

Examining the guidance and counselling students' perceptions about English language learning beliefs

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Abstract

Since contemporary views of learning and teaching place learners in the center of learning process, most of the researchers and practitioners have directed their attention to understanding what goes on in the mind of the learners during the process of learning and teaching. In the area of English language learning and teaching this perspective have also been adopted and for more than three decades one of the main concerns of the researchers and practitioners have been on exploring the factors influencing the language learners in the learning and teaching process. 'Learner beliefs' have been identified as one of the main the sources of learners' actions and decisions in this process. Therefore, in this study the researcher aimed to explore the English language learning beliefs of the students studying in the Guidance and Counseling Department at one of the Universities in Northern Cyprus. It also explored if the participants' perceptions about English language learning showed differences according to gender and age. 132 first year student teachers studying in the Department of Guidance and Counseling Department at a University in North Cyprus were the participants of the study. 65 female and 67 male student teachers participated in this investigation. In order to collect data about the student teachers' perceptions regarding English language learning "English Language Learning Beliefs Inventory (BALLI)" version 2 was utilized. The questionnaire consisted of 44 items and the responses were given according to the 5-point Likert Scale. The findings revealed significant differences between the male and female participants' perceptions about English language learning beliefs. The participant student teachers' perceptions about language learning beliefs differed significantly in relation to age.

Key words: Learner beliefs, gender, age, learning, teaching.

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Introduction

Beliefs are believed to be the sources of most of our actions, behaviours and decisions. They are complex constructs that are not so easy to uncover. Teachers' beliefs have impacts on their choices of teaching methods, attitudes and behaviours of teaching. Beliefs about learning and teaching a foreign language can even guide and influence the choice of the tasks and activities that teachers use in language classrooms.

Research on the beliefs dates back to 1960s. Rokeah (1968) tried to identify the components of 'beliefs' and suggested that they have three components: cognitive, affective and behavioral. Nespor (1987) argues that belief systems are affective. Similarly, Ernest (1989) claims that belief is the affective outcome of thought. Shavelson and Stern (1981) emphasize that when knowledge is lacking teachers draw on their beliefs. However, Clark and Peterson (1986) and Nisbett and Ross (1980) consider belief as a knowledge type. Research on language learning beliefs started after the mids of 70s (Rubin, 1975; 1981; Naimen, Frochlich, Stern & Todesco, 1978; Fillmore, Kempler & Wong-Fillmore, 2014; Nation & McLaughlin, 1986).

There has been many studies focusing on not only learner beliefs but also on teacher beliefs. For instance, Kouritzin, Piquemal and Nakagawa (2007) carried out a research investigating pre-service teachers' attitudes towards and beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning with 99 students in the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba. Similarly, Chai, Khine and Teo (2006) conducted a survey with 537 Singapore pre-service teachers about their epistemological beliefs. Altan (2006) investigated language learning beliefs of 248 university students. Peacock (2001) also investigated the second language learning beliefs of 146 ESL trainees at the University of Hong Kong. Mesri (2012) carried out a research study with 90 students exploring the gender effect on Iranian university learners' beliefs to learn English. Ariogul, Unal and Onursal (2009) surveyed 343 foreign language learners' beliefs about language learning at a Turkish university. Fujiwara (2014) conducted a survey to find out whether there were any significant differences in the beliefs of the groups of students at different levels of English proficiency, with different age and gender, and majoring different academic fields regarding language learning. Thompson and Aslan (2015) conducted a study with 168 EFL learners in Turkey investigating their language learning beliefs. Similarly, Altan (2012) investigated 217 foreign language learning beliefs of pre-service teachers. Simon and Tavniers (2011) carried out a study with 117 advanced EFL learners investigating their language learning and teaching beliefs. Tang and Tian (2015) studied the associations between Chinese EFL learners beliefs and their language learning strategies. However, studies that explored Guidance and Counselling Department students' beliefs seem to be lacking. To address the gap in understanding the English language learning beliefs among Guidance and Counselling Department students at the Faculty of Education of a university in Northern Cyprus, this study surveyed 135 Guidance and Counselling department freshmen students using an adapted questionnaire developed by Horwitz (2013). It explored the perceptions of the students' studying in the Department of Guidance and Counselling of a university in Northern Cyprus regarding English language learning. It also investigated whether there were any gender and age related significant differences among the participant students.

To conduct this study the researcher adopted the following key research questions:

- 1) What are the perceptions of the Guidance and Counseling Department students regarding their beliefs about English language learning?
- 2) Are there any gender related differences in the participants' perceptions about English language learning beliefs?
- 3) Are there any age related differences in the participants' perceptions about English language learning?

Research Design

In this study, the perceptions of the students studying in the Department of Guidance and Counseling about English language learning beliefs were explored with qualitative means of investigation.

The Participants

Out of total 154 freshmen students studying in the Guidance and Counseling Department and taking ING 110 course, 132 freshmen students participated in this study. These participants were from Turkey and Northern Cyprus. They were studying at one of the universities in TRNC (Turkish republic of Northern Cyprus). All of them were adult learners of English. Of 132 participants 67 were male and 65 were female participants. 98 participants were between the ages of 18 to 22. 28 participants were between the ages of 23 to 27 and only 6 participants were between 28 and 32 years old. All the participants had to take two English courses in their first year, one in the Fall semester and one in the Spring semester, as a requirement of the curriculum. This study was conducted in the Spring semester, therefore, these participants had already taken the first English course in the Fall semester. All the participants' informed consent was sought and they participated voluntarily.

Data Collection Instrument

For the purpose of collecting data about the participants' perceptions regarding English language learning "English Language Learning Beliefs Inventory (BALLI)" version 2 (Horwitz, 2013) was utilized. There 44 items in the questionnaire and the participants responded to the questionnaire items according to the 5-point Likert Scale. There were five response categories: 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'uncertain', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'. The reliability co-efficiency (Chronbach's Alpha) of the questionnaire was .79. The questionnaire measured learners' beliefs in five areas:

- Foreign language aptitude
- The difficulty of language learning
- The nature of language learning
- Learning and communication strategies
- Motivations and expectations

Data Analysis

The collected data was subjected to statistical analysis. SPSS 21 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) was used for the statistical analysis. To find out if there were any significant differences between the male and female participants' perceptions an independent samples t-test was utilized. For the purpose of testing whether the participants' perceptions differed according to different age categories, a one way ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) was employed. For the purpose of testing whether the significance was meaningful between the age categories, a Scheffe Test was administered after the ANOVA

Findings and Discussion

Table 1 below, demonstrates the frequency and the percentage of the female and male participants in the study.

Table 2. Frequency and Percentage of the Male and Female Participants

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Female	65	49.2	49.2	49.2
Male	67	50.8	50.8	50.8
Total	132	100	100	100

As can be seen from Table 1, the descriptive analysis of the participants according to variable "Gender" revealed that 49.2 % female and 50.8 % male participated in this study. Of the 132 Guidance and Counseling Department students, 65 were female while 67 were male participants. Table 2 below, shows the frequency and percentage of the participants according to different age categories.

Table 2. Frequency and Percentage of the Participants According to the Different Age Categories

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18-22	98	74.2	74.2
	23-27	28	21.2	95.5
	28-32	6	4.5	100.0
	Total	132	100.0	100.0

As can be seen from Table 2, in this study the participants were in three different age categories which were 18-22, 23-27 and 28-32. The largest group of the participants was in 18-22 age category with 74.2 %. The participants who were between the ages of 23 and 27 constituted 21.2 % of all the participants. The third age category had only 4.5 % of the participants who were between 28 and 32 years old.

Table 5 below, shows the means and standard deviations for the responses of the participants English language learning. For statistical calculations, 'strongly agree' was considered as 1 and 5 for 'strongly disagree'. In the table, the lower the number is the higher the agreement and the higher the number is the higher the disagreement.

The most agreed item among the belief items was B1: 'It is easier for kids to learn a foreign language than adults.' Female participants indicated a strong agreement for B1 with 1.28 mean score while male participants showed a strong agreement for the same item with 1.57 mean score. Besides B1, both female and male participants indicated a strong agreement for 8 more belief items which were B2, B3, B15, B16, B17, B18, B23 and B40. The female and male participants strongly agreed with the item B2: 'Some people have a special talent for foreign language learning' with a mean score of 1.95 and 1.99, respectively. For the item B15: 'A person who spends an hour a day for learning a foreign language can learn it in less than a year' female participants strongly agreed with the mean score of 1.80 while the male participants strongly agreed with the same belief with the mean score of 1.85. Similarly, female and male participants strongly agreed with the belief item B16: 'I have a special talent for learning a foreign language' with very close mean scores as females' mean scores were 1.77 while the males' scores were 1.75. For the belief item B17: 'Learning vocabulary is the most important thing in learning English' the female participants strongly agreed with the mean score of 1.82 and the male participants strongly agreed with the mean score of 1.92. For the item B18: 'It is a good idea to try to talk English to the people learning English' the female participants showed a strong agreement with the mean score of 1.48 and the male participants indicated a strong agreement for the same item with a mean score of 1.90. The female participants strongly agreed with the belief item B23: 'It is important to practice through social media' with the mean score of 1.74 and the male participants showed a strong agreement with the mean score of 1.80. For the belief item B40: 'I would like to have English speaking friends' the female participants strongly agreed with the mean score of 1.68 and the male participants showed strong agreement for the same item with the mean score of 1.97. A small standard deviation

(SD), ranging from .76 to 1.51 for the perceived beliefs, it seemed that the participants were in agreement with each other.

Table 5: Means and Standard Deviations for replies of Female and Male Participants Concerning English Language Learning

Belief Item	Gender	N	Mean	SD	Belief Item	Gender	N	Mean	SD
B1	Female	65	1.28	.76	B23	Female	65	1.74	1.06
	Male	67	1.57	.86		Male	67	1.80	1.00
B2	Female	65	1.95	.96	B24	Female	65	2.57	1.23
	Male	67	1.99	1.05		Male	67	2.45	1.20
B3	Female	65	1.83	.89	B25	Female	65	2.65	1.28
	Male	67	2.04	.96		Male	67	2.97	1.27
B4	Female	65	2.86	1.10	B26	Female	65	2.11	1.07
	Male	67	3.10	1.19		Male	67	2.15	1.11
B5	Female	65	2.46	1.14	B27	Female	65	2.69	1.28
	Male	67	2.37	1.08		Male	67	2.75	1.15
B6	Female	65	1.92	1.06	B28	Female	65	2.00	1.07
	Male	67	2.34	1.17		Male	67	2.40	1.29
B7	Female	65	2.20	.97	B29	Female	65	3.32	2.73
	Male	67	2.10	1.16		Male	67	2.76	1.24
B8	Female	65	3.60	1.32	B30	Female	65	2.30	1.18
	Male	67	3.40	1.51		Male	67	2.40	1.14
B9	Female	65	2.11	1.10	B31	Female	65	3.11	1.39
	Male	67	2.25	1.15		Male	67	3.12	1.24
B10	Female	65	1.95	1.15	B32	Female	65	2.66	1.29
	Male	67	2.10	1.14		Male	67	2.28	1.04
B11	Female	65	2.78	1.37	B33	Female	65	2.66	1.30
	Male	67	2.28	1.09		Male	67	2.60	1.25
B12	Female	65	2.98	1.46	B34	Female	65	3.03	1.36
	Male	67	2.75	1.22		Male	67	2.76	1.18
B13	Female	65	3.14	1.27	B35	Female	65	2.29	1.22
	Male	67	2.82	1.34		Male	67	2.36	1.23
B14	Female	65	3.40	1.22	B36	Female	65	3.22	1.37
	Male	67	2.93	1.23		Male	67	2.99	1.40
B15	Female	65	1.80	.97	B37	Female	65	1.95	1.05
	Male	67	1.85	.92		Male	67	2.19	1.19
B16	Female	65	1.77	.89	B38	Female	65	1.95	1.12
	Male	67	x1.75	1.02		Male	67	2.07	1.17
B17	Female	65	1.82	1.14	B39	Female	65	2.58	1.35
	Male	67	1.91	1.15		Male	67	2.52	1.30
B18	Female	65	1.48	.84	B40	Female	65	1.68	.75
	Male	67	1.90	1.10		Male	67	1.97	.98
B19	Female	65	2.63	1.45	B41	Female	65	2.55	1.34
	Male	67	2.48	1.11		Male	67	2.76	1.30
B20	Female	65	2.25	1.15	B42	Female	65	2.34	1.16
	Male	67	2.49	1.25		Male	67	2.66	1.29
B21	Female	65	2.06	.96	B43	Female	65	2.60	.86
	Male	67	2.19	1.01		Male	67	2.58	.90
B22	Female	65	2.86	1.40	B44	Female	65	2.22	1.20
	Male	67	2.90	1.38		Male	67	2.64	1.15

Table 6 below, demonstrates the perceptions of the female and male participants about English language learning beliefs. In order to test for the differences in female and male participants' perceptions regarding English language learning beliefs a t- test was administered. As can be seen from Table 6 below, the results of the test showed that the differences between female and male participant students were significant at the 0.05 significance level for 6 belief items: B1, B8, B11, B19, B32 and B34. The significance for the belief item B1: "It is easier for kids to learn a foreign language than adults' was $p = .023 < 0.05$. The mean score of the females' responses was 1.28 while it was 1.57 for the male participants. This indicated that that the perceptions of the female and male participants were significantly different with female teachers being more in favour.

For the belief item B8: 'It is important to learn about the English speaking cultures in order to be able to speak English', the significance in the reported perceptions was $p=.024<0.05$. The mean score for the female participants was 3.60 while it was 3.40 for the male participants. This revealed that the perceptions of the female and male students were significantly different. The female participants seemed to feel stronger about their beliefs.

The significance for the item B11: 'English can best be learnt in an English speaking country' was $p=.011<0.05$. The mean score of the female students was 2.78 while it was 2.28 for the male participants. This showed that the female and male participants were significantly different in their perceptions regarding this item. The female participants were stronger than the males in their perceptions.

For the belief item B19: 'It is better to have native teachers' the significance was $p=.006<0.05$. The mean score for the female participants for this belief item was 2.63 and it was 2.48 for the male participants. This revealed that the female participants were stronger in their belief compared to the male participants.

The significance for the belief item B32: 'The most important part of English language learning is to learn how to translate from my mother tongue to English' was $p=.021<0.05$. The mean score for the female participants was 2.66 while it was 2.28 for the male participants. This showed that the perceptions of the female and male participants differed significantly with the female participants being in more favour.

For the item B34: 'I can find a lot of useful materials on internet to practice English' the significance was $p=.048<0.05$. The mean score of the female participants was 3.03 and it was 2.76 for the male participants. This revealed that the female and male participants were significantly different in their perceptions about this belief item with the female participants supporting this statement more.

The results showed that in general, of 6 belief items in which the participants' perceptions indicated significant differences, female participants held more positive beliefs about Nature of Language Learning (items B8 and B11) and Learning and Communication Strategies (item B19) and Foreign Language Aptitude (items B1 and B34). Only in one Foreign Language Aptitude item (B32) males were more positive in their beliefs.

Table 6. Perceptions of 'Beliefs' by the Variable 'Gender' (Independent Samples "t" Test)

BELIEF ITEMS	GENDER	N	MEAN	Mean Difference	t-value	Df	P
B1	Female	65	1.28	-.29	-2,05	130	.023*
	Male	67	1.57				
B8	Female	65	3.60	.19	.79	130	.024*
	Male	67	3.40				
B11	Female	65	2.78	.50	2.31	130	.011*
	Male	67	2.28				
B19	Female	65	2.63	.15	.68	130	.006*
	Male	67	2.48				
B32	Female	65	2.66	.37	1.85	130	.021*
	Male	67	2.28				
B34	Female	65	3.03	.26	1.21	130	.048*
	Male	67	2.76				

*Significance

Table 7 below, shows ANOVA for 'Beliefs' and 'Age'. An ANOVA test administered to test the differences beliefs and age revealed significant results for 5 items: B17, B19, B27, B35 and B39 at the

0.05 significance level, as demonstrated in Table 7 below. The ANOVA test showed that for B17: 'Learning vocabulary is the most important thing in learning English', for B19: 'It is better to have native

teachers', for B27: 'It is easier to speak English than to understand it', for B35: 'It is more difficult to read and write than to speak and understand' and for B39: 'People in my country think that learning English is important', 'age' was an important factor that influenced the perceptions of the participants. This result will be interpreted below.

Table 7. ANOVA for 'Beliefs' and 'Age'

DESCRIPTIVES		ANOVA					
	Variable Qualifications		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
B17	18-22	Between Groups	7.87	2	3.93	3.10	.04*
	23-27	Within Groups	163.68	129	1.27		
	28-32	Total	171.55	131			
	Total						
B19	18-22	Between Groups	18.84	2	9.42	6.08	.003*
	23-27	Within Groups	199.79	129	1.55		
	28-32	Total	218.63	131			
	Total						
B27	18-22	Between Groups	10.40	2	5.20	3.64	.029*
	23-27	Within Groups	184.23	129	1.43		
	28-32	Total	194.63	131			
	Total						
B35	18-22	Between Groups	12.21	2	6.10	4.26	.016*
	23-27	Within Groups	184.79	129	1.43		
	28-32	Total	196.99	131			
	Total						
B39	18-22	Between Groups	15.64	2	7.82	4.69	.011*
	23-27	Within Groups	214.99	129	1.67		
	28-32	Total	230.63	131			
	Total						

*Significance

In order to test whether the significance was meaningful for B17, B19, B27, B35 and B39 and to compare the means of the age categories for these items, a Sheffe Test was employed after the ANOVA.

The significance for B17: 'Learning vocabulary is the most important thing in learning English' ($p=.010$) was between the age categories that the students 18-22 and 28-32, as shown in Table 8 below. This means that the students between the ages of 28-32 were more positive about this belief item than the participants who were in 18-22 age category.

Similarly the significance for B19: 'It is better to have native teachers' ($p=.010$) was between the students who were in 28-32 and 18-22 age categories, as shown in Table 8 below. This means that the participants who were between the ages of 28 and 32 held more positive beliefs than the participants who were between the ages of 18 and 22. For the same belief item B19 ($p=.003$) the significance was between the age categories 28-32 and 23-27, as shown in Table 8 below. This means that the students who were in 28-32 age category held more positive beliefs than the participants in the 23-27 age category.

For the belief item B27: 'It is easier to speak English than to understand it' ($p=.034$) the significance was between the age categories 23-27 and 18-22, as shown in Table 8 below. This means that the students who were between the ages of 18-22 were more positive in their perceptions for this belief item than the participants who were in the age category of 23-27.

The significance for the belief item B35: 'It is more difficult to read and write than to speak and understand' ($p=.047$) was between the participants who were in the age category of 28-32 and 23-27, as shown in Table 8 below. This means that the students who were in the age category 28-32 held more positive perceptions for this item than the students in the 23-27 age category. The significance for the belief item B39: 'People in my country think that learning English is important' ($p=.014$) was between the students who were in the 28-32 category and the participants who were in the 23-27 age category, as shown in Table 8 below. This means that the participants who were between the ages of 28-32 had more positive perceptions about this belief item compared to the participants who were in the 23-27 age category.

In general, the findings about the perceptions of the participants regarding age indicated that the older participants held more positive beliefs towards English language learning. The perceptions of the participants in the items that indicated significance showed that the older participant learners held more positive beliefs about Learning and Communication Strategies (items B17 and B19) and Motivations and Expectations (items B35 and B39) compared to the younger participants. Only in one significant item (B27) the younger learners' perceptions were more positive. This might mean that the older they get the more positive beliefs they form about English language learning.

Table 8. Scheffe Test: Multiple Comparisons for Significant Belief Items Regarding Age

Dependent Variable	(I) Age	(J) Age	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std.	Sig.
				Error	
B17	18-22	28-32	-1.62 [*]	.52	.010 [*]
B19	28-32	18-22	1.62 [*]	.52	.010 [*]
B19	28-32	23-27	1.95 [*]	.56	.003 [*]
B27	23-27	18-22	-1.33 [*]	.50	.034 [*]
B35	28-32	23-27	1.35 [*]	.54	.047 [*]
B39	28-32	23-27	1.73 [*]	.58	.014 [*]

*The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that there was a generally agreed belief among the male and female participants that age is an important factor in foreign language learning because the most agreed item in the questionnaire was "It is easier for kids to learn a foreign language than adults". This might be due to the reason that young learners are more willing to risk taking when learning a foreign language whereas adults approach language learning in a more analytical way so they may hesitate to take risks in producing the language. Horwitz (1999) and Rifkin (2000) also found that the learners' age may influence their language learning beliefs.

There is another important finding of this study that both female and male participants strongly agreed that some people have got special talent for learning a foreign language and in general they believed that they possessed this talent. Ariogul et. al. (2009) also had similar findings in their study in which German, English and French language learners showed agreement in their beliefs that some people are gifted for language learning yet the participants in that study did not believe that they were gifted for it.

In this study, the findings also revealed that in general female participants held more positive beliefs regarding nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies and foreign language aptitude. Similarly, Tang and Tian (2015) in their study found that male participants considered foreign language learning more difficult than female participants and female participants had significantly positive beliefs for using learning and communication strategies compared to the male participants. Yuan, Liu, Wang & Xiao (2006) also indicated stronger beliefs in motivations and expectations for language learning in females. Some other studies on strategy use in language learning also indicated that females used strategies more frequently than males (Green & Oxford, 1995; Kaylani, 1996).

The findings of this study also revealed that the female participants gave more importance to learning English in an English speaking country, having a native teacher while learning and learning English speaking cultures compared to male participants. Altan's (2012) study supplied confirming findings to this study indicating that in his study 50 % of the participants expressed the need for knowing the culture of the language studied and 92 % of the participants showed agreement in the belief that "it is best to learn English in an English-speaking country". This finding might indicate that the participants wanted to sound like native speakers therefore they expressed a strong need for learning the language in the country where it is spoken. Similarly, Simon (2005) found that 96 % of non-native learners aimed to have "native-like English pronunciation" and Simon & Tavniers (2011) study confirmed a similar finding. Atas's (2012) study also indicated that 80 % of the participants believed that languages are better learnt from native speakers of that language.

Another important finding of this study is that the participants, who were in the age category 28-32, emphasized that vocabulary learning is the most important thing in language learning and the male participants also indicated that learning how to translate is the most important thing in foreign language learning. In line with this finding, Oz's study (2007) indicated similar findings as in his study half of the participants considered translation and vocabulary learning as important parts in language learning. Similarly, Horwitz (1987) found that in her study more than the half of the participants believed that vocabulary learning is important in foreign language learning. Altan (2012) also found that 59 % of the participants in his study believed that learning new vocabulary is the most important part of foreign language learning. In line with the findings of this study, Tang and Tiang (2015) also found that low level Chinese EFL learners indicated a strong belief in vocabulary learning and translating. Similarly, Simon and Tavniers (2011) indicated that the learners in their study considered vocabulary learning as a significant factor in language learning.

Limitations and Implications

Although findings of this study revealed valuable results that need to be taken into account in the language learning and teaching process, they are restricted to its context where it was carried out and to a limited number of the participants who took part in it. Therefore, they cannot be generalized to a wider population so there is a need for a further exploration of the role and impact of learners' beliefs on their decisions, actions, behaviors and achievement regarding English language learning. Similar studies carried out in different contexts with a larger number of participants can help us understand better the role and importance of learner beliefs in this process. Qualitative means of investigations, such as carrying out interviews and observations can provide a more in-depth understanding of the place of learner beliefs in the language learning process.

Conclusion

To sum up, the findings of this study revealed that the perceptions of the participant Guidance and Counselling Department students differed significantly in relation to gender. In other words, the findings indicated that the male and female learners' perceptions about English Language learning showed differences. The findings also indicated that the learners' perceptions differed significantly in relation to age. The differences might be due to different prior personal experiences the learners had related to English language learning because the scientific research studies have shown that beliefs individuals hold are usually shaped as a result of the experiences they have about learning and teaching. The participant students were adult learners so their prior experiences related to English language learning might have had influence on their current beliefs.

Therefore, there is a need for education programmes designed in such a way that they create opportunities to help learners become aware of their existing beliefs in tertiary education. Besides, it is of paramount importance for language learners to experience positive experiences in language learning at early stages of learning so that they can develop positive approaches to English language learning.

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