

A Survey on the Relationship between Learning Beliefs and Learning Strategies

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Abstract: With the shift of the concept of English teaching, learning beliefs and learning strategies are increasingly attracting researchers' attention. This study, based on a questionnaire, centered on the current situation of learning beliefs and learning strategies used by three-year college students. The result shows: (1) the students have the strongest form-focused beliefs and most disagree with using-mother tongue beliefs. (2) In the practical learning activities, using-mother tongue strategies are most frequently used by students and the frequency of meaning-focused strategies is the lowest. (3) There are significant correlations between belief variables and strategy variables.

Key words: three-year college students; learning beliefs; learning strategies

1. Introduction

In recent years, the concept of foreign language teaching has shifted from the teacher-centered to the student-centered. Learning process and learner factors play a more critical role, among which what the researchers are most interested in is learning belief and learning strategy. Belief means students form their own views on the importance of the foreign language learning because of their own experiences or other people's influence^[1]. Strategy is "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, and enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situation."^[2] Chinese linguist, Dr. WEN Qiu-fang defines language learning beliefs are the students' claims of how to master language knowledge, language skills and communicative competence. Strategies refer to the measures taken by learners to learn effectively, which may be external or internal behaviors^{[3](105)}.

According to WEN's framework, this investigation is concerned with four types of learning beliefs: (1) management beliefs, (2) form-focused beliefs, (3) meaning-focused beliefs and (4) using-mother tongue beliefs. Management beliefs refer to views on the importance of planning, setting goals, choosing learning strategies and evaluating progress etc.; Form-focused beliefs refer to learners' opinions of the importance of repetition, memorization and intensive study of texts. Meaning-focused beliefs refer to learners' opinions of the importance of extensive exposure to and communicative use of the target language. Using-mother tongue beliefs claim that translation is a good way to learning English well. Comparatively, there are four learning strategies: (1) management strategies (2) form-focused strategies (3) meaning-focused strategies and (4) using-mother tongue strategies. Management strategies are planning and regulating the learning process cognitively and affectively, and learners' study habits. Form-focused strategies are traditional learning strategies used in form-focused activities and test-based intensive study. Meaning-focused strategies are used in communicative activities and in seeking exposure to the language. Using-mother tongue strategies advocate the use of the mother tongue in

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learning. Language learning strategy is directly related to language learning.

Beliefs are more stable and they have profound influence on English learning. It can not only coordinate learners' classroom experience, but also is the base to choose and stimulate different learning strategies. According to the second language learning patterns, learners' beliefs determine their learning methods reflected in their learning strategies. Research has shown that all language learners use certain types of language learning beliefs and strategies to a certain level, but different in frequency and choice. Successful language learners tend to prefer correct beliefs and have the ability to put them into effective learning strategies. Thus, to facilitate the learners' language learning and to promote learner autonomy, language learning belief and strategy are key points for language instructors to pay attention to. On the other hand, beliefs cannot be separated from learning strategies in foreign language learning and because the study on learners' beliefs "constitutes an important area of enquiry, as it is reasonable to assume that their 'philosophy' dictates their approach to learning and choice of specific learning strategies"^[4]. Some researchers^{[3](105)} have studied the relationship between learning beliefs and learning strategies and the results show beliefs affect learning strategies and the relationships between them are highly stable. They mainly involved in undergraduates while this study is centered on three-year college students, the lower level of English learners.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research questions

This study is designed to answer the following questions: (1) What is the frequency of learning beliefs preferred by three-year college students? (2) What is the frequency of learning strategies employed by three-year college students? (3) What are the relationships between the two variables?

2.2 Subjects

The subjects were 60 three-year college students of Grade 2005 from chemistry department of Linyi Normal University, among whom 49 were females and 11 males who have completed one academic year of college English learning.

2.3 Research instrument

The research instrument is a questionnaire. The first part is the students' basic information. The second part is a questionnaire on learning beliefs and learning strategies designed by WEN Qiu-fang (1996), with a slight amendment, including 43 statements: 1-20 are learning beliefs and 21-43 are learning strategies. Specifically, 1-5 are management beliefs, 6-10 are form-focused beliefs, 11-15 are meaning-focused beliefs, 16-20 are using-mother tongue beliefs; 21-25 are management strategies, 26-31 are form-focused strategies, 32-39 are meaning-focused strategies and 40-43 are using-mother tongue strategies. Each statement was given five choices of frequency in the form of 5 Likert-Scale from 1(never or almost never true of me) to 5 (always or almost always true of me).

2.4 Data collection and analysis

The questionnaires were administered in class with the teacher's supervision. Altogether there are 60 valid questionnaires. The response rate was 100%. All the data were input into the computer and then were analyzed by SPSS 11.0. The analysis procedure is: (1) Descriptive statistics was employed to get the mean scores and the standard deviations of learning belief and strategy. (2) Correlation analysis was to examine the relationship between learning beliefs and learning strategies.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1 The descriptive statistics of learning belief and strategy (N=60)

variables	M	S. D	variables	M	S. D
management beliefs	3.44	.78	management strategies	3.09	.75
form-focused beliefs	3.71	.68	form-focused strategies	2.87	.55
meaning-focused beliefs	3.39	.70	meaning-focused strategies	2.25	.59
using-mother tongue beliefs	3.22	.78	using-mother tongue strategies	3.25	.94
learning belief	3.44	.41	learning strategy	2.77	.43

From Table 1 we can see that the general mean score of belief variable is 3.44, showing students' learning belief is at a medium level. The mean score of form-focused beliefs is as high as 3.71, suggesting students strongly believe in traditional learning methods. They emphasize the importance of recitation, repetition, intensive study of texts, analysis of grammar structures and rules. In their mind, to learn English well, they must recite new words and texts, listen to the record again and again and do a lot of grammar exercises. But to some degree, they have removed the opinion of using mother tongue in mind, which is proved by its low mean score (3.22). Students also prefer some management beliefs such as making plans, setting up learning goals and choosing appropriate learning strategies, which can manage their learning affectively.

Students' learning strategy use is moderate overall with a mean score of 2.77. The mostly common used one is using-mother tongue strategies (3.25) and the most rarely used one is meaning-focused strategies (2.25). Compared with learning beliefs, there are some changes: students most prefer form-focused beliefs which are less used in strategy result, at the second place from the bottom, followed by meaning-focused strategies. Students most rarely prefer using-mother tongue beliefs, but mother tongue strategies are most frequently employed in their practical learning activities. Only management beliefs are comparatively stable, showing they use management strategies to manage and evaluate their learning. By interview they said they couldn't help using mother tongue to assist their English learning such as translating into Chinese when reading English, memorizing the Chinese meaning of new words and thinking in Chinese while writing or listening. This phenomenon is understandable. In China, students' English learning are easily affected by this Chinese environment. They less approve of meaning-focused beliefs, and in the practical performance meaning-focused strategies are least used, which shows students are not aware that the extensive communicative activities in English is an effective way of learning English as shown in table 2.

Table 2 The correlation coefficients of learning belief and learning strategy

beliefs \ strategies	management		form-focused		meaning-focused		using-mother tongue	
	r	Sig.	r	Sig.	r	Sig.	r	Sig.
management	0.55*	.000						
form-focused			0.38*	.003				
meaning-focused					0.27*	.042		
using-mother tongue							0.72**	.000

* correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed);

** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level;

n=60

The results of correlation analysis show that there are positive significant correlations between four belief/strategy variables. The highest correlation coefficient of using-mother tongue beliefs/strategies shows students' beliefs about the role of mother tongue positively affect their choice and use of mother tongue strategies, revealing that the students' language proficiency is not so high. Next is management and form-focused beliefs/strategies, meaning-focused beliefs have the least effect on the corresponding strategies among the subjects. This result is in accordance with WEN and WANG's research on undergraduates, which further demonstrates that

strategies are positively affected by beliefs to some degree: the more students believe in some beliefs, the more they use the corresponding strategies in their learning practice^[5].

4. Conclusion and Implication

From the study above, conclusions can be drawn that three-year college students' learning belief and learning strategy is at medium level. Each pair of learning beliefs/strategies has significant correlation. So some pedagogical implications can be reached:

(1) The participants' preference for mother tongue and the lowest frequency of meaning-focused strategies suggest three-year College students have lower English level compared with undergraduates investigated in some previous research. The reasons may be as followings. Firstly, many students have been accustomed to thinking in Chinese and read, write and answer questions by translation since in middle school. Secondly, they don't realize the final goal of learning English is communication. Under the present examination system language knowledge is mainly tested rather than the communicative competence. In order to remove the influence of L1, teachers should maintain students' awareness of avoiding mother tongue and help students accumulate language knowledge such as remembering new words and grammar; on the other hand, we must do our utmost to create English environment: listening, speaking, writing in English as much as possible, particularly practicing it with classmates and teachers or even native speakers of English. We should develop students the habit of thinking in English and tell them that learning a language means paying attention to content, accuracy of linguistic forms and communicative effective as well. Some English activities such as spoken English contest, English corner and English class report are all good ways to improving English-thinking ability and the development of English learning, which stress not only the form-focused practice but also the meaning-focused practice.

(2) Language learning and teaching shouldn't be only confined to language itself, learning skills should also be emphasized. More attention should be given to students' learning process and learning methods. Students' awareness of learning strategies is rather weak and their knowledge of learning strategies is poor. Learning belief is one of meta-cognitive knowledge; once formed, it is stored in one's mind and not easy to change.^[3] Beliefs may positively promote one's language learning or impede one's learning activities. Teachers should learn about students' beliefs and encourage students to find out learning strategies appropriate to them. By giving students instructions and lectures on beliefs and learning strategies, and helping them to form correct beliefs and using effective learning strategies, they can make greater achievements in English learning.

(3) In this study there are significant correlation between learning beliefs and strategies. However, not all correct beliefs can be transformed into corresponding strategies. Beliefs are affected by factors such as learning environment, learners' personalities and previous learning experience. Further study on learning beliefs and learning strategies is significant for English learning and teaching.

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(Edited by ZHANG Dong-ling and XIE Ting-ting)