

Beliefs about language learning of Chinese ESL learners undertaking vocational education in Hong Kong

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Abstract:

Background: Most previous research on beliefs on language learning (BALLs) has been focusing on tertiary level learners. Information of learners of other backgrounds is extremely lacking.

Aim: To identify the BALL patterns of Chinese ESL learners undertaking vocational education in the Hong Kong context and to explore the possible influences on their BALLs.

Sample: Questionnaires were administered to 243 Chinese ESL learners undertaking vocational education in Hong Kong.

Method: Surveys on the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) were conducted and descriptive analyses were performed.

Results: Results indicate that respondents endorsed the existence of a specialized ability on language learning. They believed in the existence of foreign language aptitude, but did not agree that they had a special ability of learning foreign language. Respondents regarded English a language of medium difficulty. One hour a day for one to two years was regarded as necessary for speaking the target language well. The learning of vocabulary and grammar was regarded as important, and respondents viewed foreign language learning as different from learning other academic subjects. Respondents were overwhelming in their view that it is best to learn English in an English-speaking country. In addition, they endorsed the importance of excellent pronunciation, repetition, practising, guessing word meanings, and were tolerant of making mistakes in speaking. Finally, there existed a high level of motivation among the respondents, with instrumental motivation being more prevalent than integrative motivation.

Conclusion: Certain learner characteristics and features of the socio-linguistic context of the Hong Kong society are suggested to contribute to the unique BALL patterns of this group of learners. Several implications for teaching in light of the findings are suggested.

Keywords: Beliefs About Language-learning, Chinese ESL Learners, Vocational Education.

香港接受職業教育學生的英語學習觀念

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摘要

背景：過往大部份關於語言學習觀念的研究的對象為大專學生。現時關於其他背景的學生在這方面的資料很缺乏。

目的：找出在香港正接受職業教育的學生對語言學習的觀念，和探討可能影响他們的語言學習觀念的因素。

調查對象：以問卷形式進行，訪問了243個在香港接受職業教育的學生。

調查方法：採用量化方法，用Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) 來量度受訪者的語言學習觀念。

調查結果：結果顯示出受訪者認同語言學習天份的存在。雖然他們認為所有人都有能力學習外語，但是他們認為自己沒有學習語言的天份。他們指出英語是一種中等學習難度的語言。假如一個人每天花一個小時學習一種語言，受訪者認為他需要用一至兩年便能夠流利的說那種語言。受訪者相信學習生字和文法是外語學習的重要環節，他們也認為學習外語跟學習別的學科不同。他們也一致認為最好能夠在英語國家學習英語，也認同一流的發音、重覆練習、推測文字意思的重要性。他們對講英語的錯誤也較為容忍。最後，結果顯示受訪者有很強的學習動機，而他們的工具動機比融入動機強。

總結：本文提出受訪者的特質和香港社會語言背景的特點，是構成此群學生獨特的語言學習觀念的原因。本文在最後提出一些教學的啟示。

關鍵詞：語言學習觀念、中文為母語學生、職業教育。

1. Introduction

Previous research on beliefs on language learning (BALLs) has been focused on tertiary level learners (Sakui & Gaies, 1999). Information on the BALLs of learners of other characteristics and backgrounds is extremely lacking. As will be introduced in details in section 3.1 below, the respondents of this study had certain learner characteristics such as having less successful academic achievement and lower English proficiency than their counterparts undertaking mainstream education in secondary six and seven and universities distinguish them from other groups of L2 learners in H.K. The fact that they were undertaking vocational education also distinguishes them from other groups of Chinese ESL learners in the Hong Kong context. At the same time, this group of learners may share some similarities with their Chinese counterparts both in the Hong Kong and other Chinese contexts because they are members of the broader Chinese culture. The interpretive focus of this paper is to explore how some of the characteristics of this group of learners and certain features of the socio-linguistic context of Hong Kong contribute to the unique patterns of their BALLs.

Given the above background, the purpose of this study is to identify the BALL patterns of Chinese ESL learners undertaking vocational education in the Hong Kong context and to explore the possible influences on their BALLs. Information on these two aspects can allow teachers who work with vocational education in Hong Kong to improve their language teaching. The information gathered may also be applicable to the improvement of the ESL teaching of Chinese ESL learners of other learner characteristics and contexts to a certain extent.

The findings introduced in this paper are the descriptive findings on BALLs of a larger project focusing on the relationships between BALLs and the use of metacognitive language-learning strategies (MCLLSs).

2. Literature review

Kuntz (1996) commented that the development of Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) marked the beginning of systematic research on students' BALLs, and subsequent findings have identified beliefs useful for language instruction, curriculum development, textbook writing, and program planning. Therefore, Horwitz's (1985; 1987; 1988) framework of learners' beliefs was adopted in this study. She classifies BALLs into the following five areas: Foreign Language Aptitude, The Difficulty of Language Learning, The Nature of Language Learning, Learning and Communication Strategies, and Motivations. The BALLI is designed to measure these areas.

Two studies (Horwitz, 1999; Kuntz, 1996) provide comprehensive reviews of the studies using the BALLI. Horwitz's (1999) review includes studies on L2 and EFL learners of American, Korean, Taiwanese and Turkish cultural backgrounds learning German, French, Japanese, and English. Results of these studies show that there is a lack of clear-cut cultural differences in BALLs among learners of different cultural backgrounds. The amount of subsequent research employing BALLI in different contexts has been quite substantial, with examples such as Harrington and Hertel (2000), Kern (1995), Carter (1999), and Mantle-Bromley (1995).

The use of BALLI has been popular among research conducted in the Chinese contexts. Huang and Tsai (2003) used the BALLI together with interviews in Taiwan and found that there were marked differences between high and low proficiency English learners in four out of the five dimensions of the BALLI. Firstly, high proficiency learners believed that they were more equipped with special abilities for learning English. Secondly, they perceived English learning as an easy task. Thirdly, high proficiency learners perceived access to listening and reading materials, rather than translation, as more important. Fourthly, they enjoyed practicing English with native speakers. No difference between high and low proficiency learners in their motivation was found.

Yang (1999) administered the BALLI and SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) to 505 university students in Taiwan. He used factor analysis and identified four dimensions: Self-efficacy and Expectation About Learning English, Perceived Value and Nature of Learning Spoken English, Beliefs About Foreign Language Aptitude, and Beliefs About Formal Structural Studies. These factors were different from Horwitz's conceptualization. He suggested that Chinese ESL learners may have a different set of beliefs from Horwitz's sample in the western context. His findings suggest that there is a need to identify the patterns of BALLs of local Chinese learners in Hong Kong.

In the Hong Kong context, Peacock (2001) used BALLI to measure teacher trainees' BALLs. The major findings are that most first-year trainee teachers endorsed the notion of foreign language learning

aptitude and the hierarchy of difficulties of different languages. They perceived foreign language learning as different from learning other academic subjects. They also perceived foreign language learning as consisting of the learning of vocabulary and grammar rules. The trainee teachers agreed with the importance of repetition and practice, appreciated the value of guessing, and were quite tolerant of errors in speaking. Almost all of them agreed that good English allowed them to find a good job. Differences between the BALLs of teacher trainees and their teachers were found, and developmental changes of the teacher trainees were recorded over their 3 years of studies.

In addition to the employment of BALLI, there has been a lot of research using other instruments to investigate Chinese ESL learners' perception and attitudes on language learning. For example, Littlewood, Liu and Yu (1996) focused on the spoken English of university students in Hong Kong and found that respondents had low confidence in their spoken English, and they learned English for practical reasons. Yu (2007) focused on learning beliefs and found that university students in mainland China believed in the value of traditional learning methods, including recitation, repetition, intensive study of texts, analysis of grammar structures and rules. Benson and Lor (1999) conducted a qualitative research on the conceptions of language and language learning of 16 first-year university students, and identified three domains of beliefs about language learning from the interview data: work, method and motivation. Despite that fact that the data of this study are qualitative, many of the

beliefs identified concur with some earlier findings based on Horwitz's (1999): university ESL learners in the study believed in the importance of repeated practicing, viewed language as a collection of things such as grammatical concepts and word patterns, and valued the importance of language environment in language learning. However, unlike some of the previous findings (e.g., Littlewood et al., 1996; Shaw, 1981), the findings of this study seem to suggest that the respondents of this study emphasized more on internal rewards rather than external rewards in their language learning.

Substantial research has been conducted on BALLs from different angles in other Chinese and local contexts (Garrott, 1993; Wang, 2001; Littlewood, 2001; Chan, Spratt, & Humphreys, 2002). For example, Garrott (1993) studied the attitudes toward English-language learning and teaching of university students in mainland China and found the order of the skills that students were confident of and comfortable in was reading, speaking, listening and writing. They reported the most effective study methods were practice, use, self-study, repetition, listening and memorization.

In sum, previous research on BALLs in the Chinese contexts has provided us valuable information on the beliefs of Chinese ESL learners on their language learning. Previous research has found differences in the BALLs between high and low proficiency learners the BALL patterns of Chinese ESL learners which are different from those of learners in other western contexts were also found. Previous research also provided us information

on beliefs related to aspects such as self-efficacy, methods of learning, and motivation. Despite the wide variety of aspects and target groups of learners of these previous studies, none of them focused on the BALLs of learners undertaking vocational education. The BALL patterns of this group of learners are unknown. Also, how some of their learner characteristics and certain elements of the socio-linguistic contexts contribute to their BALL pattern is also unknown. There is a need to conduct the present study.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Participants of this study were ten classes of students randomly selected from a total of 24 classes of first and second year diploma courses in Business Administration at a vocational education institute. There were about 25 students in each class. A total of 243 respondents were surveyed. Their mean age was 18.88 (SD=1.48). About half of them (51.0%) were males and half (49.0%) were females.

One major focus of this paper is exploring how some of the learner characteristics of the participants and certain features of the socio-linguistic context of Hong Kong contribute to the BALL patterns of the participants of this study. Therefore, it is necessary to briefly introduce certain features of the socio-linguistic context in which the participants of this study were located in. This contextual information provides useful background information for the interpretive analyses of the results of this study.

Hong Kong is an international centre of trade,

finance and commerce with a population of over six million, 98% of whom are Chinese with Cantonese as the predominant language. Cantonese is common in the daily lives of Hong Kong people, and Hong Kong people seldom have the need to use English except in the workplace. English is typically considered as having a 'value-added' role in the Hong Kong society (Li, 1999), meaning that English proficiency is always associated with external rewards such as better career prospects.

There are two main public examinations at the secondary level in Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) and the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examinations (HKALE). Among those who decide not to prepare for their HKALE after taking their HKCEE, some start a career, others continue their studies abroad, and still others continue their studies locally in other institutions. Vocational education is one of their choices. Students who opted for vocational education are academically less successful and have lower English proficiency compared to their counterparts who decided to study Form Six and Seven.

In the first year of the diploma course, which the participants of this study were studying, English is a compulsory subject. The approximate number of instruction hours of English is 200. The English curriculum is heavily vocationally biased, with students learning the different types of communication in the workplace, including speaking, writing, reading and listening.

3.2 Instruments and procedures

The instrument of this study was a survey questionnaire in Chinese. The first part was a Chinese-translated version of the 34-item BALLI¹ (Horwitz, 1987) designed for ESL students. All the items in the BALLI are in the Likert scale format ranging from '1' ('Strongly Disagree') to '5' ('Strongly Agree'). Several changes were made to the BALLI to suit the Hong Kong context: (1) 'the Americans' in item 13, 24 and 32 were changed to 'people from English-speaking countries' because it is more common for Hong Kong people to meet people from other countries in addition to the Americans only; (2) the phrase 'people from Hong Kong' was used in item 6 and 20 because it is a more popular description than the original phrase 'people of my country'; (3) the phrase 'cassettes or tapes' was changed to 'audio-visual materials' because it is more common for students in Hong Kong to learn by using audio-visual materials in their language learning. The reliability of BALLI, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha, was .768 in this study. This shows that the BALLI has satisfactory internal reliability, and this value was higher than the alpha of .69 reported by Yang (1999) of his Chinese version. The BALLI items, including the descriptive statistics of each item, are given in Appendix 1.

The second part of the questionnaire contained items measuring MCLLSs. The final part contains items on the demographic information of research participants.

As mentioned at the outset, findings presented in this paper are a part of the larger study investigating the relationships between BALLs and MCLLSs. Therefore, findings relating to the relationships between BALLs and MCLLSs will only be briefly reported at the end of section 4.

The survey questionnaire was administered to the ten selected classes at the beginning of their English lessons with the presence of the researcher. Before the commencement of data collection, the researcher explained the purpose of the study to the participants and the reasons why they were selected and invited as the participants. The researcher also explained to them there were no right and wrong answers to the questions and they were free to express their views. Finally, the researcher explained to the participants that the information they provided would be kept confidential and would only be used for research purposes, and the participation in the research was voluntary. All the students agreed to be the participants and they were given an approximate of 20 minutes to complete the questionnaires.

4. Results

This section contains two parts. The first part reports the patterns of BALLs and the second part provide results for factor analyses.

4.1 Results of descriptive analysis of BALLI items

The interpretive focus of this study was to explore how some of the learner characteristics shaped by certain features of the socio-linguistic context of the Hong Kong society contribute to

the unique patterns of BALLs of this group of learners. The details of respondents' BALLs and the interpretive analyses are given below.

Foreign language aptitude

Respondents in general viewed that there is an existence of specialized abilities for language learning. Over eighty percent (84.8%) of them believed that some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages (item 2). Half of them (50.2%) also expressed that people who speak more than one language are very intelligent (item 30). A substantial proportion of them (69.1%) believed that everyone can learn to speak a foreign language (item 33). The majority of respondents (81.4%) agreed that it is easier for children to learn a foreign language (item 1).

Respondents of this study held a rather negative view on their special ability for foreign language learning (item 16). Only 9% of them believed they had such ability, and 51.4% disagreed with this statement. A highly possible reason for this discrepancy is that the respondents of this study came from a relatively less successful academic group, and most of them had unsatisfactory English results in their previous public examination (i.e., the HKCEE). Respondents' rather negative attitude towards their language-learning ability is further reflected by the responses of item 6: Despite less than 10% of them viewed themselves as having a special ability for foreign language learning, about one-third (34.2%) of them believed that Hong Kong people in general are good language learners (item 6). This shows that respondents viewed themselves as less successful language learners compared to the average Hong Kong citizen.

The difficulty of language learning

Slightly more than half (54.8%) of the respondents regarded that some languages are easier to learn than others (item 3), and English is a language of medium difficulty (51.3%, item 4). Respondents' mean on this item is comparable to that reported by the low proficiency learners in Huang and Tsai's (2003) study. This is natural as we remember respondents of this study came from a relatively less successful academic group. Consistent with the responses on item 16 mentioned in the previous section, a substantial proportion of respondents (43.2%) regarded English as a difficult language. Half of them regarded English a language of medium difficulty. This percentage is comparable to the view on the difficulty of English learning held by local Chinese ESL learners and Chinese ESL of other contexts.

Respondents of this study were neither optimistic nor pessimistic in their future success of English learning (item 5). Respondents' mean on this item (3.04) is close to the reported mean of low proficiency learners of Huang and Tsai's (2003) study. This, again, is related to their low self-efficacy in their English language learning.

What is interesting is that the percentage of respondents in this study who believed one hour a day for one to two years are needed for learning to speak the language well (item 15) is high. The percentage of respondents believing in this view is 40.2%. This shows that respondents of this study might possess quite unrealistic expectations about the difficulty of learning English. This might be the source of their

less successful English learning and frustration. This percentage is comparable to the 39% reported by the ESL learners in Yang's (1999) study on Taiwanese university students. Contextual influence might explain this phenomenon. The lack of frequent contacts with English-speaking people of learners in Hong Kong, which is similar to the situation in Taiwan, may be one of the culprits in resulting in this unrealistic expectation about the difficulty of learning English in both contexts.

The nature of language learning

About half of the respondents believed vocabulary (item 17, 57.6%) and grammar (item 23, 52.3%) are important parts of learning a foreign language, and 45.7% believed that English learning is a matter of translating from their native language (item 28).

These findings echo a lot of previous findings on the characteristics of English learning of Chinese learners, for example, the emphasis of rote-memorization (Maley, 1986), careful examination of grammatical structure, ignoring communicative skills, emphasizing on mistakes, and using translation (Barlow & Lowe, 1985; Harvey, 1985; Scovel, 1983). At the same time, findings in this aspect seem to be consistent with most of the earlier findings in local and non-local Chinese contexts of Chinese ESL learners of different backgrounds (e.g., Benson & Lor, 1999; Littlewood et al., 1996; Peacock, 2001; Yu, 2007).

About half of the respondents (54.3%) viewed that foreign language learning is different from learning other academic subjects (item 27). A substantial

proportion of respondents of this study (74.8%) viewed that it is best to learn English in an English-speaking country (item 12). However, only 27.6% of the respondents were aware of the importance of English-speaking culture to their L2 learning (item 8). This characteristic may be related to the lack of contact with English-speaking cultures as already mentioned, and the vocational focus of the English course this group of learners were undertaking.

In sum, responses related to this theme seem to suggest that respondents possessed beliefs which are restrictive to their foreign language learning. They believed foreign language learning is a matter of learning vocabulary, grammar and translation. While the overwhelming proportion of the respondents regarded an English-speaking environment is important for their foreign language learning, they lacked the awareness of the importance of culture learning in their L2 learning.

Learning and communication strategies

The majority of respondents viewed it is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation (item 7) and to repeat and practice a lot (item 18). About sixty percent of them appreciated the value of guessing (item 14). The beliefs on the importance of repetition and practice echo a lot of previous findings on the BALLs of Chinese ESL learners (Benson & Lor, 1999; Garrott, 1993; Wang, 2001; Yang, 1999; Yu, 2007).

About half of the respondents disagreed with the statement 'You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly' (item 9). This shows that they are quite tolerant of errors in speaking.

The percentage of respondents who reported they enjoy practicing English with people from English-speaking countries they meet (item 13) is only 52.3%. The reason for this result is the special context in Hong Kong, where most students do not have frequent contacts with people of other nationalities, and the occasions they speak with English-speaking people are either in school with the native-speaking teacher or interviewing tourists for homework assignments. The context of speaking English in Hong Kong is very different from the situation in the U.S. (i.e., the context in which the BALLI was developed) for ESL students, in which ESL students have frequent daily contacts with English-speaking people. However, in this aspect respondents' view is similar to the view held by high proficiency learners in Huang and Tsai's (2003). The similarity of this finding with that of Huang and Tsai's (2003) further confirms the determining role of context in affecting BALLs. In Taiwan, English is introduced as a foreign language and most people have little contacts with English-speaking people. Therefore, ESL learners in Taiwan might be less comfortable in practicing English with people from English-speaking countries they meet.

The popularity of willingness to guess, emphasizing on excellent pronunciation, high tolerance for mistakes in speaking are facilitative to language learning. However, we should remember that there are still a quarter of the respondents having a low tolerance for making mistakes. In addition, respondents were quite ambiguous in their views on whether beginning students should be allowed to make errors in speaking. These two findings suggest that respondents possessed beliefs which may be restrictive to their language learning.

Motivations

There is a high level of motivation among respondents in learning English, as shown by the overwhelming percentage of respondents who agreed with the items relating to this theme. Respondents were the most positive on this theme among all the five BALLI themes. An example is that the percentage of respondents who expressed they would like to learn to speak English well (item 31) is 84.8%. This finding seems to be consistent with Huang and Tsai's (2003) lack of differences found in the motivation intensities between high and low proficient learners. However, more research is needed to confirm this finding.

As regarding language learning motivation, respondents in this study is instrumental. This is reflected by the lower percentage of respondents who agreed with item 24 (44%) compared to the overwhelming popularities of item 29 (88%). However, what is intriguing is the high percentage of respondents (77%) who agreed with item 32, which is related to making friends with English-speaking people.

Given the strong motive of finding a good job and the relatively less importance placed on making friends with English-speaking people, we can suspect that the reasons for the high percentage of respondents who viewed Hong Kong people regarded learning English as important (87.2%, item 20) and those who wanted to learn to speak English well (84.8%, item 31) are instrumental ones.

The overwhelming prevalence of instrumental motivation among the respondents of this study is contextual. As mentioned in section 3.1, English is

typically considered as having a 'value-added' role in the Hong Kong society and most parents have a strong preference to opt for English-medium secondary education for their children. The inclination towards instrumental motivation is in trend with earlier findings (e.g., Littlewood et al., 1996; Shaw, 1981) despite the participants of these studies came from another background (i.e., university). Another factor which might contribute to the high instrumentality of respondents towards their English learning is that they are undertaking vocational education. As already mentioned, the English curriculum is highly practical that respondents have little opportunities to appreciate the culture of English-speaking countries in their classroom.

Summary of descriptive findings

A summary of the descriptive analysis of BALLs is as follows. Respondents endorsed the existence of a specialized ability on language learning. They believed in the existence of foreign language aptitude, but did not agree that they had a special ability of learning foreign language. Respondents regarded English a language of medium difficulty. One hour a day for one to two years was regarded as necessary for learning to speak the target language well. The learning of vocabulary and grammar were regarded as important, and respondents viewed foreign language learning as different from learning other academic subjects. Respondents were overwhelming in their view that it is best to learn English in an English-speaking country. In addition, they endorsed the importance of excellent pronunciation, repetition, practicing, guessing word meanings, and were tolerant of making mistakes in speaking. Finally, there existed a high level of motivation among the respondents, with instrumental motivation being more prevalent than integrative motivation.

4.2 Results of factor analysis on BALLI

In order to identify the factor structure of the BALLI for Chinese ESL learners, principal component and factor analyses using varimax rotation were conducted. Analyses of scree test (see Appendix 2) resulted in four factors. Items with loadings larger

than .40 were retained. Altogether, the four factors explained 28.453% of the total variances. Details of the factor loadings of BALLI items constituting each factor, and the variances explained by each factor are given in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Factor loadings of the BALLI items that constitute each factor

Factor 1: <i>Importance and Difficulty of Learning English</i> (Variances explained: 9.221%)		
31.	I want to learn to speak English well.	.765
20.	People in Hong Kong feel that it is important to speak English.	.720
29.	If I learn English very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job.	.718
1.	It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.	.535
33.	Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	.495
Factor 2: <i>Self-efficacy</i> (Variances explained: 6.759%)		
5.	I believe that I will learn to speak English very well.	.798
6.	Hong Kong people are good at learning foreign languages.	.650
4.	English is	
	(Please circle one answer)	
	(a). a very difficult language	
	(b). a difficult language	
	(c). a language of medium difficulty	
	(d). an easy language	
	(e). a very easy language	.559
21.	I feel timid speaking English with other people.	-.552
16.	I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	.532
Factor 3: <i>Learning and Communication Strategies</i> (Variances explained: 6.469%)		
17.	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary words.	.679
18.	It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	.642
23.	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar.	.596
7.	It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.	.531
Factor 4: <i>Integrative Motivation</i> (Variances explained: 6.004%)		
13.	I enjoy practicing English with the people from English-speaking countries I meet.	.796
12.	It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country.	.652
32.	I would like to have friends from English-speaking countries.	.523

Kuntz (1996) has made a comparison of the factors obtained from factor analysis of the BALLI of previous studies. Firstly, Bacon and Finneman (1990) found five factors related to Authentic Texts and seven factors on Language Learning. Tumposky (1991), on the other hand, found the same five factors as Horwitz (1988). Mantle-Bromley (1995) found all the themes as Horwitz (1987) except motivation. Truitt (1995) identified five themes: Value and Nature of Learning, Self-efficacy and Confidence, Correct and Formal Learning, Ease of Learning and Motivation. Finally, Kuntz (1996) also found five themes but with different structures: FL Aptitude, Employment, Personal Interests, People and Culture, and Linguistic Components. We can see that the factor structure obtained in this study resembles the most with Yang's (1999) study. One possible reason is that Yang's (1999) study and this study were both conducted in the Chinese context. The differences in the factor structures between these previous studies as well as their differences with the factor structure of this study confirm Yang's (1999) contention that each group of ESL learners has their unique set of beliefs towards their L2 learning. The differences in the factor structures of this study and Yang's (1999) study suggest that the unique characteristics and the unique English learning environment may help the vocational English learners in Hong Kong develop their own unique set of beliefs although they share similar beliefs with other groups of learners of English as L2.

Results on the relationships between BALLs and MCLLS use indicate positive relationships exist between them. More specifically, Integrative

Motivation and Language and Communication Strategies of the BALLI were found to have the strongest positive relationships with MCLLS use as a whole. Their respective Pearson Product-moment correlations with total MCLLS use are .355 ($p < .001$) and .341 ($p < .001$). Results of multiple regression analyses indicate that Integrative Motivation is a good predictor of most MCLLSs, and Self-efficacy can predict some of the MCLLSs.

5. Conclusion and implications

Taken together, some of the BALLs of the participants of this study who were undertaking vocational education can be traced back to their learner characteristics (i.e., less successful academic achievement, and the fact that they were undertaking vocational education) and the unique socio-linguistic roles of English in Hong Kong (i.e., the 'value-added' role of English in the Hong Kong society, and the lack of contact of most local people with English). Thus, findings partly echo the earlier contention of the importance of context in viewing BALLs (e.g., Benson & Lor, 1999; Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Diab, 2006). In addition, through the comparison of descriptive data and results from factor analysis, this study has identified some differences of ESL learners studying at a vocational institute with learners studying at other types of institutions, both in the western and Chinese contexts. An issue to follow is how the findings of this study can be useful for improving the English teaching to this group of learners. The implications of the findings of this study for teaching are introduced below.

Teachers need to improve the self-efficacy of this group of learners. This can be achieved by providing a greater sense of mastery over their English learning. As we remember, this group of learners did not have successful and positive language learning experiences in the past. Enhancing their self-efficacy can at the same time rectify their view that English is a difficult language to learn. This, in turn, can improve their optimism on their future language learning achievement.

Secondly, teachers need to help this group of learners realize the value of audio-visual materials in language learning. Teachers can demonstrate to them how to use the materials and how this type of materials can assist them to improve their language learning. Teachers can also organize discussions with learners on the value of translation, and explain or even demonstrate to them the limited value of translation in foreign language learning.

Findings of this study show that respondents hold quite a large number of misconceptions on foreign language learning. Respondents viewed there is a specialized ability for language learning and English learning as a matter of translation. They had unrealistic expectations about the difficulty of learning English, and did not see the importance of the learning of culture. There is a need to rectify these misconceptions.

Apart from rectifying misconceptions, teachers should reinforce and encourage learners' beliefs which are facilitative to their L2 learning. Respondents of this study indicated that they enjoy practicing English with

native speakers. Teachers should arrange activities which allow learners to have more contacts with native speakers. In addition, teachers should help their students understand that everyone can learn to speak a foreign language, people who are good at mathematics are not necessarily poor language learners, women are not necessarily better than men in learning foreign languages, and it is best to learn English in an English-speaking country. The acceptance of these beliefs may help the vocational English learners in Hong Kong improve their English.

The popularity of willingness to guess word meanings, emphasizing on excellent pronunciation and a high tolerance of making mistakes in speaking are facilitative to the communicative approach. The popularity of these beliefs shows that learners may have high receptiveness towards communicative approach. In addition, respondents of this study endorsed the value of learning and communication strategies. The value respondents placed on learning and communicative strategies shows that there is a high possibility that they are receptive to strategy training. Teachers should provide this type of training to this group of learners in order to improve their ESL learning, as it has been consistently found that language-learning strategy use is positively related to L2 proficiency.

The prevalence of both integrative and instrumental motivations among the respondents implies that teachers should not only emphasize on only one type of motivation. Previous research has found that both types of motivations are needed for successful learning (Vandergrift, 2005).

6. Limitations of the study

Like most other quantitative studies, this study suffers from the limitation of lacking details on the information gathered. The use of standardized inventory items (i.e., the BALLI) allows systematic presentation of data, statistical manipulations of data, and easy comparisons of information across the results of different studies. However, quantitative data gathered in this study do not show the details of participants' beliefs. The reasons for the importance respondents placed on different aspects of beliefs are also not known. On the other hand, the reasons for respondents not perceiving some aspects as not important are also not known. In addition, there might be some aspects on BALLs which respondents might regard as important but are not included in the BALLI.

Results of the study by Peacock (2001) show that BALLs change over time. The snapshot picture given by the data of this study do not show whether there are changes and the details of changes in the BALLs of Chinese ESL learners undertaking vocational education.

Only one method of data collection (i.e., survey questionnaire) was used to collect data in this study. Although the information gathered from survey questionnaire provide valuable information on the BALLs of this group of learners, it is possible that the data only reflect respondents' views in one angle only. Triangulation of the sources of data (i.e., interviews, diaries, or even observations, etc.) allows a more comprehensive picture on the BALLs of this group of learners.

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Appendix 1 Descriptive Statistics of BALLI Items

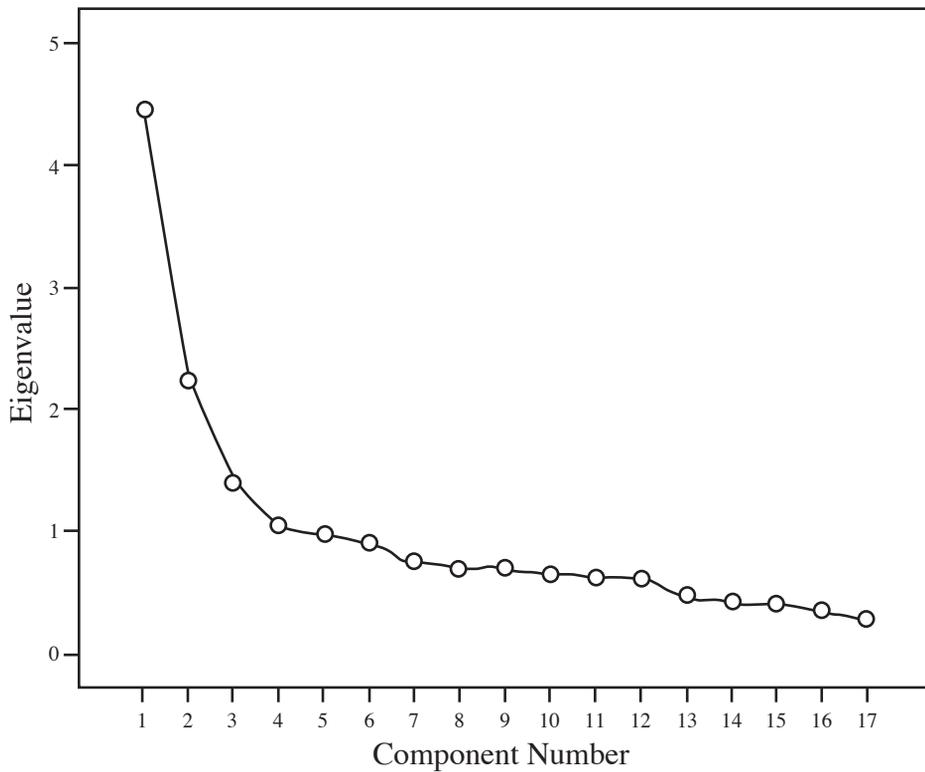
BALLI Items	Mean (SD)	%				
		Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5
1. It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.	4.14(.836)	.4	4.1	14.0	44.0	37.4
2. Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	4.19(.712)	0	1.2	14.0	49.8	35.0
3. Some languages are easier to learn than others.	3.60(.921)	1.7	8.3	35.3	37.8	17.0
4. English is (a) a very difficult language (Pease circle one answer) (b) a difficult language (c) a language of medium difficulty (d) an easy language (e) a very easy language	2.55(.716)	7.6	35.6	51.3	5.5	0
5. I believe that I will learn to speak English very well.	3.04(.847)	2.1	22.2	50.6	19.8	5.3
6. Hong Kong people are good at learning foreign languages.	3.13(.836)	2.1	20.2	43.6	31.3	2.9

7.	It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.	3.98(.862)	.8	4.1	21.0	44.9	29.2
8.	It is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures in order to speak English.	3.01(.964)	4.5	24.7	43.2	20.2	7.4
9.	You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly.	2.41(1.069)	20.7	36.5	27.8	10.4	4.6
10.	It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.	3.01(1.018)	5.0	29.3	32.6	26.0	7.0
11.	People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages.	2.55(1.181)	17.4	40.5	22.3	9.9	9.9
12.	It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country.	4.01(.922)	1.7	4.1	19.4	40.9	33.9
13.	I enjoy practicing English with the people from English-speaking countries I meet.	3.60(.878)	.4	8.4	38.9	35.6	16.7
14.	It's o.k. to guess if you don't know a word in English.	3.67(.875)	1.6	5.8	32.5	43.6	16.5
15.	If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take them to speak the language very well: (Please circle)						
	(a) less than a year						
	(b) 1-2 years						
	(c) 3-5 years						
	(d) 5-10 years						
	(e) You can't learn a language in 1 hour a day.	2.69(1.178)	12.4	40.2	24.5	11.2	11.6
16.	I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	2.48(.850)	11.1	40.3	39.5	7.4	1.6
17.	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary words.	3.64(.813)	.4	6.6	35.4	44.0	13.6
18.	It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	3.85(.851)	.8	5.3	23.9	48.1	21.8
19.	Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.	2.84(1.047)	11.1	25.1	38.7	19.3	5.8
20.	People in Hong Kong feel that it is important to speak English.	4.29(.819)	1.2	2.1	9.5	40.7	46.5
21.	I feel timid speaking English with other people.	3.29(.932)	2.9	14.8	42.0	30.9	9.5
22.	If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on.	2.93(1.093)	8.6	28.8	31.3	23.0	8.2
23.	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar.	3.58(.837)	0	8.6	39.1	38.3	14.0
24.	I would like to learn English so that I can get to know people from English-speaking countries better.	3.38(.840)	1.6	10.7	43.6	36.2	7.8
25.	It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language.	3.34(.917)	1.2	16.9	38.0	33.9	9.9
26.	It is important to practice with audio-visual materials.	3.37(.874)	1.6	11.5	44.4	32.5	9.9
27.	Learning a foreign language is different than learning other academic subjects.	3.51(.906)	2.1	10.7	32.9	42.8	11.5
28.	The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from my native language.	3.39(.904)	.8	15.6	37.9	35.0	10.7
29.	If I learn English very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job.	4.39(.834)	.8	3.3	7.9	31.8	56.2
30.	People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.	3.48(.997)	2.9	12.3	34.6	34.2	16.0
31.	I want to learn to speak English well.	4.41(.878)	.4	4.5	10.3	23.5	61.3

32.	I would like to have friends from English-speaking countries.	4.00(.923)	0	6.6	22.6	35.0	35.8
33.	Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	3.88(.887)	1.2	4.5	25.1	43.6	25.5
34.	It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.	3.15(1.043)	3.3	26.3	33.7	25.1	11.5

Appendix 2 Results of Scree Plot

Scree Plot



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