THE COMPARISON BETWEEN UPPER-INTERMEDIATE EFL AND ESL LEARNERS' BELIEFS ABOUT LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

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Abstract

Beliefs about language learning have turned out to be a growing subject of concern within educational contexts specifically in relation to other variables such as language learning strategies. The aim of the current study was to compare EFL and ESL beliefs about language learning strategies using a mixed method research design. A total number of 229 participants, 115 EFL and 114 ESL upper-Intermediate English language learners were selected to complete Beliefs about Language learning Inventory (BALLI) questionnaire. Further, 10 volunteer participants, five from each contexts, were also interviewed about their attitude on language learning strategies. The results of the study revealed that there was a significant statistical difference between EFL and ESL beliefs about language learning strategies. Moreover, the analysis of the qualitative data showed that context had a great influence on shaping learners' beliefs about learning a language.

Keywords: language learning strategy, beliefs about language learning, EFL, ESL

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent decades have witnessed an increasing recognition of the importance of language learners' beliefs about language learning strategy use. Many studies have been carried out to examine learners' general beliefs on strategy use in relation with some factors such as age, gender, aptitude, intelligence (Wenden, 1986; Horwitz, 1987; Vann & Abraham, 1990). However, it has been found that relatively little research has been conducted to investigate learners' beliefs about strategy use in relation to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second language (ESL) (Wenden, 2001). To address the lack, this paper aims to compare learners' beliefs about (LLSs) in two different contexts, Malaysia where English is considered as second language (ESL) and Iran where English is a foreign language (EFL).

This study is of significant both theoretically and practically. On a theoretical level, this topic will shed light on the area of research in foreign language learning beliefs and second language learning strategy use addressed extensively by applied linguists worldwide. It will also provide information concerning Iranian and Malaysian English students' beliefs about English language learning. On a practical level, the proposed study would help identifying the second and foreign language learners' beliefs, which will provide guidelines to EFL and ESL teachers on how to tailor their teaching methods to avoid mismatches between classroom practices and learners' beliefs. The results of the study will help Iranian teachers to think more about English context and understand how the learners' beliefs about language learning in different contexts can affect the learners' learning process and, hopefully, will provide them with more insights to guide the teaching and learning practices.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Language Learning Strategy Use

Related studies suggested different definitions for language strategies such as "the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge" (Rubin, 1975, p. 43); and "specific action taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). However, the definitions of language learning strategies proposed so far have been problematic as noted by Ellis (1994, pp. 532-533). More recently, Griffiths (2007) has defined strategies as "activities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own language learning" (p. 91). Learning strategies were also classified mostly as direct or indirect, on language learning (O'Malley et al., 1985a; Rubin, 1981). They were also classified as metacognitive, cognitive and social/affective categories (Chamot, 1987). Furthermore, LLSs were grouped as memory, cognitive, compensation direct language learning strategies, and metacognitive, affective and social indirect strategies (Oxford, 1990). However, as observed by Dörnyei and Skehan (2003), the proposed strategy taxonomies have exhibited certain problems.

2.2 ESL/EFL Setting

Setting is one of the social/situational factors that affects LLS use. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) noted the significance of distinction between ESL (English as second language) learning and EFL (English as foreign language) learning, which can have an impact on LLS use. In this regard, EFL students in Chamot et al.,'s (1987) study employed LLSs different from those employed by ESL students (rehearsal, translation, note-taking, substitution, and contextualization) in O'Malley's et

al.,'s (1987) study. Specifically, "The EFL students also reported relying on cognitive strategies (in relation to metacognitive and socio-affective strategies) to lesser extent than the ESL students" (p. 544). These findings can be accounted for by the adequate exposure of second language learners to the target language, in instructional as well as real-life settings, therefore these language learners employ particular strategies (e.g. socio-affective) more frequently than EFL learners who do not need to use the target language in their daily life and often do not develop or employ a variety of LLSs. Thus, as indicated by the research to date, context has an important effect on strategy selection and use. Oxford and Anderson (1995) noted an "inextricably linked" association between SL/FL language learning and LLS (p.25).

2.3 Beliefs on Language Learning Strategy

Horwitz (1999) identified a positive relationship between beliefs about language learning and experience. He argued that learning experience is affected by learners' beliefs as much as their cultural background. Language learning strategies, on the other hand, help students to learn better and more effectively. Therefore, beliefs about these strategies are highly important, since having a positive attitude toward language learning strategy causes more effective usage of strategies which finally lead to achieve better results. In this regard, Yang (1992) asserted that a mutual correlation between learner's beliefs and strategy use might exist instead of a causal relationship between them.

Hong (2006) studied and compared the monolingual Korean and bilingual Korean-Chinese university students' strategy use and beliefs about language learning, and the relationship between these variables. Participants were 428 monolingual and 420 bilingual Korean-Chinese university students. He also examined the influence of background variables (e.g. gender, self-rated English proficiency, and academic major). Results showed that bilinguals held stronger beliefs on the importance of formal learning and felt less afraid of speaking English with natives. Moreover, Abedini et al., (2011) studied the relationship between EFL learners' beliefs about language learning and their strategy use. The study was conducted on 203 Iranian undergraduate EFL learners doing BA degree. Results revealed that EFL learners with positive and reasonable beliefs used more language learning strategies.

Vann and Abraham (1990) case studied two Saudi Arabian women (ESL) enrolled in an intensive English program at an American University. The main objectives of the study were to determine possible reasons for the lack of success in their language learning efforts. This study showed that the language learning strategy should correctly match the task the learners are supposed to do. In a similar vein, Razak et al., (2012) also assessed the use of language learning strategies among ESL learners in Malaysia. Results showed that female students had more strong beliefs about language learning strategies and that they had a better using of language learning strategies than their male counterparts.

From the review of previous studies, we notice a few research gaps in this field. First, the research on the relationship between learners' beliefs and language learning strategy use are relatively rare, and the existing studies tend to focus only either on ESL or EFL contexts. Second, empirical studies of large scales are limited, especially in the Iranian context. To address the lack, the current research undertakes a mixed method study to compare Upper-Intermediate EFL and ESL language learner's beliefs on the language learning strategy use. Based on the objectives of the study and overall research design the quantitative research question was as:

1. Is there any significant difference between Upper-Intermediate EFL and ESL learners' beliefs about language learning strategies?

And two qualitative research questions were as:

1. What are the beliefs about language learning strategies held by Upper-Intermediate Iranian EFL learners?
2. What are the beliefs about language learning strategies held by Upper-Intermediate ESL learners in the Malaysian context?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participant and Setting

The participants of the study involve 115 EFL learners from Iran and 114 ESL learners from Malaysia (living and studying in Malaysia). Malaysian ESL participants of the study stated their proficiency level as Upper-intermediate based on the degree they were doing at the time of data collection. However, Iranian EFL learners mostly were not able to exactly specify their levels. Thus, Oxford Quick Placement Test was conducted to identify their true proficiency level. Based on the results of the placement test, it was found that the majority of participants were placed among Upper-Intermediate level. participants were from different institutes and studied English as ESL or EFL. More detailed information about the participants is provided in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1,
Descriptive statistics of Participants

		EFL	ESL
Gender	Male	82	82
	Female	33	32
Age	20-25	67	66
	26-30	27	30
	31-35	16	9
	36-40	4	3
	41-45	1	6
Nationality	Iranian	115	73
	Malaysian	-	33
	Others	-	8
Degree	Students	65	31
	BA	38	40
	MA	11	35
	Ph.D.	1	8

3.2 Instruments
3.2.1 Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)

The questionnaire has often been used in previous research on learners' beliefs on language learning, and has been proved to be an effective tool. It consists of two sections, with the first trying to obtain participants' demographic data, such as their age, gender, nationality etc. The other intending to illicit learners' retrospection upon their beliefs about English language learning. It is divided in three parts. Part one includes 31 five Likert items, part two includes 2 multiple choice items, and part three is in the form of an open-ended questionnaire consisting of three questions. The questionnaire also consisted five constructs as foreign language aptitude, the difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and

motivations. Two versions of the questionnaire were provided, one for EFL and the other for ESL learners. The EFL version had a Persian language introduction and ESL used English language only.

3.2.2 Oxford Quick Placement Test
For the Iranian EFL learners, the Oxford Quick Placement Test was used in order to specify their proficiency level. The test includes 60 questions intended to measure learners' language proficiency levels.

3.2.3 Structured Interviews
In order to enhance the reliability of the study and improve the depth of understanding of the issue under study , structured interviews were conducted to seek and derive more data from a selected sample of participants (five participants from Iran and five from Malaysia). The open ended questions were used to provide opportunity to develop the answers. The interview consists of 5 questions which consistent with the main constructs of the BALLI questionnaire.

3.3 Data Collection and Analyses Procedures
Data collection started in 2014 and lasted for 6 months. For Malaysian participants, the online questionnaire was designed and sent to the more than 150 learners from which 114 were responded and sent back. To gather the data in Iran, the researcher collected data either via e-mail or in person from different universities and language institutes in different cities of Neyshabour, Mashhad, Sabzevar, Tehran, Esfahan, shiraz, Rasht, Sanandaj, and Gochan. Around 200 questionnaires were distributed, 100 online and 100 distributed directly from which 115 questionnaires were received back. It took about 30 minutes for the EFL participants to complete Oxford Quick Placement Test and 15 minutes to complete BALLI questionnaire.

In the subsequent stages, an interview was conducted with 5 participants in each group which lasted between 9 to 14 minutes. For Iranian students, the interview was conducted in Persian, and then transcribed and translated into English. The interviews in Malaysia were conducted by an Iranian M.A student who lived in Malaysia. Interviews were recorded and send as audio files by e-mail. Both EFL and ESL participants' interviews were typed and used as samples to support the findings of the study.

The data analysis of this study was done in two major phases: Qualitative and Quantitative in accordance with the research questions. The collected quantitative data were analyzed and yielded descriptive statistics (mean, frequencies, and standard deviations) in order to examine the respondents' survey reports. Specifically, the data collected from participants were analyzed in terms of their beliefs on language learning strategies. Moreover, the collected quantitative data were analyzed through application of independent sample T-test, in order to compare the participants' views and interpret the results in accordance with the research questions. As regard to qualitative data, responses to BALLI's open-ended questions were categorized into three groups (agree/undecided/disagree) and each question was analyzed separately. After that, structured interviews were tape scripted and the frequencies of responses were analyzed.

4. RESULTS
The (BALLI) questionnaire was analyzed for reliability in order to determine if the related items were internally consistent. The reliability analysis results are presented in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1.
Reliability Analysis results of Beliefs about Language Learning Strategy

	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
EFL	.705	33
ESL	.736	33

The reliability results of BALLI indicated the reliability coefficient of .705 for the EFL version and .736 for ESL version respectively. The Cronbach's Alpha values were regarded as acceptable reliability coefficients.

4.1 Quantitative Data

Results of EFL and ESL students' survey on beliefs about language learning strategy use were first checked for normal distribution through test of normality. Findings of Normality table reveals that P-value for Kolmogorov-Smirnov is higher than .05, so the assumption of normality was not violated and the normality distribution of data was confirmed (Table 4.2).

Table 4.2.
Tests of Normality of Beliefs about Language Learning Strategies Scores

	EFL	ESL
N	115	114
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	.733	.857
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.657	.455

In order to find out the EFL and ESL learners frequency of responses on beliefs about language learning strategy use, the descriptive survey data analysis was conducted. The analysis of the data revealed an almost a low overall average (M = 64.75, SD = 9.9) in beliefs about language learning strategy use by EFL learners. Out of 33 items EFL participants indicated three items No 4 (94.8 %), No 1 (89.6 %), and No 3 (89.6 %) as the most believed language strategies respectively. The participants regarded three least believed strategies as items No 17 (27 %), Item No 22 (29.6 %), and item No 11 (31.3 %).

Conversely, The overall average of data survey for ESL participants was almost high (M = 113.80, SD = 10.6). They reported the most believed language strategies as items No 14 (95.3 %), No 22 (91.4 %), and No 7 (91.2 %) respectively. They also stated items No 8 (35 %), Item No 20 (38.3 %), and item No 31 (38.7 %) as the least believed strategies. The overall results of the EFL and ESL students' reported on beliefs of LLSs is shown in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3.
Descriptive Statistics for language learning strategies for the EFL and ESL group

group	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
EFL	115	40	86	64.573	9.9
ESL	114	88	142	113.807	10.6

In order to find out if there was any significant difference between EFL and ESL Upper-Intermediate learners' beliefs about language learning strategies Independent-Samples T-test was applied to the related survey data (See Table 4.4).

Table 4.4.
Independent-Samples T-test Results between EFL and ESL Groups on Beliefs about Language Learning Strategies

Groups	N	Mean	SD	T-value	Sig.
EFL	115	64.57	9.9	-36.06	.000
ESL	114	113.80	10.6		

The data showed that there was a significant difference in means for EFL learners (M = 64.57, SD = .9.9) and ESL learners (M = 113.80, SD = .10.6); t (229) = -.36.06, p= .000 (two-tailed). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = -.043, 95% Cl: -.064 to .052) was almost big (eta squared = .053).

4.2 Qualitative Data

In order to both improve the reliability of the research and enrich the depth of understanding of the research, qualitative data were also collected both by open-ended questionnaires and structured interviews. For this reason, there were three open-ended questions in BALLS which all participants were asked to answer both EFL and ESL. Moreover, 10 volunteered participants five EFL and five ESL were interviewed separately.

The first open-ended question in BALLI asked learners' ideas about learning foreign languages. In the EFL context, motivation and practice were the most frequent responses, S4 "motivation and having a personal reason for learning a foreign language is very important". EFL learners reported "learning in ESL context" as the second most frequent answer, S3 "based on my experience, if you want to learn a new language, you should be in that context". Factors like attention, memorization, learning all skills together, knowing culture, using picture, memory, and practice with native teacher were regarded as the least frequent responses by EFL learners, S5 "I think using picture memory method is not very effective for learning a new language".

In the ESL context, the most frequent answer referred to practice with native teachers. For example, S2 mentioned: "I personally think that exposure is an important key to master a foreign language. By that, I mean one must learn a new language with a native teacher of that language and also constantly use the language to learn it well". Watching movies was the second most frequent response, S2 "Learning a foreign language is easier if you watch movies in that particular language. I have witnessed some teenagers in my country self-learn Korean language just because they love watching Korean drama" . Participants also mentioned that taking to native speakers is also important in learning foreign languages, S3 "It would also be an advantage if learners have a chance to talk to natives of language".

Second qualitative question in BALLI asked participants to describe the situation of a person in their country who was familiar with a foreign language. (How was s/he different from others?). EFL Learners believed that if a person speak English, s/he could have a better job opportunity. The second frequent responses were access to many data resource and have a higher social level. The next frequent beliefs were having special view (or being open minded) and having self-confidence. Participants mentioned ability to communicate with foreigners, having higher professional level, having a better academic achievement, having better understanding of foreign culture and better academic situation, being able to easily work with computer, and being able to watch movies as the next popular responses to second question respectively.

ESL participants, on the other hand, represented somewhat different responses. The most frequent answer to second question was that that a person who was familiar with a foreign language could possibly have a better opportunity to find a job. The second popular idea was that learning a new language will not change your situation in this country. Following this, considering learning a new language as an opportunity to speak and communicate with foreigners was rated as the third popular response. few believed if you learn a new language, you will be open-minded. Two of them mentioned that if a person learns another language, s/he would be considered smarter and can have access to first hand materials. Only one participant pointed out to brighter future and having more confidence.

The third question in BALLI asked participants if they think English was different from their native language? Was it harder or not? What were the major differences? In the EFL case, most of the participants believed that English was different from Persian. 43% considered it easier and 37% said that English is more difficult than Persian. The rest thought that Persian is not easier or harder than English. Grammar was mentioned as the major difference of Persian and English. Then vocabulary, pronunciation, alphabet shape, writing system, tense, accent, and phonology were regarded as the most important differences between two languages correspondingly.

Most of ESL participants believed that English was different from their native language. In other words, 46% of them thought that it was harder than their native language and 40% believed that it is easier. The rest said it is neither easier no harder. For major differences between English and the participants' mother language, the most frequent answer was the grammatical rules followed by tense, pronunciation and vocabulary. The word order, verb inflection, sentence structure, alphabet culture and accent were mentioned as well.

The first question of the interview asked participants to clarify the reasons why some people learn a language better than other people do? EFL participants mentioned talent, motivation, genetic factors, and parents economic situation as the important factors lead to someone's success over the others. One participant asserted that two factors of gender and environment affect language learning. Other participants claimed that the economic situation of parents is very important. They said that some children have the ability to learn English, but did not have enough budgets to go to English institutes. Still, others believed that some children have higher mental ability and may be smarter and thus can learn English more easily. The participants in the ESL context considered motivation and practice as the major factors affecting learning. One participant said that "I think learning a new language is more about focus and perseverance than anything else. Also, it is very important to have some kind of motivation".

The second question of the interview asked participants how fast they can learn a language. All participants both in EFL and ESL believed that it would not be possible to learn English in a very short time. One participant said that "I do not think that people can learn English in only a week. It is not easy to learn a new language, but it can be fun and rewarding at the very least".

Question number three explored participants opinion on the best way of learning a language. Environment, teachers, and motivation were the most frequent answers of the EFL participants as the main influential factors in acquiring a language. One participant considered the environment as an opportunity to practice English. Another participant believed that children should learn English and Persian simultaneously. The other one said that teachers and classes can replace environment.

The ESL participants thought that the best way of learning a language is through communication. They thought it was easier to learn new vocabulary when they were used in everyday communication.

The fourth question of the interview explored the way to start communication when learning a language? All participants in the EFL group believed that they should not wait, and start communicating in the early stages of language learning process. One participant believed that in early stages, even when a learner has learnt little number of words, s/he can start communicating with others in English. Another participant believed that communication should happen step by step like a child who starts speaking. The ESL participants said that most influential factor in learning a language is the classroom and the students present in the classroom that they get to communicate with. In that case, the communicative endeavor can be guided though it might be limited. Another way of establishing communication opportunities is when learners use the Internet. Using different social network websites like Facebook provide students with the opportunity to communicate with different people from different countries.

The last question of interview asked about the real benefits of learning a language. Reading books, having a better economic situation, being open-minded, speaking with foreigners and working with computer were among the benefits of learning a language for EFL participants. One of participants believed that "knowing another language, help to read more books and thus can help to be more knowledgeable and open-minded person". Communicative ability is the main advantage that another participant pointed to. The third participant mentioned that if you learn a new language, you can work with laptop, tablet, computer, etc. Also it can provide a better opportunity to continue education. The fourth participant stated that if you travel to another country, you can communicate with other people.

The ESL participants believed that being able to communicate in another language can offer some benefits like better job opportunities. One participant also maintained that "language is a big part of each culture, when you learn a new language, you learn about a new world, a new culture. I find it extremely interesting when I can communicate with the people outside of my world. Learning English can be even more useful since it is a global language".

5. DISCUSSION

The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of BALLI (.705) for EFL version and (.736) for ESL version were above the established acceptable standard of .70 and indicated that the study data collection instruments were reliable. However, they were lower than (.875) in the reported reliabilities coefficient by Harwitz (1999).

The descriptive statistics results of the participants' beliefs about language learning as reported in Tables 4.2 showed that the ESL students possess by far a greater belief on learning strategies (M= 113.80) than their EFL counterparts (M= 64.57). These findings are parallel with Hong (2006) but in contrast with Abedini et al., (2011). This shows participants of EFL and ESL had different ideas which may not be very surprising since the environment has very important impact on building different ideas about language learning (O'Malley's et al., 1987).

Further, what EFL learners regarded as the most important strategies and points on language learning (items 4, 3, and 1) were not in congruent with the ESL learners' beliefs (items 14, 22, and

7). On the contrary, item 22 which was considered as an important strategy by ESL students, ranked among the least believed items by EFL participants. These findings suggest that although the EFL students have some awareness on language learning strategies, their beliefs upon learning process, however, are not very strong.

In order to support the results of quantitative data, and to improve the reliability of the study the qualitative data were also collected through open-ended questions and structured interviews. Responses to firs open-ended question on BALLI were analyzed in details and similar ideas were grouped and classified as motivation, practice, learning in ESL context, attention, memorization, learning all skills together, knowing culture, using picture, memory, and practice with native teacher. The most important findings in this parts were that EFL participants mostly believed on the role of motivation, practice, and being in context, whereas, ESL participants regarded having a native teacher, watching movies, and talking to native speakers as the most influential ways to learn a new language. The reason why EFL learners do not believe on the role of native teacher and partners and somehow disregard these items might be the unavailability of any native English speaker in the country.

The second question in BALLI explored participants opinion on the position of someone who knows English language. EFL learners believed that having a better job opportunity, having access to many data resource, having a higher social level, being open-minded, and having self-confidence were the most important outcomes of knowing English for someone who can communicate in English. Similarly as EFL learners, ESL participants also thought that familiarity with a foreign language could possibly help someone to find a better job. This shows how instrumentally EFL and ESL students were motivated. However, some ESL participants believed that learning a new language will not change their situation. Following this, some ESL participants considered learning a new language as an opportunity to speak and communicate with foreigners.

What the results of analysis to the third question in BALLI revealed was that almost both EFL and ESL language learners believed that generally English language was a more difficult language than their mother tongue. EFL students stated grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, alphabet shape, writing system, tense, accent, and phonology as the most important differences between two languages respectively. Whereas, ESL learners regarded the most significant differences between their native language and English in grammatical rules, tenses, pronunciation, and vocabulary.

Structured interviews were conducted with five EFL and five ESL volunteered participants. The analysis of the interviews showed that both EFL and ESL participants regarded talent and motivation as the most important factors leading to someone's success in learning a new language. Furthermore, all participants both EFL and ESL believed that it would not be possible to learn English in a very short time. They also stated that the best way of learning a language is to be in the context and have contact with native speakers.

5. Conclusion
This paper compared EFL and ESL language learners' beliefs about language learning strategies.
By analyzing the data collected through questionnaire and structured interviews, the major finding of the study was the significant difference between EFL and ESL beliefs about language learning strategies. The comparison of the results of open-ended questions of BALLI and interviews revealed the fact that the destination for both EFL and ESL language learners is the same but with

different routes. They both believed that learning a new language can help them to find a better job and to have better social status. However, EFL learners relied mostly on the available resources for leaning language, like their on motivation and practices, while ESL participants considered the role of native teachers and partners very important in learning language.

It is hoped that language stakeholders in Iran especially teachers will take into serious consideration the findings of this study in order to help their language learners become aware of
language learning strategy use. Teachers should also try to make their learners aware of the effects of environment on the learning process. The results will hopefully pave the way for a better understanding of learners' needs and desires. Finally, the limitations of the current study propose the direction for more research in future.

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