41 females) at Roudbar Islamic Azad University. Having calculated the correlations between and among the variables in the study, the authors concluded that since $p < 0.50$, there was certainly a relationship between the students' beliefs system and their choice of strategies. By the same token, in terms of language learning strategies, the frequent used strategy was cognitive strategies ($Mean = 3.50$) scored the highest, followed by meta-cognitive and memory strategies.

Keywords: strategy; belief; positivism; post-positivism; meta-cognitive

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1. Introduction

There is no doubt that learners' beliefs about language learning have an impact on the choice of learning strategies. However, as Hong (2006) insists there is a non-unidirectional relationship between beliefs and strategy use which indicates that just as beliefs about language learning can affect the use of strategies, learning strategies may also influence learners' beliefs about language learning. In any case, there are many studies focused on learners' beliefs underlying their choice of learning strategies. Considering learners as strategic, Breen (1996, p. 90), explicates the fact that learners are seen as actively channeling their energies in order to make the learning process manageable. The learners as Breen (1996) maintains expressed this effort in two broad ways: a learner will adopt learning strategies that mobilize cognitive processes such as attention or memory, meta-cognitive planning and decision making, and overt socio-affective behavior in ways which the learner believes will reduce the complexity of the learning task (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). In fact, what is apparent is that the employment of a variety of strategies on the part of students is the result of a shift in teacher/learner beliefs system emanated from two schools of philosophy: positivism and post-positivism.

The term positivism, as a version of empiricism, as Richards & Schmidt (2002) claim, was first coined by the French philosopher, Auguste Comte who believed reality can be observed (Mack, 2010). In other words, Comte's concept of positivism was based on scientific and objective beliefs, not subjective beliefs. In fact, as Mack elucidates, "*positivism maintains that the scientist is the observer of an objective reality*" (p. 2), not the constructor of this reality. As declared, it goes strong that behavioral strategies are inspired by the work of positivist philosophy. Accordingly, behaviorists developed theories (and strategies) about the behavior of an organism with no reference to what might be happening in the mind of it (Brown, 2001). Thus, the learners in this realm of psychology were not suggested any strategies related to cognitive domains such as inferencing, deducing, organizing and many others. In short, the foundation of learning strategies, as Gass and Selinker (1994) claim, was based on mimicking and analogizing. That is, we say or hear something and analogize from it. Basic to this view is the concept of habits. We mimic the speech of others and analogize from what we already know.

The result of the shift from positivism to post-positivism results in a constructivist perspective which takes an "*anti-positivist*" paradigm (Mack, 2010) as it emphasizes the ability of individual to construct meaning. It is inspired by this perspective that individuals came to the world with pre-determined innate capacity which enables them to acquire their linguistics system. Put simply, language is a part of cognitive development. To be able to learn a new word, for example, a learner has to understand a concept a word represents. The last twenty years have witnessed a considerable increase in the amount of research on the relationship between learners' beliefs and learning strategies. To better appreciate the concept of this relationship, the present study, having taken (1) a critical look at the concept of language learning strategy and its possible draw backs; and (2) the definition of beliefs and the approaches to elicit one's beliefs, attempts to investigate the relationship between the students' beliefs and their choice of strategies in a university located in north of Iran, i.e., Roudbar Islamic Azad University.

2. Literature review

2.1 The concept of learning strategies: A critical look

Learning strategies have been defined differently by different researchers. However, there is a commonsensical understanding that the term 'strategy' as Brown (2001) claims refers to a specific attack that we

make on a given problem. Earlier, Mayer (1988) defines strategies specifically as "*behaviors of a learner that are intended to influence how the learner processes information*" (cited in Lessard-Clouston, 1997). In their seminal study, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) defined learning strategies "*the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information*" (p. 1). Oxford (1990) also provides this helpful definition:

... language learning strategies—specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language. Strategies are tools for the self-directed involvement necessary for developing communicative ability. (Oxford, 1990, p. 18)

Dornyei and Skehan (2003, as cited in Macaro, 2006, p. 322), reviewing definitions of strategies, argued that a strategy cannot be either cognitive or emotional or behavioral. They asked whether a strategy was a neurological process, a cognitive operation, or a behavioral act involving motor skills. They questioned, moreover, whether a strategy could contribute to both knowledge and language skills and posited that there was no theoretical explanation for how strategies might be related to skills. They concluded that a theoretical basis for the concept of learner strategies was still sadly lacking and that to provide a scientifically rigorous definition researchers would have to provide a coherent neurological and biological account of behaviors, something that Dornyei and Skehan considered an enormous undertaking.

In his most recent attack on learner strategies, Dornyei (2005, as cited in Macaro, 2006, p. 322) catalogued the inability of researchers to explain the difference between "engaging in an ordinary learning activity and a strategic learning activity", a problem that has led him to question the very existence of learner strategy. There is not that much space in the paper to concern the drawbacks of learner strategy definition, but what is plausible is that with the emergence of cognitive psychology which takes an anti-positivist paradigm, the emphasis was placed on the ability of individual to construct meaning. In the same line, researchers in different fields began to investigate various characteristics of learners and, in particular, learning strategies received notable attention.

As far as the classification of language learning strategies is concerned, much of the earlier research, mostly in the 1970s, concentrated on compiling inventories of the learning strategies that learners were observed to use or reported to use. O'Malley's and Chamot (1990) divided language learning strategies into three main categories: meta-cognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies. At the same time, Oxford (1990) sees the aim of language learning strategies as being oriented towards the development of communicative competence. She divides language learning strategies into two main classes, direct and indirect. Along the same line, Cohen (1998), broadly, differentiates language learning strategies according to whether they are cognitive, meta-cognitive, affective, or social.

Overall, as Oxford (1989) holds, "*language learning strategies research has suffered from an overemphasis on meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies*" (p. 4). In claiming that the social and affective strategies are found less in L2 research, Oxford (1994) argues that, "*the L2 learner is not just a cognitive and meta-cognitive machine, but rather a whole person*" (p.2). Furthermore, Oxford (1994) outlines almost two dozen L2 strategy classification systems defined into subsequent classifications. She explains that the existence of these distinct strategy typologies indicates a major problem in the research area of L2 learning strategies: lack of a coherent, well accepted system for describing these strategies. There is not much space to debate what learning strategies suffer from except to end up this part with two theoretical assumptions proposed by Griffiths and Parr (2001) which underlying contemporary beliefs on language learning strategies: (1) learning strategies are cognitive; and (2) learning strategies can be learned.

To comment that some students are more successful at learning language than others are, language learning strategy theory postulates that at least part of this differential learner's success rate is attributable to the varying strategies which different learners bring to the task. From this perspective, which views students as being able to

consciously influence their own learning ideology, the learning of language becomes a cognitive process, similar in many ways to any other kind of learning (McLaughlin, 1978, cited in Griffith & Parr, 2001, 249). It is a view diametrically opposed to Krashen's Monitor and Acquisition/Learning hypothesis which states language cannot be consciously learned but acquired through natural communication. Following this assumption that some students are more successful than others, and the hypothesis that some of this success may be a result of more effective language learning strategies, it is further assumed that the strategies employed by the more successful learners may be learned by the less successful ones, and the teacher can help them by promoting awareness of them and encouraging their use.

2.2 Language learning beliefs

To better appreciate the concept of this relationship, it is necessary to see what beliefs are meant and how one can approach one's beliefs system. Considering learner's beliefs system as a learner variable in the field of language learning was pioneered by Horwitz (1987). In contrast with learning strategies, there is no commonsensical understanding of what beliefs are. As Williams & Burden (1997, p. 56) conclude, "*Beliefs are notoriously difficult to define and evaluate, but there do appear to be a number of helpful statements that we can make about them. They tend to be culturally bound, to be formed early in life and to be resistant to change.*" In any way regarding beliefs, three definitions, as cited in Li (2004) are noticeable:

- notions about language learning that students have acquired (Kuntz, 1996);
- an individual's opinions about language learning (Banya & Cheng, 1997);
- synonymous with attitudes, representations, opinions or ideologies (Fraser & Gaskell 1990) (pp. 23-24).

Although some researchers consider beliefs as synonymous with meta-cognitive knowledge, McKelvey (2003) argued beliefs are idiosyncratic, subjective and value related. However, Meta-cognitive knowledge as Pintrich (2002) states refers to knowledge about cognition in general, as well as awareness of and knowledge about one's own cognition.

2.3 Approaches to language learning beliefs

To investigate human's beliefs in SLA, there are several approaches. To Kajala (1995), human beliefs can be investigated through two approaches: the mainstream approach and the discursive approach. In the former, the focus is on describing beliefs as cognitive entities in learners' mind. The mentioned approach describes beliefs as stable, statable, and fallible. The discursive approach, in contrast, takes into account the function of beliefs and investigates them in talks and writing. The discursive beliefs hold beliefs as socially constructed and variable from one person to another as well as from context to another. According to Barcelos (2006), learners beliefs can be investigated through the normative, the meta-cognitive and the contextual approach (cited in Oksanen, 2005, p. 9). Along the same line, Oksanen (2005) asserts the first two approaches—normative and meta-cognitive—can be grouped into Kalaja's mainstream approach, while the last one—contextual—into his discursive approach. To Barcelos (2006), the normative approach views beliefs as preconceived ideas or opinions. The meta-cognitive approach, on the other side, equates beliefs with meta-cognitive knowledge which means the knowledge the learners have about learning (Wenden, 1998, as cited in Oksanen, p. 10). Wenden (1998) defines meta-cognitive knowledge as relatively stable acquired information about our own learning. As she claims such knowledge can change over time, and can be acquired either consciously or unconsciously.

The contextual approach, as Oksanen (2005) traces, can come under the umbrella of three approaches: Bakhtian approach, Vygotskian approach and Deweyan approach. An essential term derived from Bakhtian is the notion of 'voice'. The term encompasses that what the subject says is not only language but reflects the speakers' beliefs and world view. Another notion which is derived from Bakhtin is the function of dialogic speech and

writing in constructing our experience. What is implicit in Bakhtin' approach is that beliefs are as subjective experience and dynamic (Oksanen, 2005). Since we acquire a language as part of our knowledge through discourse, our knowledge means partly repeating words and thought formulated by others. Thus, beliefs reflect personal views.

Vygotsky was much interested in self-regulation as Oksanen (2005) claims. Self-regulation means the learners' planning, monitoring and evaluation of his or her own learning. Much of Vygotsky's study could be linked to the study of meta-cognition. The Vygotskian perspective defines beliefs as something that are constructed in interaction but at the same time individual and mental. In fact, they are constructed through mediated action such as speech.

As stated in Oksanen (2005) three ideas can be derived from Deweyan ideas: experience, the paradoxical nature of beliefs and identity. Dewey (1933) describes beliefs as paradoxical in nature since "believing" often means "not knowing for sure", but at the same time we are confident to act upon our beliefs. On the other hand, beliefs are something we accept as truth now, but which may be questioned later. The third idea that Barcelos (2006) adopts from John Dewey (1933) holds beliefs are connected to identity. This notion is tripartite (Dewey, 1933): first, our experiences are shaped by our relationship with the environment. Thus we form our ideas and self-image in terms of environment and people in it. Second, beliefs are tightly connected to learning and identity. Barcelos (2006) explains that when we learn, we construct our identities and, at the same time, beliefs. Third, our identity is influenced by different groups we belong to, such as men and women or groups that come with, for instance, our occupation, socioeconomic levels or marital status. Based on these ideas and the research goals, Barcelos (2006) sees ethnography as the most appropriate method for investigating beliefs from a Deweyan perspective.

2.4 Purpose of the study

The number of studies on the relationship between strategy use and beliefs shows there is a critical relationship between; however, so much research is needed to determine what strategies are effectively employed by students and what strategies are more common among them. The paper was originally conducted in a university whose students were mostly among the natives, i.e., Roudbar city. Considering that beliefs are culturally-bound, the researcher is going to investigate whether in a small society—i.e., Roudbar, the students' use of strategy is affected by their beliefs or not. To this end, the researcher is going to investigate the following questions:

- A. Does the use of strategy is pervaded by learners' beliefs?
- B. What strategies are commonly used by the students in Roudbar, Islamic Azad University?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

In order to perform this study, 80 first-year college students (39 males and 41 females) between 20 and 25 years of age were randomly selected from Islamic Azad University, Roudbar Branch. They had been admitted from different parts of Iran on the basis of an entrance exam held by the Iranian Ministry of Science, Research and Technology. Furthermore, the students were in the first semester of their university education and were studying different majors such as accounting, management, and architecture.

3.2 Instruments

The instruments used in this study are as follows:

- To determine the specific strategies that participants preferred in language learning, the ESL/EFL Version of Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) developed by Oxford (1999) was employed. The 50-item questionnaire made use of a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never or almost never) to 5 (always or almost always) and consists of six strategy groups namely: (1) memory, (2) cognitive, (3) compensatory, (4) meta-cognitive, (5) affective, and (6) social.
- Another instrument in the study was the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI developed by Horwitz, 1987) to determine the participants' beliefs about the five subscales: (1) foreign language aptitude, (2) difficulties of language learning, (3) nature of language learning, (4) learning and communication strategies, (5) motivation and expectations.

3.3 Procedure

Being qualitative, the procedure of the present study was limited the administration of questionnaires to the students of a number of classes at different proficiency among eighty students.

4. Results

To obtain results from the questionnaires, the mean and standard deviation were computed and ranked. Pearson r correlation was employed to determine whether significant relationships between the independent variables exist.

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation of each element. Results show that the scores obtained from all the factors are close to each other as indicated in their standard deviation. In terms of Language Learning Strategies, the frequent used strategy was cognitive strategies ($M = 3.50$) scored the highest, followed by meta-cognitive and memory strategies. These were followed by compensatory and affective strategies, and the least frequently used strategy was social ($M = 3.02$).

Table 1

Mean and Standard Deviation of the Variables (SILL)

Variables	Mean	SD
Memory	3.38	0.76
Cognitive	3.50	0.63
Meta-cognitive	3.41	0.72
Compensatory	3.16	0.70
Affective	3.10	0.72
Social	3.02	0.54

Table 2 reports that the students had a general positive belief about learning the language. Specifically, they had the most positive belief about their motivations and expectations, followed by their learning and communication strategies, then difficulty of language learning, their aptitude, and finally the nature of language learning. That the results ranged from 2.10 to 3.30 showed that the participants in the study had overall optimistic beliefs about language learning.

Table 2

Mean and Standard Deviation of the Variables (BALLI)

Variables	Mean	SD
Beliefs about language learning	3.30	0.46
Foreign language aptitude	2.41	0.53
Difficulty of language learning	2.56	0.52
Nature of language learning	2.10	0.54
Learning and communication strategies	2.80	0.87
Motivations and expectations	2.92	0.84

The correlations between and among the variables in the study were also conducted. As reported in Table 4 $p=0.00$, there is certainly a relationship between the choice of strategies and students' beliefs since *significant level* is smaller than 5.00; however, language learning strategies, in general, were found (Table 5) to be weakly correlated with beliefs about language learning. This means that the more the students used a particular strategy group, the less positive belief they held about language learning.

Table 3

Descriptive statistics of strategy and belief

One-Sample Statistics	N	Mean	SD	SEM
Strategy	6	3.2617	.19374	.07910
Belief	6	2.6817	.41954	.17128

Table 4

The result of t-Test

One-Sample Test (Test Value = 0)			Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	T	df			Lower	Upper
Strategy	41.237	5	.000	3.26167	3.0583	3.4650
Beliefs	15.657	5	.000	2.68167	2.2414	3.1220

Table 5

The results of correlation between learners' beliefs system and the choice of strategies

Correlations		Beliefs	Strategy
Beliefs	Pearson Correlation	1	-.067
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.900
	N	6	6
Strategy	Pearson Correlation	-.067	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.900	
	N	6	6

5. Conclusions and discussions

The strategies employed by teachers in the class, directly or indirectly inculcate a thought into students' beliefs system through which base their studies. What is ignored in introducing learning strategies to students is the concept of disposition as a key factor. As the employment of strategy is culturally-bound, the writers claim introducing new strategies are curtailed due to learners' previous experience of the students. Since individuals are unique, it is indisputable that we cannot assume that all are in favor of the specific strategy employed in the class. Such a perspective needs to emphasize the gradual development of attitudes to learning, and use any realizations about later successful approaches to language learning to inform the development primary school activities and materials. As Littlejohn (2008) maintains it will also need to see the teaching of strategies not as objects of learning (something to learn about) which are presented and practiced, but as ways of working which are built into the design of classroom tasks and specified in task instructions.

Li (2004) maintains research studies on the relationship between beliefs and language learning strategies have suggested that beliefs would be likely to be an underlying factor in the use of strategies. Oxford (1994) holds for attempting to teach students to use learning strategies effectively, L2 strategy training should be based clearly on students' attitudes, beliefs and stated needs. For example, as Wang (1996, cited in Vibulphol, 2004, p. 24) concluded the majority of the unsuccessful language learners tended to possess negative beliefs about language learning such as: they did not believe that they had foreign language aptitude; they believed that English was a difficult language; they valued the importance of translation in English learning; and so on. On the

contrary, fewer successful language learners held such beliefs. Along the same line, Oxford (1994) claims negative attitudes and beliefs often causing poor strategy use or lack of orchestration of strategies.

The studies on the relationship between beliefs and strategy choices show beliefs are culturally-bound. Park (1995, as cited in Hong, 2006, p. 57) in a study on the beliefs of Korean University students and their choice of learning strategies concluded that Korean students used more meta-cognitive and memory strategies than communicative affective strategies. Park's study kept that the students held a strong desire to have English speaking friends and to learn to speak English. Park also reported that the relationship between the learners' beliefs and the strategies was moderate to low, and depended on specific types of beliefs and strategies. In other words, some beliefs were more related to learning strategies than other beliefs. Park concluded that the major reason for this relationship was due to their fear of making mistakes and feeling timid when interacting with native English-speakers or others; the participants were reluctant to use interactive practice strategies to learn English in spite of their high desire to learn to speak English. In addition, EFL learning environments provide less opportunity for Korean students to practice English with other people in and out of the classroom.

According to Horwitz (1987) that some beliefs are probably shaped by students' previous experiences as language learners, and that other beliefs are probably shaped by students' cultural background, have been widely accepted and supported by many other language learning researchers. In effect, language learners' strategy choice and use reflect their beliefs which are strongly determined by different cultural backgrounds.

In a study conducted by Wenden (1987, as cited in Hong, 2006, p. 55), the preliminary evidence of the influence of learners' beliefs on their language-learning strategy was investigated. She interviewed 25 adults ESL learners at the American Language Program (ALP) at Columbia University. The students were asked to talk about language learning activities used in the classroom and outside and about what they believed about language learning. She noted that learners who were concerned about the importance of using the language (e.g., speaking and listening) would often use functional or communicative strategies. Learners who stress the importance of learning the language would use cognitive strategies (e.g., memorizing, or consulting reference materials). She concluded that understanding learners' beliefs about language learning and how they vary is very important to comprehending how individual learners approach language learning.

However, one, as Griffith (2007) claims, must be cautious of the lack of coincidence between students' and teachers' perceptions. Nunan (1988) also talks of clear mismatches between learners' and teachers' views, and disparate perspectives (as cited in Griffith, 2007, p. 92) regarding learning strategies. Along the same line, Griffith (2007) claims, "*the potential of such mismatches to negatively affect what goes on in the classroom suggests a need to find out more about how teachers' perceptions intersect with students' perceptions*" (p. 92).

Moreover, 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).

The role of organism, of course, in the choice of learning strategies is undisputable; in fact, for a learner to learn languages various strategies are to be employed, these strategies are the reflection of their beliefs. Accordingly, Li (2004) argues language educators have long recognized that learners bring to the language learning task a complex set of attitudes, experiences, expectations, and learning strategies. Within this complex web of variables are *beliefs*; beliefs about the nature of language, about the language-learning task, about likely outcomes, about learners' personal language learning strengths and limitations (Sakui & Gaies 1999 as cited in Li, 2004, p. 41).

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