

English Language Learning Beliefs of Iranian High School Students

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Abstract

Language learning beliefs are considered to be an important factor influencing student learning outcomes. This mixed-methods research investigated English language learning beliefs of Iranian English language learners. Data were collected from 226 junior and senior male and female high school students using the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) and semi-structured interviews. Participants reported strong beliefs in terms of ‘motivation and expectation’ and ‘foreign language aptitude’. First and third graders’ mean belief scores were statistically different across their ‘overall beliefs’, ‘foreign language aptitude’, and ‘motivation and expectations’. Moreover, although the overall gender differences were not statistically meaningful, significant differences were noticed with regards to beliefs about ‘difficulty of language learning’ and ‘foreign language aptitude’. The results underscore the hypothesis that changes in language learning beliefs happen due to learners’ stage of development, i.e. their grade. Further, certain misconceptions among high school learners were noticed about the role of aptitude and intelligence, error correction, and supremacy of learning certain forms of language. The implications are discussed with reference to language education and policy development.

Keywords: language learning beliefs, high school, EFL, gender, grade, BALLI

Background

Since mid 1980s, a large body of research has been published on learners’ beliefs about language learning in both ESL and EFL contexts (e.g., Agudo, 2014; Amouzie & Winke, 2009; Bernat & Lloyd, 2007; Chang & Shen, 2010; Daif-Allah, 2011; Fujiwara, 2014; Horwitz, 1999; Moser, 2012; Nahavandi & Mukundan, 2014; Zhang & Cui, 2009). Beliefs are meaning categories employed for thinking “in the activity of understanding the world and oneself

“(Negueruela-Azarola, 2011, as cited in Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011, p. 284). Learners bring a complex set of expectations, experiences, and beliefs to the language classrooms. Language learning beliefs have been defined as “the perspectives that learners hold about language learning, which are a result of a number of factors that shape one's thinking and belief formation, including past experiences, culture, context, and numerous other personal factors” (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005, p. 3). This definition reflects a more dynamic nature of learner beliefs given that learner beliefs are subject to the impact of external factors (e.g. culture) and learning contexts (e.g. study-abroad) leading to the view that learner beliefs may change over time (Amouzie & Winke, 2009; Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011; De Costa, 2011; Gao, 2008; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003; Zhang & Cui, 2009). Regardless of the origin of learner beliefs, their perceptions and beliefs may have a profound influence on their learning endeavours or “even determine a learner’s attitude and motivation when learning the language in question” (Cotterall, 1995, p. 199). Thus, understanding learner beliefs helps us better understand learner approaches and strategies to language learning and better plan language instruction (Horwitz, 1999). Unsatisfied learning expectations and erroneous beliefs can have significant negative impact on classroom instruction and learner engagement and ultimate learning outcome (Agudo, 2014).

Prior research on language learner beliefs employs both small-scale ethnographic case studies and/or large cross-sectional studies using either a cognitive or sociocultural perspective. The findings capture a complex, multidimensional, and dynamic picture of beliefs intertwined with micro and macro socio-political and cultural contexts, significant others, and other internal factors such as self-concept and identity, self-efficacy, personality traits, and other individual differences (see for a review Barcelos & Khalaja 2011; Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005; Horwitz, 1999). Consequently, it has been suggested that researchers study on how beliefs function across learner groups with different gender, age, nationality, learning style, and personality types in different contexts (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005; Liu, Chih-Kai, & Wiley, 2016; Sioson, 2011; Wong & Nunan, 2011).

Research to date indicates that learners’ beliefs about language learning have a major influence on their stage of language development. Fujiwara’s (2014) study of 208 seventh-grade middle school Thai learners of Japanese showed higher level learners’ more positive attitudes and realistic beliefs. Peacocks’s (1999) study of 202 EFL students at a university in Hong Kong demonstrated that erroneous learner beliefs of some lower-level learners were detrimental to their language learning. For instance, less proficient learners underestimated the difficulty of language learning, believed errors should be highly avoided at earlier stages, and were more into memorising grammar rules. These erroneous beliefs were assumed to be the reason for their lower language proficiency. More experienced third year distance EFL students in a Chinese university showed higher confidence and control in their own efforts (Zhang and Cui, 2009). First-year students compared to third-year students showed less confidence in asking for help when necessary, and more dependent on the teacher than on themselves in doing the tasks. Chang and Shen’s (2010) study of 250 Taiwanese high school students showed stronger beliefs about language learning and use of more English learning strategies among higher grade students. Peng and Hui’s (2012) study of 30 Malaysian students revealed that students with higher grades showed higher desires for language learning and their motivations and expectation levels was higher than those with lower grades. A couple of studies from Iran on learner beliefs showed that proficiency level had a significant effect on the motivation of Iranian undergraduate ESP students. More proficient students had stronger motivation and sets

of expectations (Bagherzadeh, 2012), and more in favour of using different kinds of language learning strategies (Sotoudehnama & Heidari, 2014).

Further, gender is also a key variable that may influence attitudes, motivations, behaviours and beliefs about the nature of language learning and how it occurs (Tercanlioğlu, 2005). Very few studies have focused on the relationship between gender and language learner beliefs, and there is no strong consensus in the findings. Bernat and Lloyd's (2007) study of 262 EFL students from different nationalities at an Australian university showed that both males and females shared similar beliefs about language learning with minor differences in their beliefs. For instance, females more significantly than males believed that intelligence played a greater role in language learning, and males were more likely to enjoy the experience of practicing English with native speakers. Similarly, no differences were found between Chinese male and female undergraduate learners of English in their beliefs about learning English (Zhang & Cui, 2009). Contrary to Bernat and Lloyd's (2007) findings, the female Saudi learners in an undergraduate English program were more likely to enjoy the experience of practicing speaking the language with native speakers and more confident about their language abilities, while males were more realistic about their language abilities and the length of time it would take to learn English (Daif-Allah, 2012). It was argued that the differences might not be necessarily gender-bound, thus social, religious, and cultural factors may influence the nature of foreign language learner beliefs. Studies on EFL learner beliefs of higher education institutions in Iran capture different results on gender beliefs. Nahavandi and Mukundan's (2014) study of 369 Iranian EFL engineering students showed that females, compared to males, reported a higher level of motivation for learning and social interaction and speaking in English. On the contrary, other studies in the Iranian context found no significant gender differences with university students in their beliefs (Bagherzadeh, 2012; Sotoudehnama & Heidari, 2014).

Although numerous studies have investigated learners' beliefs about second language learning in different countries (e.g., Cotterall, 1995; Rieger, 2009; Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Siebert, 2003; Sioson, 2011; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003; Tercanlioğlu, 2005), little is known about EFL learners' beliefs in eastern contexts like Iran. Moreover, with the exception of a few, a significant majority of the research studies reported above all focused on learner beliefs across college and tertiary levels. The beliefs EFL learners hold are largely induced by their past classroom learning experiences (Agudo, 2014; Peacock, 1999). Around one third of the 121 EFL university students in Hong Kong interviewed by Peacock said that, among other things (e.g., teachers, family or friends, classroom tasks, mass media, and living abroad), their secondary school experience had a significant impact on the formation of their beliefs about language learning. As such, investigating the beliefs of high school students can provide insights into how beliefs are formed at earlier stages of language learning and their carryover effect when the same learners pursue their studies in higher levels of language learning. To date, no study has explored the language learning beliefs of Iranian high school students and its relationship with their language stage of learning. Moreover, there have been inconsistent results in the literature on the key variables in this study. For example, research regarding gender differences in students' beliefs shows contradictory findings as noted above. Thus, further studies are warranted to better understand how learners at earlier stages of learning go about language learning in EFL contexts. Such knowledge could help language teachers develop a "clear understanding of their students' beliefs because learners with realistic expectations and informed beliefs are more likely to behave productively in class, work harder outside class, and persist longer with language study" (Mantle-Bromley, 1995, p. 375). Hence, the findings of the

present study can help English teachers reduce potential classroom conflicts that may stem from inconsistencies between teacher and learner language beliefs. Furthermore, examining learners with different gender and learning stages can uncover any relationship between these variables and learner beliefs and thus offer new insights into what younger EFL learners expect. We are particularly interested in what beliefs high school students have in general about learning English using a quantitative measure (i.e. questionnaire). We further probe into their personal stories in order to more deeply investigate the perspectives of individual students using a qualitative measure (i.e. interviews). Using a 'hybrid mixed methods question' (Creswell, 2015, p.71), we were interested in what results emerge from comparing the quantitative data about language learning beliefs of Iranian male and female junior and senior high school students with qualitative data from their interviews. This study is primarily quantitative (Brown, 2014) followed by semi-structured interviews with high school students to further probe into their beliefs about learning English.

Method

Participants

To accomplish the objectives of this study, a total of 226 (Table 1) students studying at four public schools in Tehran were selected. The participants were enrolled at first and third grade high school at the time the data were collected. Their ages ranged from 14 to 17. 109 students (48%) were junior high school first-graders and 117 students (52%) were senior high school third-graders. They were selected based on a combination of purposive and availability sampling. Two classes from each school were chosen. The participants were selected from different grades and genders so that their language learning beliefs could be compared.

Table 1. Distribution of the Study Participants

| Gender | Grade | Senior High (SH) | Junior high (JH) | Total | Percentage |
|--------|-------|------------------|------------------|-------|------------|
| Male | | 55 | 58 | 113 | 50% |
| Female | | 54 | 59 | 113 | 50% |
| Total | | 109 | 117 | 226 | 100% |

Instrumentation and Procedure

Using explanatory sequential design, we used two instruments: Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) (Appendix A), as well as interviews with learners. In this design the intent is to initially use "quantitative methods and then use qualitative methods to help explain the quantitative results in more depth" in an attempt to further explain and draw inferences about language learners' beliefs (Creswell, 2015, p.13).

The BALLI questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section included background information which elicited gender, age, prior family language orientation, and previous foreign language learning experiences. The second section included the BALLI items which elicited learners' beliefs about language learning. It contained thirty-four items relating to beliefs within five major areas as shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Distribution of the Items of BALLI

| Constructs | Items |
|---|----------------------------------|
| The difficulty of language learning (DLL) | 3, 4, 6, 14, 24, 28 |
| Foreign language aptitude (FLA) | 1, 2, 10, 15, 22, 29, 32, 33, 34 |
| The nature of language learning (NLL) | 5, 8, 11, 16, 20, 25, 26 |
| Learning and communication strategies (L&C) | 7, 9, 12, 13, 17, 18, 19, 21 |
| Motivation and expectations (M&E) | 23, 27, 30, 31 |

This instrument has been widely used to assess learner beliefs in relation to second or foreign language learning (e.g., Bernat & Lloyd, 2007; Fujiwara, 2014; Nahavandi & Mukundan 2014; Siebert, 2003; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003; Yang, 1999). The Persian version of BALLI (validated by Mohebi & Khodadady, 2011) was adopted for the present study due to its relative comprehensiveness in representing different beliefs of university students about language learning. It was found to be a valid and suitable tool for research on language learning beliefs in the Iranian context (Mohebi & Khodadady, 2011).

Participants responded to items on a six-point Likert scale, ranging from 'Strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Cronbach alpha reliability estimate of the questionnaire was found to be .72 which was acceptable.

To gain further information which might not be possible to obtain through the structured questionnaire, interviews were conducted with 15 volunteered participants from both grades and sexes (see Table 3). The interview questions were adapted from Swani (2012), thus checked for readability and content validity with an experienced researcher, and then piloted with two learners. The interviews took place during April-May 2012. Each interview was conducted individually, lasted for about 45-55 minutes, as well as audiotaped and transcribed. Each transcription was coded for ease of analysis and tracking of the points raised. Then, the typical responses across the transcriptions which stood out and were inclusive of the most common reported beliefs were analysed and translated into English for reporting purposes. The questions (Appendix B) were chosen and modified from the BALLI in order to probe more into different dimensions of learner' beliefs. The interviews were conducted in learners' first language, i.e. Persian.

Table 3. Distribution of the Interviewed Participants

| Grade | Female | Male | Total |
|-------|--------|------|-------|
| SH | 4 | 6 | 10 |
| JH | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| Total | 6 | 9 | 15 |

The participants were assured that all the information provided by them will be kept confidential and their anonymity preserved. The participants were given the BALLI questionnaire and were fully briefed on how to fill out the questionnaire items. Some of the questionnaires were discarded as they had not been fully completed. The quantitative analysis

involved descriptive statistics and analysis of variance. The qualitative analysis involved coding, transcribing, and identifying the major themes in transcriptions.

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness of the qualitative data, triangulation, member checking, and auditing were used. Triangulation is the process of corroborating evidence from different sources, in this case corroborating evidence from both interviews and questionnaires to enhance the accuracy of the study (Creswell, 2009). A couple of participants were asked to check the accuracy of their accounts. This member-checking helped ensure accuracy of the recorded data and presentation of participants' views (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, as an external audit, the project supervisor conducted a review of the interview to ensure consistency in coding and thematic categorization (Ivankova, 2014).

Data from the quantitative phase of the study were analysed and reported followed by the qualitative data and results from interviews hoping that the former could help further explain the quantitative findings. Integration of the findings from the two data sources happened in the discussion and conclusion sections in which findings from both sources were connected and compared to answer the study questions (Creswell, 2015).

Results

Quantitative Results

Figure 1 shows the overall mean scores of the learners' perceptions on the constructs of the BALLI:

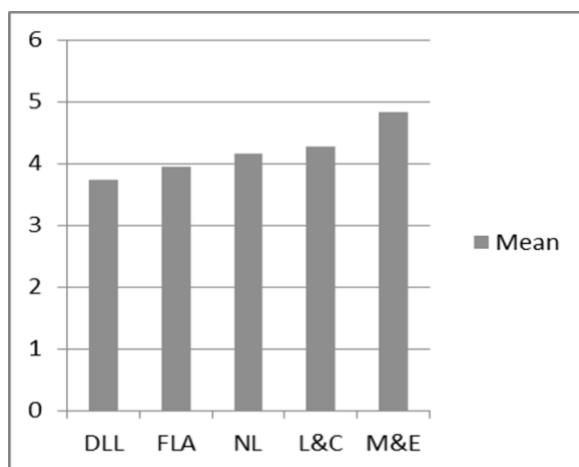


Figure 1. Means Performance on Different BALLI Constructs

The results show that high school students have more fixed beliefs about their Motivation and Expectations ($M= 4.83$, $SD = 1.30$), followed by Learning and Communication strategies ($M= 4.28$, $SD = 1.30$) and Nature of Language Learning ($M= 4.16$, $SD = 1.30$). They have less strong beliefs about Foreign Language Aptitude ($M= 3.94$, $SD = 3$), and Difficulty of Language Learning ($M= 3.74$, $SD = 2.9$).

The Difficulty of Language Learning

As illustrated in Figure 1, a significant majority (79%) either agreed or strongly agreed that learning some languages are easier than others. Most (88%) believed English is an easy language to learn. A large number (68%) also believe that they can learn to use English fluently

in 1-5 years by spending one hour a day learning it; a small minority thought it would take more than five years (15%). This indicates that high school students mostly underestimate the difficulty of learning English. Most studies in the literature report learning English as of medium difficulty among Korean, Turkish, Taiwanese, and Chinese tertiary learners of English (Bernat & Lloyd, 2007; Horwitz, 1999; Kunt, 1997; Park; 1995; Yang, 1999). All the students had already studied English for 4-5 years at the time of this study, and they were not still speaking or using it very well. It might be that younger learners have some misconceptions about learning a foreign language before their proficiency improves to the level of university students (Peacock, 1999).

Foreign Language Aptitude

High school learners seem to have a strong belief in aptitude for language learning. More than half of them (53%) agreed that some people are born with a special ability to learn a foreign language. A significant majority (87%) had a positive outlook towards themselves as having a special ability to learn a foreign language, and that everyone can learn to speak a foreign language (85%). 63% agreed or strongly agreed that it is easier for children than for adults to learn English. Over half of them (55%) strongly believed that one who is good at learning Math and Science is good at learning English as well. The results are similar in many ways to recent findings in the literature with both university and secondary school students (Aguda, 2014; Bernat & Lloyd, 2007; De Costa, 2011; Fujiwara, 2014; Horwitz, 1999; Peacock, 1999). This is significant as one precaution of this might be students associating their difficulties, slow progress, and lack of success with lack of aptitude and thus get frustrated, disheartened, and ultimately give up language learning. Teacher intervention might be necessary in underestimating aptitude and changing the learners' beliefs in this regard (Mantle-Bromley, 1995).

The Nature of Language Learning

A good number of participants (62%) agreed that it is necessary to know the foreign language culture in order to speak well, and 86% strongly agreed or agreed that it is best to learn a foreign language in the target context. Accordingly, developing learner's knowledge and sensitivity through producing cross-cultural materials towards the target culture could be beneficial (Cortazzi, 1990).

67% strongly agreed or agreed that learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning many new words. The agreement range in the literature on the supremacy of vocabulary is from 42 to 79% (Bernat & Lloyd, 2007; Horwitz, 1999; Oh, 1996; Peacock, 1999).

Over half of them agreed that grammar plays an integral role in learning English. A significant number of them agreed that reading and writing in English are much easier than speaking and listening to it. This was expectable given the heavy emphasis placed on both grammar and vocabulary in Iranian high schools. Around half of them (47%) also agreed that learning a foreign language is different from other academic subjects. Further, 65% agreed that learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of translating from Persian.

Learning and communication strategies

A great majority of the respondents (85%) believed that having a native-like accent is of great importance confirming the strong belief in the literature among EFL learners (i.e. both high school and university students, less amongst the latter) about this formal aspect of language

(Agudo, 2014; Ke & Cahyani, 2014; Peacock, 1999; Bernat & Lloyd, 2007). This goes strongly against findings on teacher beliefs on pronunciation showing their very low support for excellent accent (Kern, 1995; Peacock, 1999). This shows a conflict between teacher and student beliefs requiring learner strategy training by teachers to bust this myth amongst EFL learners about attaining native-like accent in the current global English as a lingua franca (ELF) context.

An overwhelming majority (93%) agreed on the importance of repeating and practicing the language reflecting their strong belief that their individual effort makes the biggest contribution to successful language learning (Zhang & Cui, 2009).

Most participants (68%) agreed that guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words in the foreign language is important and necessary. Meanwhile, a great majority (59%) of the students believed that it is impossible to speak a language without making mistakes; hence disagreeing with the statement: “you should not say anything in the foreign language until you can say it correctly.” On the other hand, almost 80% of them believed that if errors are not corrected in the beginning stages, they would be hard to eradicate later on. This is problematic as it suggests that high school students expect to be constantly corrected by the teacher probably with their incorrect pronunciations.

Motivation and Expectations

About 62% expected to ultimately learn English very well. More than half of them (53%) also agreed that they want to get to know people who speak English as a native language. Evidence in the literature before 2000 does not show a strong interest amongst EFL learners to get to know native speakers (Horwitz, 1999). This trend seems to have changed in recent studies with Chinese ESL learners (showing 70% agreement) in Australia showing more integrative orientations and motivations (Bernat and Lloyd, 2007). Further, high school students strongly believe that if they get to speak English very well, they would certainly find opportunities to use it (over 50%) and thus would have greater job opportunities (67%). 72% affirmed that people from their country think it is important to speak a foreign language. As English is the only foreign language taught at Iranian public high schools, it is likely that parental, contextual (school, media, friends), and societal input on the popularity of the language have contributed to this strong belief.

Beliefs Across Sexes and Grades

Table 4 illustrates the mean and standard deviations of male and female junior high (JH) and senior high (SH) school students on different dimensions of their beliefs.

Generally speaking, in comparison with JH students ($M = 135.41$, $SD = 11.32$), SH students had higher mean scores ($M = 140.01$, $SD = 11.32$). Further, overall, females harboured more positive beliefs about language learning than male students.

Table 4. Male/Female JH and SH Participants' Mean Scores on BALLI

| | N | Overall Beliefs | DLL | FLA | NLL | LC | ME |
|-------------|-------|-------------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| JH | 117 | 135.41 (11.32) | 3.71 (1.34) | 3.9 (1.43) | 4.1 (1.40) | 4.1 (1.37) | 4.8 (1.34) |
| SH | 109 | 140.01 (11.32) | 3.76 (1.31) | 4.09 (1.32) | 4.1 (1.26) | 4.3 (1.31) | 4.9 (1.23) |
| Males (M) | 113 | 137 (11.98) | 3.84 (1.23) | 4.01 (1.32) | 4.2 (1.28) | 4.2 (1.23) | 4.7 (1.01) |
| Females (F) | 113 | 138.3 (11.07) | 3.65 (1.34) | 4.15 (1.35) | 4.1 (1.26) | 4.2 (1.38) | 4.8 (1.18) |
| Overall SD | ----- | 11.09 | 1.29 | 1.33 | 1.3 | 1.3 | 1.2 |

ANOVA was used to examine any meaningful differences in the beliefs of learner groups with different sexes and grades. Multiple comparisons demonstrate meaningful differences between first and third graders' overall beliefs ($F(1, 56) = 7.50; p = .007$; partial $\epsilon^2 = .035$) but not between different sexes.

Table 5. Comparison of Learner Beliefs across Sex and Grade

| Factor | Dependent Variable | df | f | Sig. | ϵ^2 |
|----------|--------------------|----|-------|------------|--------------|
| Gender | Overall belief | 1 | .79 | .37 | .030 |
| | Difficulty of LL | 1 | 4.27 | .04 | .019 |
| | FL aptitude | 1 | 28.79 | .00 | .117 |
| | Nature of LL | 1 | .68 | .40 | .020 |
| | L&C strategies | 1 | .001 | .97 | .004 |
| | Motivation | 1 | .60 | .43 | .012 |
| Grade | Overall belief | 1 | 9.20 | .00 | .035 |
| | Difficulty of LL | 1 | .44 | .50 | .001 |
| | FL aptitude | 1 | 11.38 | .00 | .050 |
| | Nature of LL | 1 | 1.22 | .26 | .005 |
| | L&C strategies | 1 | 7.24 | .00 | .030 |
| | Motivation | 1 | 1.85 | .17 | .022 |
| Gender * | Overall belief | 1 | .21 | .64 | .001 |
| Grade | Difficulty of LL | 1 | .04 | .83 | .001 |
| | FL aptitude | 1 | 1.5 | .22 | .006 |
| | Nature of LL | 1 | .03 | .84 | .001 |
| | L&C strategies | 1 | .17 | .68 | .004 |
| | Motivation | 1 | 6.91 | .12 | .011 |

Overall, SH students held stronger language learning beliefs compared to their JH school counterparts on most dimensions of beliefs. Statistically significant differences relate to FL Aptitude ($F(1, 197) = 11.38; p = .00$; partial $\epsilon^2 = .05$) and L&C strategies ($F(1, 108) = 7.24$;

$p = .00$; partial $\epsilon^2 = .03$). SH students compared to their JH counterparts showed less disagreement with the idea that some people are born with a special ability for learning foreign languages. Further, they showed less disagreement to the belief that women are better language learners than men. They also believe more strongly that people who learn more than one language are more intelligent. Nonetheless, both groups strongly believe that they have the capacity for learning foreign languages, and everyone is endowed with the capacity to learn to speak a foreign language. As for L&C strategies, SH believe more strongly in the role of practice in language laboratory, the importance of repetition and practice of language, and guessing unknown words.

Although boys and girls in high school were not strongly different in their overall language learning beliefs, significant differences were noticed across two sets of beliefs, i.e. Difficulty of Language Learning ($F(1, 49) = 4.27$; $p = .04$; partial $\epsilon^2 = .019$) and Foreign Language Aptitude ($F(1, 49) = 4.279$; $p = .00$; partial $\epsilon^2 = .117$). It is worthy to note that the effect size for FLA ($\epsilon^2 = 0.117$) indicated a large effect meaning that these cross-gender differences are significant. In this regard (FLA), girls had significantly higher mean scores compared to boys. That is, they strongly believe that women are better language learners than men. Both sexes however believe that people who speak more than one language well are more intelligent highlighting the importance of internal factors in language learning for both boys and girls. This can be significant as those who feel slow in their progress may mistakenly attribute their lack of success to lack of intelligence and thus get frustrated or disillusioned (Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Peacock, 1999).

Qualitative Findings

Interview results highlighted some interesting points regarding learners' beliefs about aptitude, error correction, characteristics of a good language learner, importance of learning English, and language exposure.

Regarding the difficulty of learning English, most interviewees (67%) believed it to be a difficult language and emphasized that despite its difficulty, English can be learned by making ample effort. A typical response by a Male JH student was:

“Learning English is a difficult task that requires a great deal of perseverance. The more time and effort you devote, the easier this task is I think.”

Similarly, an SH student stated *“Learning English differs from student to student. But by putting in the required effort everyone can make this job easier.”*

As shown in the quantitative results for question two, girls more strongly than boys were positive about the ease of learning English and shared more realistic attitude about the length of time needed to learn the language (Nahavandi & Mukundan 2014; Rieger, 2009; Siebert, 2003).

In response to the second question concerning the capability of learning a new language, 73% percent considered their capability satisfactory and sufficient. However, two of the interviewees, due to their poor performances in previous English tests, rated their ability average, and the other two did not see the talent in themselves for learning languages, as one male JH said *“...this lack of language learning ability might be the cause of my failure and lack of success compared to my peers.”*

The negative impact of assessment on student beliefs compounds the erroneous belief amongst some high school students that they are not made for languages, and once they compare their performance with stronger students in class, this feeling is further exacerbated which might lead to anxiety or less favourable emotional states as one female JH interviewee said: *“I am not bad at learning English. The only problem I have is that I feel shy whenever I speak English in front of my stronger classmates.”*

Currently, assessment of student progress in Iranian public high schools is mostly a product-based paper-and-pencil multiple-choice test on certain features of the language (mostly grammar, vocabulary, and functions). More varied and dynamic assessment procedures may be necessary to help learners realize their varied language learning potentials. Creating a more protective classroom environment where they are less intimidated to partake would benefit the less confident learners as well.

Most interviewees further highlighted that learning English or any foreign languages does not necessarily need a knack and if one does not possess the knack for learning English, it does not mean he cannot learn it at all. On the other hand, they believed they can make up for this by devoting more time and energy as stated by a male SH student: *“I believe that everybody has the ability to learn foreign languages, but while some people appreciate this God-given ability, some don’t recognize it.”* Another male SH stated: *I can say that I have very good skills to study new things, like new languages, but I am not happy with myself ...I believe that if I devote more time and take learning English more seriously, surely, I would get better results.*

Regarding the way they approach learning English, half of the interviewees maintained they spent most of their study time memorizing new words and newly-learned grammatical structures. This high preference for memorization and translation fully resonates with the quantitative results for question one. This could be due to the current traditional grammar translation methodology practiced in Iranian high schools. The strong belief in memorizing grammar and vocabulary, as well as translation can be a hindrance to teachers who want to develop a more task-based pedagogy as their efforts would be in conflict with the learners’ beliefs. Further, all the interviewees were less confident with listening and speaking in English and hoped they practiced the skills more in class. The text-based curriculum which is heavily based on developing English reading and to a minimal extent writing skills to the exclusion of listening and speaking practices is a contributory factor in knocking down the learners’ confidence in speaking and listening. Consequently, designing and promoting more interactive listening and speaking activities in classrooms by curriculum developers and teachers is warranted (Liu et al, 2016; Pan 2015). One-third of the interviewees reported to watch English films and listen to English music and taking extramural lessons in private language institutes. Four students reported to make sentences and stories with the newly encountered words and expressions. They believed that contextualization is an optimal technique for them to retain the newly learned words. Similar communicative strategies were also used by effective EFL learners in Wong and Nunan’s (2011) survey of around 700 undergraduate students in Hong Kong. Constant review of the learned materials and preparation before coming to class were other strategies used by the rest of the participants.

Interestingly, all the respondents unanimously maintained that learning English is important and communicating through English nowadays is essential for success in their future career and life. When inquired about the reasons behind this, they mostly concurred that it is an international language and will come in handy for travels to a foreign country. Also, they

emphasized that it is the language of science, computer, and the internet. A common response by a female SH was ...*the majority of public places around the world use English. In addition, a huge number of people speak this language.* The quantitative findings on M&E also confirm the students' instrumental motivation to learning English. The belief (from questionnaire results as well) that they would one day speak English very well and will use it whenever the opportunity arises reflects an internal desire to use English for communicative purposes. It is likely that the instrumental motivation to better learn a language for seeking job opportunities is more consistent among different cultural groups, while integrative types of motivation such as the desire to get to know the target language speakers may be a more individual matter (Horwitz, 1999; Liu et al, 2016).

The interviewee's beliefs were elicited about what successful language learning involves. Half of them considered perseverance, self-evaluation, and good teachers the key to success. Being enthusiastic and active in the classroom and preparation, practice, and self-study were considered as equally important by the others. As a female SH interviewee asserted: "*The secret to be successful in learning a new language is to have enough time, good teachers and school, and suitable learning environment. Also, the learner should have clear aims and monitor his achievement in language.*" A male JH student believed in... *regular participation in class and paying careful attention to the teacher while teaching a new lesson.*"

Individual effort (self-study and self-evaluation) is highly valued which was also reflected in their strong beliefs in L&C strategies in the questionnaire. There is also strong emphasis in the interviews on informed teaching and nurturing environment. Learners' views about successful communication practice are rooted in their beliefs about effective ways of learning a language and their preferences for effective teaching methods (Benson and Lor, 1999; Peng, 2011). If their beliefs are not affirmed in the school by teachers, they may start doubting the facilitative role of the classroom environment and thus not sustain their motivated behaviour. This was fully confirmed in Yang and Kim's (2011) study of a study-abroad (SA) case in which the learner's initial L2 beliefs were not assured by his SA learning experience and thus abandoned participating in the L2-rich environment.

Most interviewees believed that without making mistakes and guessing, they will not improve satisfactorily. On the other hand, in line with the questionnaire findings, they most strongly believed errors need to be corrected early on as later removal would be very difficult. As a female SH student believed:

"I always remember my mistakes when I try to say the same thing or sentence, this helps me not to repeat the same mistake again. In addition, I ask my close friends to correct my mistakes when I talk to them in English."

The desire to be corrected was found to be one of the five most popular strategies shared among less effective language learners in Wong and Nunan's (2011) study, and among significantly less proficient learners in Peacock's (1999). The high school students' obsession with error correction was mainly on pronunciation, grammar accuracy, and vocabulary choice. This belief could be due to high emphasis in high school on traditional classroom instruction, their strong belief (by over 90% of both JH and SH as shown above) about the importance of repetition, and partly the past language instruction methods they have been experiencing (Loewen, Fei, Thompson, Nakatsukasa, Ahn, & Chen, 2009). The 'mistaken' or uninformed beliefs can have a negative impact on their ultimate success due to a reliance on

less effective learning strategies leading to negative attitude towards learning and autonomy, classroom anxiety, and poor cognitive performance (Bernat & Lloyd, 2007).

As for language exposure in class, all the interviewees showed integrative orientations believing that learning English in an English-speaking country is more efficient. However, 67% thought that if the teacher speaks only English in class, learning would considerably decrease due to lack of comprehension. Similarly, half of the Spanish secondary school students preferred English teachers provide explanations in Spanish (Aguda, 2014). A common response was raised by a female SH student: *“If we learn English in an English country, we can learn much better. But if the teacher solely speaks in English, I can’t follow... and makes me anxious. Some Persian is good”*.

Discussion

This study sheds light on language learning beliefs of Iranian high school students and the relationship between their grade level and beliefs about English. The results show that foreign language learning beliefs of high schoolers is subject to many firm beliefs and convictions across boys and girls with different grades. Overall, Iranian high school students are very optimistic about their future language learning progress and show relatively high levels of motivation (both integrative and instrumental). They demonstrate a strong sense of agency believing in the role of individual effort, perseverance, and practice in ultimate success in language learning. Their internal desire to speak a foreign language, their strong belief that someday they would speak English very well (their ideal L2 self), and their interest in watching movies, listening to music, and seeking opportunities to speak with native speakers all allude to high motivations and expectations to use English for communicative purposes. Most of these activities occur outside school which can provide multiple meaningful contexts as out of class affordances. These affordances can help develop more affirmative thinking about the communicative value of language and thus might lead to more positive beliefs and motivated behaviour for language learning (Alanen, 2003; Peng, 2011). However, based on the interviews and our own experience, the typical Iranian public high schools may not adequately afford classroom practices and experiences to meet the above expectations. Learners’ beliefs can significantly impact their amount of takeaway from the language classroom, and their attitudes towards communication practice are rooted in their beliefs about effective means of learning a language (Benson & Lor, 1999). If we believe that learner beliefs interact with the classroom environment, then it is essential that high school curriculum developers and school authorities affirm these young learners’ positive beliefs. This is possible by creating a classroom environment which offers a strong meaning-making and symbiotic potential for learners through innovative and collaborative teaching practices, authentic language, audio-visual tasks, and more dynamic assessment techniques among other things. High school teachers need to actively engage learners in meaningful practices and tasks and scaffold their participation throughout the high school program and subsequently help them internalize their beliefs. Otherwise, learners might lose their agentive effort to pursue their L2 goals

On the other hand, the students seem to be highly dependent on memorizing vocabulary and grammar, translation into Persian, and error correction which could be due to their current and past traditional grammar translation (with its focus on reading and writing) and textbook-oriented curriculum. Overreliance on these strategies can pose a serious threat to both teachers and learners in meeting their communicative orientations. The high school teacher, as a highly respected figure in Iranian society, can be a significant mediator by clearly explaining “the

purposes and rationale behind each activity and class” (Barcelos, 2003, p.194) in boosting the young learners’ current positive foreign language identity and sense of competence and develop their awareness of their capabilities as language learners (Feuerstein and Feuerstein, 1991). Developing an instructionally productive relationship with high school students can increase the mediational impact of classroom affordances as effective mediational tools in boosting their positive beliefs and sustaining their motivated L2 learning (Alanen, 2003; Yang & Kim, 2011).

As shown in the quantitative section, girls, contrary to boys, very strongly believe that women are better language learners and have a knack for learning foreign languages. Their stronger desires to invest in EFL partly supports the “...common-sense belief ... that languages are a feminine domain” (Schmenk, 2007, p. 124). The results on gendered language learning identity need to be treated with caution though as we found great similarities between the two sexes in their beliefs about motivations and expectation levels as well as in their attitudes towards learning and communication strategies.

The results confirm the impact of stage of learning (grade) on learners’ beliefs. SH students showed more confidence in their knack to learn English language, believed more in the role of intelligence in language learning, and in the importance of guessing and practicing in the laboratory as well. The high school students with longer and potentially higher proficiency tend to have higher levels of self-efficacy, stronger beliefs in themselves and their capacities, make more guesses, and thus have more positive and realistic views about language learning than those at earlier stages of language learning (Banya & Cheng, 1997; Bernat & Lloyd, 2007; Siebert, 2003). This shows that the higher the grade and learning experience, the stronger the learner beliefs and the higher the motivation towards language learning (Peng & Hui, 2012; Perclová, 2002). This change in senior learners’ beliefs, compared to their junior counterparts, reflects a dynamic and transformative view of beliefs as a result of further experience with learning language both in and outside language classroom. This potential transformation in learner beliefs can create a tension between the learner beliefs and the environment, e.g., the classroom (Engstrom, 1999) leading to different actions and reactions on the part of the learner to the environment. Teachers, therefore, should be aware of learners’ beliefs at different stages of the course and their own beliefs about language learning in order to assist less successful learners and maintain stronger students’ motivation and confidence in learning language with higher self-efficacy (Barcelos, 2000; Mantle-Bromley, 1995). We identified some learner misconceptions about pronunciation, error correction and memorization of grammar and vocabulary. It is; therefore, essential that teachers are aware of their own beliefs and the learners’ and identify points of conflict and remediate a more constructive relationship with L2 learners. They may need to design and implement lessons that incorporate attitude-change methods. Teachers, as active participants in classroom, play an integral role in forming the way students perceive themselves as language learners, the way they actually perform and express their identities in a certain language learning situation, and the choices and decisions they make in learning a new language.

Conclusion

The results effectively show the role of learners’ agency (self-evaluation, perseverance, and practice), motivation, and desire for investment in their vision for learning a second language. The high school learners of all grades and genders strongly believe that investing in a second language like English will have a good return for them “... a return that will give them access

to hitherto unattainable resources” (Norton Pierce, 2000, p. 10) and would develop their social identity and capital. The English curriculum might, accordingly, need to be re-evaluated so that students could see that the activities, content, topics, and teaching practices foreground their vision, imagined L2-selves, needs, and motivations all translated into appropriate plans and strategies for achievement so that they could materialize their vision in joining their imagined L2 communities (Dornyei & Hadfield, 2013). This would further accelerate their potential transition to tertiary education.

Language teachers are reckoned as experts and role models by their students in Iran. Thus, their views and beliefs about language learning, projected through their teaching practices, will heavily influence students’ own beliefs. Hence, style conflicts between teachers and learners need to be minimized to avoid the negative impact of “conflicting perceptions they may have of what helps or hinders language learning, and ... how differently they may actually perceive what is happening in their shared classrooms” (Hawkey, 2006, p. 242). Future research similar to Cohen and Fass (2001) using observational techniques could discover potential discrepancies prevalent between teacher beliefs and classroom reality. Meanwhile, furnishing student-centred practices, encouraging interactive pair and group work activities, and affording opportunities for language production could promote learners’ beliefs about how language works.

Current research confirms the duality of learner beliefs, i.e. some beliefs are stable across situations and contexts; others vary in intensity. This stability and dynamicity confirm the complexity of beliefs as a construct (Kramsch, 2003; Mercer, 2011; Zhong, 2015). In addition to gender and grade, investigating the interrelatedness of other learner and context-and-time-related factors (e.g., personality, learning styles, and learning context) could confirm the potential relationships between these factors and belief change.

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Appendix A

Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)

Gender: Male Female

Nationality: Iranian Non-Iranian

Age: _____

Grade: High school Junior High school

Mother Tongue: _____

Have you ever taken part in any language institutes? Yes No If yes, how long?

Have you ever spent a long period (*at least one or two months*) in an English-speaking country?

Has any one of your parents or siblings taken part in any language institutes or universities?

Yes No If yes, how long?

Below are some statements about learning foreign languages. Read each statement and then decide if you (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) somewhat disagree, (4) somewhat agree, (5) agree, (6) strongly agree. There is no right or wrong answers. We are simply interested in your opinions. Questions 4 & 14 are slightly different and you should mark them as indicated.

1. It is easier for children than adults to learn English.
2. Some people are born with a special ability which helps them to learn English.
3. Some languages are easier to learn than others.
4. English is: 1) a very difficult language, 2) a difficult language, 3) a language of medium difficulty, 4) a somewhat easy language, 5) an easy language 6) a very easy language.
5. English is structured in the same way as Persian.
6. I believe I will ultimately learn to speak English very well.
7. It is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent accent.
8. It is necessary to know the foreign culture in order to speak the foreign language.
9. You should not say anything in English until you can say it correctly.
10. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.
11. It is better to learn English in an English speaking country.
12. If I heard some people speaking English, I would go up to them so that I could practice speaking the language.
13. It is okay to guess if you do not know a word in English.

14. If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take him/her to become fluent? 1) less than a year, 2) 1-2 years, 3) 3-5 years, 4) 5-7 years, 5) 8-10 years 6) You can't learn a language in 1 hour a day.
15. I have an English aptitude, i.e. I have the ability to learn it.
16. Learning English is mostly a matter of learning many new vocabulary words.
17. It is important to repeat and practice a lot.
18. I feel self-conscious speaking English in front of other people.
19. If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning it will be hard to get rid of them later on.
20. Learning English is mostly a matter of learning many grammar rules.
21. It is important to practice in the language laboratory.
22. Women are better than men at learning English.
23. If I get to speak English very well, I will have many opportunities to use it. 24. It is easier to speak than understand English.
25. Learning English is different from learning other school subjects.
26. Learning English is mostly a matter of translating from English into Persian.
27. If I learn to speak English very well, it will help me to get a good job.
28. It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.
29. People who are good at math and science are not good at learning English.
30. Iranians think that it is important to speak English.
31. I would like to learn this language so that I can get to know its speakers better.
32. People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent.
33. Iranians are good at learning English. 34. Everyone can learn to speak English.

Appendix B

Interview schedule: Main Questions

1. What do you think English language learning is like?
2. How do you describe your own position with regard to English language learning?
3. How do you organise your learning?
4. Do you think you have a knack for learning languages?
5. How important is learning English for you? Explain
6. Who is a successful learner of a language?
7. How do you rate your progress? Are you happy with it?
8. What do you think about the role of mistakes in learning English?

9. Should English be learnt in an “all English” environment? Justify your position.
10. Do you have any advice for a peer or friend about optimal ways of learning English?

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