

Beliefs on Learning and Teaching Language Components: The Case of Iranian EAP and EFL Learners

Gholamreza Parsi

Islamic Azad University Central Tehran Branch, Iran

E-mail: parsi.gh862@gmail.com

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Abstract

The present study intended to investigate the possible difference between EAP and EFL learners' beliefs concerning learning and teaching of language components, namely, vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. Furthermore, this study examined the association between EAP and EFL learners' beliefs and their language components' development. To this end, 231 undergraduate EAP (117) and EFL (114) learners at Ferdowsi University took part in the study by completing a five-point Likert scale questionnaire adapted from Simon and Taverniers (2011). The face and content validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by the experts' judgment and factor analysis. Moreover using Cronbach alpha coefficient the questionnaire was found acceptably reliable ($\alpha=0.88$). Furthermore, for language components' development, the EAP learners' scores in English course and EFL learners' average scores in their Basic English courses were taken into account. The results of an Independent Samples t-test revealed that there existed a statistically significant difference between EAP and EFL learners' beliefs on learning and teaching language components. Furthermore, the results of Pearson correlation coefficients indicated a statistically significant positive association between EFL learners' beliefs and their language components' development, however no statistically significant correlation was found between EAP learners' beliefs and their language components' development.

Keywords: Beliefs, Learning and Teaching Language Components, EAP and EFL Learners

1. Introduction

Since 1980s, beliefs regarding second language learning have highly influenced applied linguists beginning with the ground-breaking works of Horwitz (1985). According to Horwitz (1987), beliefs about language learning is concerned with the language learners' predetermined attitudes or ideas on diverse subjects pertinent to second or foreign language learning.

The learners' beliefs and perspectives toward language learning are frequently manipulated by the context in which they are learning. Moreover, Horwitz (1987) maintains that learners' beliefs regarding learning are manipulated by their preceding learning experiences as well as their cultural background. This is due to the fact that language is capable of revealing different facets of culture (Kramsch, 1998).

In the same line, many scholars (e.g. Flavell, 1976 & Ajzen, 1988) consider beliefs as a fundamental concept in every discipline which deals with individuals' behavior and learning. Flavell (1987) states, considering cognitive psychology, the learners' beliefs should be regarded as a subpart of the metacognitive knowledge that is related to the learners' particular cognitive procedures and products.

As Wenden (2001) states, similar to other types of metacognitive knowledge, the beliefs of the learners regarding language learning are believed to be constant due to the fact that they can be considered as a permanent component in the learners' knowledge storage. Moreover, Flavell (1987) states that beliefs are a piece of self-knowledge engaging all that learners comprehend regarding themselves as thinkers and learners which includes their learning needs and objectives.

In recent years, scholars have placed much emphasis on the importance of the learner' features like motivations, learning styles, attitudes, strategies. One of the most newly studied features of the learners is their beliefs regarding language learning. Many language-learning scholars (e.g. Horwitz, 1987, 1988; Kern, 1995) have emphasized the significance of the learners' beliefs in foreign or second language learning. This significance is now commonly acknowledged in applied linguistics, as numerous investigations have revealed that there is a tight link between learners' beliefs and the strategies which they employ and their comparative success at learning the second language (Barcelos, 2003).

The learners' beliefs assist them appreciate the new environments and adapt to them easily, identify what is expected from them, and to act in agreement with those comprehensions. Additionally, White (1999) maintains that these beliefs are influential in describing tasks and have a crucial role in developing their behavior.

For understanding learners' beliefs regarding English language learning, the present study focuses on the language components including pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. Many studies have investigated learners' beliefs about

language learning in general; however, studies focusing on one particular feature of language learning, like grammar, pronunciation or vocabulary are scarce. Hence, the present intended to investigate Iranian EFL and EAP learners' beliefs and their success in mastering language components.

2. Review of the related literature

2.1 Theoretical framework of the study

Recognizing the significance of learners' epistemological beliefs among different disciplines has resulted in a developing body of confirmations emphasizing their importance in learning achievements and experience (Schommer, 1990); moreover, they also have a intense impact on learning behaviors as well as the learning outcomes (Weinert & Kluwe, 1987). Studies among different diciplines have revealed that learners' belief systems, social cognitions and metacognitions have a significant role to play in intellectual performance (Schoenfeld, 1983).

Furthermore, in the same line it has also been proposed that learners might be completely influenced by their comprehension regarding success in learning and the levels of expectations; with practically high expectations assessing them in building self-assurance, and low (or idealistically high) expectations resulting in dissatisfaction and demotivation (Puchta, 1999).

As Victori and Lockhart (1995) maintain, beliefs are the factors that manipulate learning, the essence of language learning and the common suppositions which the learners have about themselves as learners. Bernat and Lloyd (2007) state that it is an implicit theory and comprehending learners' beliefs in this context is vital due to the fact that learners who possess successful belief systems regarding language learning, the capabilities and skills to learn English and successful employment of learning strategies are more successful language learners.

Cotterall (1999) stated that, beliefs play a crucial role in the success, failures, and experiences of language learners. Learners' belief systems, social cognitions and metacognitions are considered as a powerful force for intellectual performance. It is believed that learners' belief system is a self-built representational system. Consequently, as Bernat and Gvozdenko (2005) maintain, information regarding these beliefs gives the teachers the opportunity of making more knowledgeable and comprehensive decisions about teaching; it also provides the teachers with more insightful approaches to the organization of learning chances (Cotterall, 1999).

Another good definition for beliefs is proposed by Horwitz (1987) who maintains that beliefs about language learning is concerned with language learners' predetermined attitudes or ideas about different issues related to second or foreign language learning.

Pajares (1992) provided a systematic appraisal of how beliefs had been comprehended in educational psychology until the 1990s by arguing that:

“Defining beliefs is at best a game of player's choice. They travel in disguise and often under alias - attitudes, values, judgments, axioms, opinions, ideology, perceptions, conceptions, conceptual systems, preconceptions, dispositions, implicit theories, personal theories, internal mental processes, action strategies, rules of practice, practical principles, perspectives, repertoires of understanding, and social strategy, to name but a few to be found in the literature”. (1992, p. 309).

Furthermore, Hong (2006) states that beliefs concerning language learning is concerned with learners' insights, notions, concepts, representations, assumptions, perceived ideas, expectations opinions, or mini-theories about the nature of language learning.

2.2 Previous research findings

A great body of research has been conducted on EFL and EAP learners' beliefs about learning and teaching of language. For instance, Aragao (2011) investigated the existence of any association between emotions and beliefs in foreign language learning among Brazilian EFL learners. He maintained that attitudes and beliefs in language learning and language teaching are tightly interconnected and can be seen in the way learners visualize their classroom context as they express their feelings and beliefs regarding themselves as EFL learners.

The results of Aragao's (2011) study revealed that beliefs and emotions in the foreign language classroom are tightly associated. The participants of their study reported speaking in class as the most serious challenge. They argued that their classmates were not familiar with spoken English which caused them to feel uncomfortable, consequently limiting their use of spoken English. Furthermore, the findings of this study indicated that learners' beliefs regarding their classmates, their speech, and their teacher had a statistically significant influence on their feelings of shyness, embarrassment and class inhibition.

In another attempt, Altan (2006) investigated the belief system of 248 foreign language major university learners studying at five key universities in Turkey. The participants were studying language in the departments of German, English, Japanese, French and Arabic and they were all going to be teachers of the languages which they were learning. The results of his study revealed that learners held a variety of beliefs, for example, some individuals are born with a particular ability to acquire a foreign language; therefore, they find language learning easier.

Furthermore, Pan and Block (2011) explored the beliefs of Chinese EFL teachers and learners regarding the conditions of English, the students' expectations of English and the primary emphasis of English learning and teaching in China. The results of their study indicated that belief in the influential value of English for the country as well as the individual

was common among the participants of the study. However, it was also revealed that the focus of the learning and teaching of English was totally examination-oriented, which might be considered as an obstacle to the development of the learners' communication skills in English.

In another study, Pishghadam and Pourali (2011) explored the beliefs of Iranian EFL students majoring in English about learning and teaching in current as well as ideal situations. The participants of the study were 22 PhD students. They were asked to fill out a questionnaire designed by Pishghadam, Askarzadeh Torghabeh, and Navari (2009). The results of data analysis indicated that the distinct discrepancy between learners' ideas regarding their professors' and their own roles in classroom appeared to be progressively fading away.

The results of their investigation highlighted the significance of revealing the learners' hidden beliefs and its impact on choosing the suitable styles of teaching and learning. Pishghadam and Pourali (2011) concluded that PhD students had fostered a feeling of self-comprehending by which they could assess their activities, attempting to modify for the best. By realizing the leading concepts in their minds, students can attain self-awareness and they can adjust or advance their implicit beliefs and notions to improve their level of learning.

In another attempt to shed light on the learners' belief, Rifkin (2000) studied the beliefs of 1000 learners of 10 different languages at dissimilar levels of teaching who were studying in three different institutions. The findings of his study indicated that there are definite discrepancies in beliefs among the different groups of the participants. Besides, with regard to some items, differences were observed between learners in a first-year language class with other learners in language classes at other levels.

The impacts of studying abroad on language learning beliefs were investigated by Amuzie and Winke (2009). Two groups of learners, i.e., 70 international learners (30 male, 40 female) participated in the study: the learners who had been in the United States for less than six months, and the ones who had been in the United States longer. The findings of their study indicated that learners obtained more powerful belief in the significance of the students' autonomy and less powerful belief in the significance of the instructors' role in learning.

The students in both groups asserted that, when they were abroad, they gained more powerful belief regarding themselves that they should themselves find occasions to use their second language and that improvement in second language learning depended on their own hard works and Endeavour outside the classroom. Another finding of their study was that the learners with stronger beliefs in learner autonomy preferred to study abroad for longer periods of time. Finally, the results of their study revealed that teaching practices for studying abroad in the United States were totally different from what the learners had been provided with in their home country.

Finally, Fujiwara (2011) investigated language learning beliefs of Thai EFL university students in order to (a) explore the dimensional structure of the language learning beliefs of Thai EFL learners, (b) recognizing the empirical identifiability of theoretically developed categories, and (c) studying the cultural discrepancies of language learning beliefs.

This study made use of a five-factor structure like the Horwitz's (1985) model and revealed the language learning beliefs which were common among many learners outside the cultural borders and the potential belief discrepancies among language learners with dissimilar cultural backgrounds. Therefore, the findings of his study provided helpful information for language teachers to develop the learner's comprehension regarding their beliefs about language learning, and expressed the significance of the context or setting of language learning.

2.3 Research questions

1. Is there any statistically significant difference between EAP and EFL learners' beliefs with regard to learning and teaching language components?
2. Is there any statistically significant relationship between EAP and EFL learners' beliefs and their language components' development?

2.4 Research hypotheses

1. There is no statistically significant difference between EAP and EFL learners' beliefs regarding learning and teaching language components.
2. There is no statistically significant relationship between EAP and EFL learners' beliefs and their language components' development.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants of the study were 231 undergraduate EAP (117) and EFL (114) learners at Ferdowsi University, Mashhad, Iran. The participants' age ranged from 19 to 30 and they had the experience of learning English at least for seven years before being accepted in university with some, especially EFL learners, having further English learning experience in language institutes. The sampling strategy for selection of the participants was convenience sampling. EAP learners were mainly selected from four fields at Ferdowsi University including Law, Persian literature, Applied Chemistry and Geology. EAP learners were studying English about three hours a week.

3.2 Instruments

In order to investigate the participants' beliefs regarding learning and teaching language components (vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar), a questionnaire was adapted from Simon and Taverniers (2011). The instrument of the

study comprised of 48 items divided into 16 parts, each containing three items on the language components, namely, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. The participants had to answer the items by indicating the degree of their agreement or disagreement with the items of the questionnaire on a 5-point scale.

The questionnaire was piloted with 82 university students similar to those of the present study. The results of Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy ($KMO=0.70$) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ($P=0.00$) showed that questionnaire enjoyed an acceptable validity rate. Additionally, Cronbach's alpha consistency was run to calculate the reliability of the instrument. The reliability of the questionnaire was estimated to be 0.88.

In order to measure the association between the participants' beliefs and their success in language components 'development, the EAP learners' scores in English course and EFL learners' average scores in their basic English courses were taken into account. Thus, the participants were requested to jot down their scores on the courses stated.

3.3 Procedure

The present study was conducted at Ferdowsi University in Mashhad, Iran. Firstly, the questionnaire was piloted with 82 university students similar to those of the present study and a factor analysis was run for the instrument to ensure the validity of the questionnaire and to determine whether it was useful for the Iranian context.

Secondly, in order to avoid any misunderstanding, the questionnaire on beliefs was translated into Persian for the EAP learners. Furthermore, a back translation was done to ensure that the instrument had been translated accurately.

Finally, the questionnaire was given to the participants of the study. Clear instructions on how to complete the questionnaire were given to the participants and then they were asked to complete the questionnaires. The administration of the questionnaire took approximately 25 minutes.

3.4 Data analysis

The statistical analyses were carried out through SPSS version 20. Regarding the first research question of the study, an Independent Samples t-test was run in order to find out whether there is any statistically significant difference between EAP and EFL learners' beliefs regarding learning and teaching language components, namely, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar.

To answer the second research questions, two separate Pearson product-moment correlations were utilized to find out the possible relationships between EAP and EFL learners' beliefs and their language components' development.

4. Results

The data were collected via using the research instrument and analyzed using such parametric statistical analyses as Independent Samples t-test, and Pearson product moment correlation.

To examine the first research question of whether there was any statistically significant difference between EAP and EFL learners' beliefs with regard to learning and teaching language components, namely, vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar, an Independent Samples t-test was run whose results are summarized in Tables 1 & 2 below.

Table 1. Mean and Std. deviation of EAP and EFL learners' beliefs

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Beliefs	EAP learners' beliefs	117	106.84	20.00	1.84
	EFL learners' beliefs	114	146.99	20.88	1.95

Table 2. Independent Samples t-test for EAP and EFL learners' beliefs

		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
Beliefs	Equal variances assumed	1.26	.26	-14.92	229	.000	-40.14	2.69	-45.44	-34.84
	Equal variances not assumed			-14.91	227.92	.000	-40.14	2.69	-45.44	-34.84

As Table 2 displays, $t_{229}=14.92$ ($p < .05$), the two groups (EAP and EFL) significantly differed with regard to their beliefs on learning and teaching language components; that is, these two groups had different beliefs on learning and teaching vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar.

The second research question sought to explore whether there was any statistically significant association between EAP and EFL learners' beliefs and their language components' development.

To this end two separate Pearson correlation coefficients were conducted. A Pearson correlation coefficient was conducted to find out the relationship between EAP learners' beliefs and their language components' development, whose results are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3. The relationship between EAP learners' beliefs and their language components' development

	EAP learners' Scores	
EAP learners' beliefs	Pearson Correlation	.145
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.118
	N	117

As Table 3 shows, there is no statistically significant relationship between EAP learners' beliefs and their language components' development.

Furthermore, another Pearson correlation coefficient was run to identify the association between EFL learners' beliefs and their language components' development, whose results are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4. The relationship between EFL learners' beliefs and their language components' development

	Average scores	
EFL learners' beliefs	Pearson Correlation	.457**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	114

As is evident from Table 4, there was a statistically significant positive correlation between EFL learners' beliefs and their language components' development.

5. Discussion

The present study intended to investigate Iranian EFL and EAP learners' beliefs regarding learning and teaching language components (vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar). To fulfill the objectives of the study, two research questions were posed. The first research question of this study aimed at investigating the existence of any statistically significant difference between EAP and EFL learners' beliefs with regard to learning and teaching language components. The results of an Independent Samples t-test indicated that the two groups (i.e., EAP and EFL learners) significantly differed with respect to their beliefs regarding learning and teaching language components; in other words, EAP and EFL learners had significantly different beliefs on learning and teaching vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar.

The source of this difference might be attributed to several factors like learners' characteristics, teachers, learners experience and textbooks. A support for this claim lies in the work of Little, Singleton, and Silvius (1984) who state that learners' past experience regarding education or language learning have a significant role in the learners' attitudes and beliefs toward language learning. The experience of the EFL learners was different from the level of experience of the EAP learners because the EFL learners had studied English for at least seven years before entering the university. Furthermore, EAP learners have passed only one general course on English while the EFL learners have gone through various courses on English. This argument may to some degree justify the existence of the difference between these two groups of learners.

Therefore, as the EFL learners experience regarding English language learning is higher than the EAP learners, it can be rightfully expected that EFL learners' beliefs regarding language learning are more profound. Furthermore, the source of difference between these two groups' beliefs may be attributed to the fact that English is a considered as a secondary course for EAP learners; that is, the students may consider it as a compulsory course which should be only passed for getting score.

Lastly, as Zeldin and Pajares (2000) state, the students who believe that they do not possess the necessary abilities for completing a task will not participate in the activities and their beliefs toward their competencies will influence the decisions which the learners make, their attempt, their preferences to continue at particular tasks, and their ability to accept failure and react rationally.

The second research question of the study was posed with the purpose of investigating the probable existence of any relationship between EAP and EFL learners' beliefs and their language components' development. The results of two separate Pearson correlation coefficients indicated that: a) there was no statistically significant relationship between

EAP learners' beliefs and their language components' development; b) there was a statistically significant positive correlation between EFL learners' beliefs and their language components' development.

Based on the results of the study, it can be argued that the EFL learners' beliefs influence their development in language learning; i.e., beliefs directly influence the learners' language learning. According to Ellis (2008), the beliefs of the learners toward language learning influence the processes involved in learning as well as their products.

Furthermore, Morri (1999) claims that "the effects of learner beliefs on learning seem to exist independently of one's ability to learn language" (p. 381). Many investigations have emphasized that the learners who have strong belief in their own ability to organize significant features of learning a foreign language seem to be more determined in coping with learning contexts in comparison to the learners who do not possess such beliefs (Chapman & Tunmer, 1995; Schunk, 1989). Therefore, the beliefs of the learners regarding language learning may significantly influence the employment of language learning strategies. In the current study, EFL learners' beliefs influence their language learning development due to the fact that these learners study the text books and perform different tasks and activities which in line with their beliefs. However, EAP learners' beliefs have little, if at all, effect on learning due to the fact that these students do not take part in instructional tasks and activities which suit their beliefs.

The findings of the present study with regard to EAP learners' beliefs are in accordance with those of a study conducted by Ellis's (2008). The results of his study indicated that the relationship between beliefs and learning was fundamentally an indirect relationship. In other words, the results of Ellis's (2008) study revealed that beliefs do not have a direct impact on language learning but are modified by the performances of the learners.

Further evidence for the findings of this study might lie in the work of Tanaka and Ellis (2003) who investigated the nature of the relationship between the students' beliefs and their TOEFL scores. The results of their study indicated no statistically significant relationship between the learners' beliefs and their TOEFL scores. The results of their study confirmed the existence of an indirect relationship between the beliefs and the proficiency intervened by the real learning behaviors in which the learners took part. Therefore, the findings of their study are in line with those of the present study with respect to the EAP learners, which revealed no association between EAP learners' beliefs and their development in learning language components.

6. Conclusion

The present study aimed at investigating Iranian EFL and EAP learners' beliefs toward learning and teaching language components (vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar). Therefore, the present study, primarily, aimed at exploring the existence of any significant difference between EAP and EFL learners' beliefs with regard to learning and teaching language components. The results of an Independent Samples t-test unveiled the fact that the two groups, namely, EAP and EFL, significantly differed regarding their beliefs toward learning and teaching language components; that is to say, EAP and EFL learners possessed significantly different beliefs toward learning and teaching vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar.

The secondary objective of this study was to investigate whether any relationship existed between EAP and EFL learners' beliefs and their language components' development. To seek answer to this question, two separate Pearson correlation coefficients were run whose results indicated that there was no statistically significant relationship between EAP learners' beliefs and their language components' development. Furthermore, it was indicated that a statistically significant positive correlation existed between EFL learners' beliefs and their language components' development.

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