

Exploring the Gender Effect on Iranian University Learners' Beliefs to learn English

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between beliefs about language learning and gender. The data for this study was collected from 90 Salmas Azad University students. Data analysis has been done with statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) software. The final result of this study shows that there is no significant effect of gender on Iranian university learners' beliefs to learn English. The result of this study can help teachers to build a supportive learning environment, to initiate students' interest, and to enhance their learning. Such learners generally lack learning interest and have lower proficiency; therefore it is necessary for teachers to use appropriate strategies to cultivate students' interest.

Keywords: General English, Learners Belief

Introduction

ELT researchers all around the world are concerned with studying how learners acquire English. They try to find ways to make teaching more effective. In Iran, ELT is a hotly debated issue too. As scholars study English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Iran and across the world, they focus on learners as an immediate source of data. Little research has been directed to the topic of how learners who their field of study at university isn't English in Iran studying English. It is the authors' belief that a better understanding of language learners can have a beneficial effect on the process of attempting to help language learners. ELT in Iran has gained a special status in the past 25 years. Post-revolutionary reactions to ELT, in certain ways, went to extremes (Aliakbari, 2002). . A movement, generally referred to as "book purging", aimed at de-culturalization of school and university English-teaching textbooks started then. In general, English did not receive due attention and its use was limited. At present, the dominant trend in Iran is toward more English language teaching. As a required course in junior high school, English is taught three to four hours in a week. Deficiency of public schools and universities in satisfying students' ever-increasing desire to learn English communicatively resulted in an extensive and still growing private sector of English teaching in the country a distinctive feature of which is introducing English at primary school and even pre-school levels. English is so crucial a factor in determining the choice of the parents that the quality of the English program and the qualifications of the teachers working in each school may affect the families' choice of school for their children. Due to limitations in state schools (see "Academic vs. non-academic learners" below), private language institutes have simply attracted an increasing number of interested

learners including young children and adults. The multiple variations observed in the programs delivered signify a great tendency to learn English.

Universities in Iran are also places in which English is taught in a range of independent fields of study such as English Language and Literature, Teaching English as a Foreign Language, and English Translation. The students in these fields can be referred to as English Major Students (EMSs). Every EMS goes through two years of general English instruction first to learn four main language skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing. In the next two years, in general, the student focuses on his/her specialized course of study. In the other majors of universities, Non-EMSs study English in a maximum of 6 credits: 3 credits of general English instruction and 3 credits of ESP in which they focus on their field related English texts and learn the related terminology. In general, these centers have not managed to bring up students who are able to communicate in English (Sadeghi 2005). Even EMSs complain that either the programs do not prepare them for using English communicatively or they are so busy studying for more difficult subjects of their major that they do not get a chance to use English effectively.

It is easy for them to follow teachers' instructions without strong motivated self-learning. The phenomena of a few independent learning models may explain why non-English majors usually do not have a systematic way of learning English, or a clear goal for studying the language. However, the only concern they have is to pass the final English examination at the end of a given semester. Learners' motivation determines the degree of their efforts and personal participation in learning English. So, this study investigated the relationship between beliefs about language learning and gender.

Background

In the language acquisition context, beliefs have been defined as 'implicit theories' (Clark, 1988), 'self-constructed representational systems (Rust, 1994), and "general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing learning, and about the nature of learning and teaching" (Victori & Lockheart, 1995, p. 224). Understanding learner beliefs in this context is essential, since it has been noted that successful learners develop insightful beliefs about language learning processes, their own abilities, and the use of effective learning strategies, which have a facilitative effect on learning. On the other hand, students can have 'mistaken', uninformed or negative beliefs, which may lead to a reliance on less effective strategies, resulting in a negative attitude towards learning and autonomy (Victori & Lockhart, 1995), classroom anxiety (Hortwitz, et al., 1986), and poor cognitive performance (Reid & Hresko, 1981). For example, a student who believes that learning a new language is mostly a matter of memorizing vocabulary will spend most of their time and effort on this strategy in hope of eventually achieving a communicative competence. Conversely, a student who believes that a special language aptitude is necessary for the acquisition of a foreign language, but that he or she does not possess such aptitude, may begin language learning with a fairly negative expectation of their own ultimate success. So far, studies in second and/or foreign language acquisition research have shown that beliefs are quite stable within the learner, strongly held, and resistant to change (Kern, 1995; Weinstein, 1994, Peacock, 2001). Moreover, interdisciplinary research suggests that beliefs are intertwined with factors such as self-concept

and identity, self-efficacy, personality traits, and other individual differences (Epstein, 1990; Furnham, Johnson & Rawles, 1985; Langston & Sykes, 1997; Siebert, 2003; Bernat, 2006). Consequently, it has been suggested researchers study how these beliefs differ across language learners, particularly in terms of individual differences such as gender, age, nationality, learning style, and personality type (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005; Wenden, 1999; Horwitz, 1999; Rifkin, 2000). There is still paucity in literature on the relationship between language learner beliefs and stable individual differences, such as gender. In psychology, researchers who have long been interested in the relationship of gender to behavior and cognition, have found significant sex-related differences in social behavior, cognitive activity, and general verbal ability (Bacon & Finnemann, 1992). Yet, in the field of second and foreign language acquisition, a comparatively small number of studies report findings in relation to these variables. For example, using the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) (Horwitz, 1987), Siebert (2003) conducted a study of 64 female and 91 male language learners ($N=156$) of mixed ethnic backgrounds (22 nationalities were represented), studying English at a higher education institution in the U.S. Siebert found a number of significant differences in beliefs among males and females in relation to language learning and strategy use, using descriptive statistics in the form of percentages. Findings revealed that male students were more likely than female students to rate their abilities highly. For example, male students were twice as likely to agree that people from their country were good at learning foreign languages. Similarly, male students were more likely to respond that they have a special ability for learning languages (25%), but only 10% of females agreed and no females strongly agreed. Male and female students also significantly differed in their assessments of how long it takes to learn a foreign language. Thus, if someone spent 1 hour a day learning a language, females estimated that it would take 5-10 years or that a language cannot be learned in 1 hour a day. Male students, on the other hand, were much more optimistic and indicated that it would take 1-2 or 3-5 years. These findings suggest that male and female students differ in their assessments of beliefs related to ability. Siebert also reported that 23% of females, as opposed to 47% of males either strongly agreed or agreed that the most important part of learning a foreign language is learning grammar. In addition, only 7% of females, but 24% of males, agreed that it is important to practice with audio-visual equipment.

In another U.S. study, Bacon and Finnemann (1992) investigated gender differences in self-reported beliefs about foreign language learning and authentic oral and written input. They surveyed 938 students of Spanish across two large state universities. The ratio of male to female respondents was approximately even. Unlike Siebert, who used the BALLI to obtain data, the researchers had developed their own 109-item questionnaire, though like the BALLI, it used a 5-point Likert format in which students responded to a series of statements regarding their experience, beliefs, attitudes, motivation and strategies with the Spanish language, both in and outside the class. Using multivariate discriminate analysis, Bacon and Finnemann found that female compared to male students reported a higher level of motivation and strategy use in language learning, greater use of global strategies in dealing with authentic input, and a higher level of social interaction with the target language (Spanish). Tercanlioglu (2005), on the other hand, performed an ANOVA and found no significant differences in beliefs about language learning of 45 male and 73 female full-time undergraduate EFL teacher trainees at a

large Turkish university. She concluded that it is possible that age, stage of life and contextual differences in the language-learning situation may also be important sources of group variation in learner beliefs.

Method

The aim of this study is to explore the gender effect on Iranian university learners' beliefs to learn English.

Research Questions:

The present research addresses the following questions:

1. What are Iranian university learners beliefs to ward learning English?
2. Is there any relationship between gender of Iranian university learners' and their beliefs about language learning?

Participants

The participants in this study were 90 male and female Iranian university studentsParticipants' ages ranged from 18- 31.

The following table provides a brief profile of the participants in this study

Table 1. The characteristics of participants of this study:

Number of participants	90
Age range	18- 31
Intermediate	Course level
Male & Female	Sex

Instrumentation

The instruments used in this study included 20 questions which were related to the learners' to ward learning general English. The researcher went to class to administer the survey at a pre-arranged time. She first briefly explained to the participants the nature and the purpose of this study and provided instructions about how to answer the questionnaire.

Procedure

Students completed the questionnaire during class time .The questionnaire did not ask for any information that could be used to identify individual students. The students were informed that the survey would have no effect on their grade.

Data Analysis

Data analysis has been done with statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) software.

Figure 1: shows the Mean scores T-Test

Group Statistics

GENDER		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
INTERMED	1.00 female	54	65.7037	14.92450	2.03097
	2.00 male	36	63.8889	11.04737	1.84123

Figure 2: shows the independent sample test

Independent Samples Test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
INTERMED	3.017	.086	.624	88	.534	1.8148	2.90825	-3.96472	7.59435
Intermediate			.662	86.965	.510	1.8148	2.74134	-3.63393	7.26356

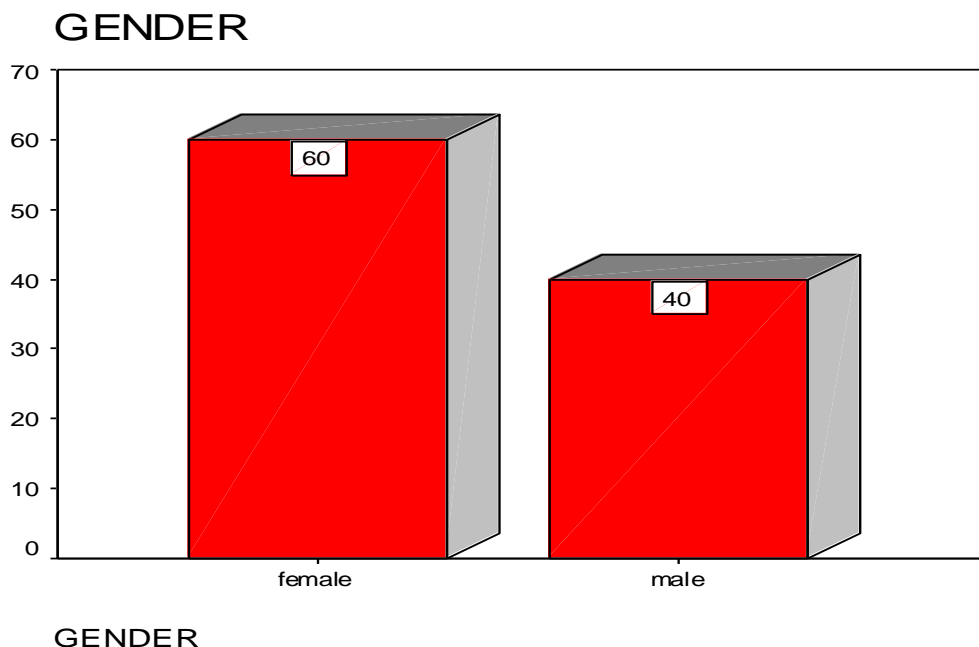
Figure3: shows the gender differences

Frequencies

GENDER

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00 female	54	60.0	60.0	60.0
	2.00 male	36	40.0	40.0	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Figure4: shows the gender differences



Conclusion

The final result of this study shows that, most of the learners were agree with questioner related to beliefs in language learning. Moreover, there was no significant difference between their beliefs and gender.

Implication

Learning a foreign language is complicated. This poses a great challenge to foreign language teachers. Teachers should be aware that due to the complexity of English for learners whose their field isn't English, it is far from enough for them only to initiate students' interest, and it is also very important for them to enhance and sustain students' interest . It is very common to see that students are highly interested when started to learn a foreign language, but soon give up learning because they cannot sustain their interest. Therefore, it seems more important to protect students' interest than initiate students' interest. In addition, teachers should recognize that though students' learning achievement is closely related to their interest and beliefs, it is connected with other factors, such as aptitude, personality, learning strategies, and previous learning experience. Therefore in L2 learning and teaching, teachers should take other learners' individual differences into account. Successful teachers who intend to change the emotional factors of their students should first be aware of their own emotional status. As Van Lier (1996) claims, "teacher development involves three parts, having (knowledge of subject matter and pedagogy, of self and others), doing (their skills and their abilities to construct learning opportunities) and being (their personal qualities, their vision, and their sense of mission)" (p.

73). In other words, good language teachers should know and do, but most importantly they also should concern about their own emotional status. Then, teachers' strategies will be much more effective. The more English teachers know about their learners as individuals, and the more that they know about learners' beliefs to learn, the more effective teaching will be and the more learners will learn.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

There are some variables not considered in this study which can be considered in further studies. These factors are as follows:

Age, proficiency level and different field of study of the learners were not considered, controlled or compared in this study.

Suggestions for Further Research

Every research has its own limitations and almost always there is a way to remove those limitations. According to the theoretical concepts and practice procedures in this study, some other related researches projects can be recommended:

The first one would be increasing the number of the participants of the research.

The second suggestion could be the inclusion of age as a variable into the study and see the differences.

Finally, we did not consider different levels of proficiency of language learners' in this study. Only intermediate learners participated in this research. Different results might be observed as a result of involving different levels of proficiency.

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