

ICEEPSY 2014

Development of Thai university students' beliefs about language learning: A longitudinal study

Takayoshi Fujiwara^{a*}

^a*Mahidol University International College, Buddhamonthon, Nakhonpathom, 73170, Thailand*

Abstract

Learners' beliefs about language learning are considered very important, yet their developmental nature still remains mostly unexplored. The purpose was to examine how Thai students change their beliefs about language learning after learning the Japanese language in an 11-week elementary-level course. The study also explored the relationships between the learners' beliefs and their achievements in language learning. Undergraduate students in a Thai university ($N = 73$) completed a modified version of Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) developed by Horwitz at two different times; one before taking the Japanese language course (pre-course) and another after having completed the course (post-course). A significant increase at the dimensional level was identified in one of the five conceptual belief dimensions, while changes were also observed in another factor yet it was not statistically significant. Pearson product-moment correlations between the belief factorial mean scores and the participants' Japanese and English achievement levels were not very strong, and most of them were not statistically significant. It appeared that the students' experience of studying the Japanese language were related to the change of their beliefs about language learning in some factors, implying the beliefs' mixed and complicated nature: some categories of the beliefs are modifiable and developed through learning, while others stable and unchangeable.

© 2015 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of ICEEPSY 2014.

Keywords: Beliefs about language learning; learning experiences; Thai university students.

1. Introduction

It is almost impossible to deny the importance of learner characteristics in language learning, or individual differences as referred in the studies of language acquisition, such as intelligence, language aptitude, motivation, etc.,

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +66-2800-3574 Ext.211; fax: +66-2441-9745.

E-mail address: takayoshi.fuj@mahidol.ac.th

because they are critical contributors to the success of language learning (Dörnyei, 2005). Learner beliefs are one of the individual differences, which have been extensively examined since Horwitz's pioneering studies (1985, 1987, 1988). Many studies in this area have been largely facilitated by Horwitz's (1987) measurement instrument, Beliefs About Language Learning (BALLI). Horwitz (1987, p.120) defines language learning beliefs as "opinions on a variety of issues and controversies related to language learning", and Wesely (2012) argues that this definition covers a wide range of beliefs including those about the target community, language, culture, in addition to those about the learning situation.

In spite of a large number of studies over the past three decades (see Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005; Wesely, 2012 for a review), two aspects of the beliefs remain mostly unexplored, and thus unknown: the beliefs' dimensional structure and their developmental nature (Fujiwara, 2011, 2014). In fact, these two unexplored aspects of the belief nature are closely related to each other, and it seems that it is mainly due to the methodological constraints of the analyses commonly used in the beliefs studies using BALLI to date. Some longitudinal studies already attempted to directly examine the developmental nature of the beliefs, or the stability of the beliefs, yet they are still very few in number. Above all, the analyses in the longitudinal studies remain at each item levels. Thus, as argued by Fujiwara (2014), we know very little about how the language learning beliefs develop at the dimensional levels through the language learning experiences.

1.1. Developmental nature of the language learning beliefs at the dimensional levels

According to Kunts (1996), the dimensionality of the language learning beliefs received very little attention from Horwitz and other researchers in the studies of language learning beliefs using BALLI. This situation basically remains the same even today at least as far as the studies using BALLI are concerned. It is only a very few studies (Fujiwara, 2011; Nikitina & Furuoka, 2006; Truitt, 1995; Yang, 1999) that examined empirically the dimensional structure of the beliefs through an investigation of the learners' responses to BALLI (see Fujiwara, 2011, for details about those studies). In fact, this issue of dimensionality of the beliefs has been the focus in some studies (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Diab, 2006; Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003; Loewen et al., 2009). Yet, in most cases, it is not BALLI, but a different measurement instrument, that was used to measure the beliefs. The dimensionality of the BALLI model thus still remains empirically unexamined.

In a similar manner, only a very few longitudinal studies (Kern, 1995; Peacock, 2001; Riley, 2009; Wong, 2010) examined the developmental nature of the language learning beliefs, or the stability of the beliefs, as reviewed by Bernat and Gvozdenko (2005) and Fujiwara (2014). In addition, Wong (2010) pointed that inconsistent findings were obtained about this nature of the beliefs as described below.

Kern (1995) was the first study addressed this issue, and investigated 288 French language learners at an American university. He identified a significant change in terms of some of the BALLI items over a 15-week period. In Peacock's (2001) 3-year longitudinal study, however, no significant change was identified for the beliefs of 146 pre-service EFL teachers in Hong Kong. Most recently Wong (2010) investigated 25 Malaysian pre-service teachers, and found that their beliefs changed in terms of eight BALLI items over 14-month period of a TESL undergraduate degree program. Meanwhile, Riley (2009) also investigated the beliefs of 661 Japanese EFL students over a 9-month English course using a different measurement instrument. Through statistical analyses of the participants' responses, a significant change was identified in terms of 11 items.

To summarize, Kern (1995), Riley (2009), and Wong (2010) identified a significant belief change over a time, while in Peacock (2001) the beliefs remained stable over a time. Furthermore, as far as the methodology is concerned, no statistical inferential testing was used to obtain the findings in all the studies mentioned above, except Riley. Above all, more importantly, all these analyses remain at single item level, and not dimensional levels.

It was Fujiwara (2014) that addressed this issue of the developmental nature of the language learning at the dimensional levels through statistical inferential testing. After having identified the dimensional structure of the language learning beliefs through statistical analyses of the participants' responses to BALLI in the first step, Fujiwara examined this developmental nature of the beliefs. While Fujiwara compared the beliefs measured at the end of the two sequential elementary-level Japanese courses with an interval of approximately 16 weeks, in this longitudinal study the beliefs were measured before and after an 11-week elementary-level Japanese language

course. This measurement at the very beginning of the course enabled us to directly examine the potential impact of the experience of learning a new foreign language on the language learning beliefs.

1.2. Purpose of the study

This study examined how Thai university undergraduate students change their beliefs about language learning after learning the Japanese language for the first time in an 11-week elementary-level course. In addition, the study also explored the relationships between the learners' beliefs and their achievements in language learning. Specifically the research questions of this study were as follows:

1. Do the beliefs about language learning change after taking an elementary-level Japanese language course?
2. What are the relationships between the students' beliefs about language learning and their achievements in language learning?

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The participants ($N = 73$) were undergraduate students who were taking a section of the elementary-level Japanese language course at a large state research-oriented university in the Bangkok metropolitan area in Thailand. The course was designed for the zero-beginners, that is, the people who had never studied Japanese before. English was the medium of instruction in all the classes in the degree programs where the participants were enrolled. All the participants were Thai native speakers.

The age of the participants at the time of the administration of the pre-course questionnaire survey was between 17 and 22, and the mean was 18.81 years ($SD = 1.126$). The largest age group was 19 years old (41.1%), and 68.5 % were either 18 or 19 years old. The female students were dominant (64.4%). Most of the participants were either business administration majors (72.6%) or science majors (13.7%).

The participants were divided into two different groups in terms of two different criteria of their English language proficiency, based on the results of the English language test in the entrance examination. First, nearly half of them (50.7 %) were asked to take a pre-university preparatory English language course at least for 10 weeks before starting the undergraduate degree program, while another half did not have to take the course. Second, the majority (69.9%) was assigned a lower level of English language course as their first English course at the university, while the remaining students (30.1%) was assigned a higher level course. It is important to note that all the participants of this study were highly competent in English as non-native English speakers even if some of them were in the "lower" level of English class. In order to be admitted to the undergraduate programs entirely taught in English, the students had to have an iBT-TOEFL score of at least 79 with a score of at least 25 in writing, or IELTS score 6.0 or above with writing 6.0 or above. The demographic characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants ($N = 73$).

Category	Level	<i>n</i>	%
Age	17 years old	8	11.0
	18 years old	20	27.4
	19 years old	30	41.1
	20 years old	11	15.1
	21 years old	1	1.4
Preparatory English course	22 years old	3	4.1
	Attended	37	50.7
	Did no attend	36	49.3
First English language course	Higher level course	22	30.1
	Lower level course	51	69.9

2.2. Materials

A modified 35-item version of Horwitz's (1987) Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) was used for this study¹. The participants were asked to indicate how they agree or disagree with the statements on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree (5)" to "strongly disagree (1)" in 33 out of the 35 items. In the two other items, because of the nature of the statement measuring the level of difficulty of the Japanese language (item 4) and the time needed to learn a new language (item 15), the different response options were given.

The statement wordings in the measurement instrument used in this study was the same as the original BALLI, except the term "English" was replaced by "Japanese" because of the target language that the participants were learning. Because of the same reason, some other necessary changes were also made, replacing "Americans" by "Japanese people", "American friends" by "Japanese friends", and so on. In addition, to accommodate the current learning situations, the words "cassettes or tapes" were replaced by "audio-visual aids (such as CDs and DVDs)".

The participants were asked to take this questionnaire survey two times: the first one was given in the very first session of the 11-week course (pre-course), and the second one at the end of the course (post-course).

3. Results

3.1. Belief change at the dimensional levels

In developing BALLI, Horwitz (1987) proposed five conceptual belief dimensions, and grouped the 35 items into the five factors: (a) Foreign Language Aptitude (FLA), (b) Difficulty of Language Learning (DLL), (c) Nature of Language Learning (NLL), (d) Learning and Communication Strategies (LCS), and (e) Motivation and Expectations (MAE). As a first step, following the conceptual groupings of the items, the mean score of each of the dimensions were calculated from the responses in each of the five dimensions for the pre-course and post-course measurement, respectively. In the next step, using those mean scores of the dimensions, a series of paired-samples t-tests was performed to examine possible changes in the participants' beliefs about language learning at the five conceptual dimensional levels.

A statistically significant increase was identified in terms of Factor 5 (Motivation and Expectations, MAE), $t(68) = -2.153$, $p = .035$, two-tailed. The effect size was small (Cohen's $d = .259$). In terms of Factor 5, the post-course mean score ($M = 4.116$, $SD = .396$) was larger than the pre-course mean score ($M = 4.009$, $SD = .362$). It indicates that the level of agreement with the statements under this dimension was higher at the end of the course than at the beginning of the course. An increase of the agreement level was also noticed in Factor 3 (Nature of Language Learning, NLL), yet the increase was not statistically significant. Table 2 below describes the results of the paired-samples t-tests, indicating the factorial mean scores and standard deviations.

Table 2. Beliefs change at the conceptual dimensional levels.

Factors	Pre-Course		Post-Course		<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				
1. Foreign Language Aptitude (FLA)	3.491	0.312	3.488	0.380	70	0.820	.935	.009
2. Difficulty of Language Learning (DLL)	3.030	0.338	3.107	0.341	49	-1.592	.118	.226
3. Nature of Language Learning (NLL)	3.732	0.333	3.811	0.356	70	-1.900	.062	.227
4. Learning and Communication Strategies (LCS)	3.549	0.296	3.591	0.369	68	-0.876	.384	.108
5. Motivation and Expectations (MAE)	4.009	0.362	4.116	0.396	68	-2.153	.035	.259

Additional paired-samples t-tests were conducted to compare the mean scores at single item levels. A statistically significant increase was identified only in one of the five items conceptually grouped together under Factor 5 (Motivation and Expectations, MAE): Item 32, $t(71) = -2.707$, $p = .008$, two-tailed. The effect size was small (Cohen's $d = .343$). In this item measuring the level of wish to have Japanese friend, the students' post-course mean

¹ The initial version of BALLI had 34 items, but one item was added in a later version by Horwitz, according to Yang (1999).

score ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 0.648$) was larger than the pre-course mean score ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 0.692$). Thus, the participants showed a stronger wish to have Japanese friends after having studied Japanese for the first time for 11 weeks.

A significant change was also identified in another item from another category: Item 12 from Factor 3 (Nature of Language Learning, NLL), $t(70) = -3.032$, $p = .003$, two-tailed. The effect size was small (Cohen's $d = .340$). The students' agreement level to the statement in this item increased significantly from the pre-course ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.038$) to the post-course ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.077$). They tend to support the idea that it is best to learn Japanese in Japan more strongly after having taken the 11-week Japanese language course.

3.2. Relationships between belief and achievements

The relationships between the participants' beliefs about language learning at the dimensional levels (i.e., the mean scores of the five conceptual factors from the pre- and post-course measurements) and their language learning achievements in Japanese and English were explored by Person product-moment correlation coefficients. The three following variables were used as the indicators of the students' linguistic achievements: (a) their grade in the elementary-level Japanese language course, (b) the period of time spent at the pre-university English language preparatory course, and (c) the level of the English language course assigned as the first English course at the university. The last two variables were included in this study considering the unique linguistic environment at the undergraduate degree programs where the participants were enrolled: The English language was used as the medium of instruction in all the classes.

Person product-moment correlations between the students' belief mean scores at the five factors from both the pre- and post-course measurements and the variables of their linguistic achievements were generally weak. The relationships were statistically significant only in the following four cases. There was a significant negative correlation between the period of the preparatory English language course and the post-course mean score of the three factors: Factor 2 (Difficulty of Language Learning, DLL), $r = -.290$, $n = 56$, $p < .05$; Factor 3 (Nature of Language Learning, NLL), $r = -.372$, $n = 71$, $p < .05$; and Factor 5 (Motivation and Expectations, MAE), $r = -.277$, $n = 70$, $p < .05$. There was also a negative correlation between the level of the first English course and the pre-course mean score of Factor 2 (DLL), $r = -.266$, $n = 62$, $p < .05$. There was no significant relationship as far as the grade of the Japanese course was concerned.

4. Discussion

This study identified a statistically significant change of the language learning beliefs at one of the five conceptual dimensional levels, comparing the beliefs of the Thai undergraduate students measured at the two different times: one before the 11-week elementary-level Japanese language course and another after the course. The participants scored significantly higher after having completed the Japanese course (post-course) than before the course (pre-course) in terms of Factor 5 (Motivation and Expectations, MAE). This tendency was also noticed in terms of Item 32, one of the five items conceptually grouped together under this Factor 5 (MAE). Furthermore, in terms of another item from another dimension (i.e., Item 12 from Factor 3: Nature of Language Learning, NLL), a significant increase was also uncovered. The relationships between the students' beliefs at the dimensional levels and their linguistic achievements were generally weak. Only in four cases regarding the English language proficiency levels, not the grade from the Japanese course, the correlation was statistically significant.

First, this study provides another empirical support about the developmental nature of the language learning beliefs: The beliefs changed after taking an elementary-level course of a foreign language. At the same time, the findings suggest the mixed and complicated nature of the beliefs: There are certain types of the language learning beliefs which could be modified through language learning experiences, while other types remain stable even after having learned a new language for the first time. The findings about this beliefs' nature of being dynamic, variable, and socially constructed endorse what was uncovered by the past studies (Kern 1995; Peacock 2001; Riley 2009; Wong 2010) that examined the belief stability at the item levels, and also by Fujiwara (2014) that examined this particular nature of the beliefs at the dimensional levels.

Considering the statements in the items under Factor 5 (Motivation and Expectations, MAE), it seems that the students at the end of the course tend to think that the importance of speaking Japanese is shared by the Thai people (item 20), and that one of the purpose of learning Japanese is knowing and understanding the Japanese people better (item 24). After having completed the course, the participants are also more likely to recognize the better professional carrier opportunities with a good command of the Japanese language (item 29). They appear to indicate a stronger wish to learn to speak Japanese well (item 31) and to have Japanese friends (item 32) at the end of the 11-week Japanese learning experience. Among those five items, the pre- and post-course difference in Item 32 was statistically significant. The students' beliefs about language learning in Factor 5 (Motivation and Expectations, MAE) changed in the favorable direction, which would facilitate the participants' effective learning with an elevated motivation and positive expectations. Thus, as far as the motivation and expectations are concerned, the 11-week experience of learning the Japanese language for the first time seems to have created a positive impact on the students' beliefs about language learning.

Meanwhile a statistically significant increase in the level of agreement noticed in Item 12 implies some concerns. At the end of the course it seems that the students tend to give a stronger support to the idea about the best place to study Japanese: It is best to learn Japanese in Japan. Although this is a very popular idea commonly and widely supported by most people (and even by language teachers), this idea was strengthened after the 11-week course taken in a Thai university, namely outside Japan. It might be due to the students' unsuccessful learning experiences in the course or unexpected failure that they faced in the course.

The second findings regarding the relationships between the language learning beliefs and the achievements in language learning confirm what has been uncovered by many past studies (e.g., Diab 2006; Fujiwara 2012, 2014; Mori 1999; Nikitina & Furuoka 2007; Peacock 2001; Rifkin 2000). The findings about the preparatory course indicate that the students with a better command of English (i.e., those who did not have to take the preparatory course) are more likely to disagree with the ideas given in the three factors, that is Factor 2 (Difficulty of Language Learning, DLL), Factor 3 (Nature of Language Learning, NLL), and Factor 5 (Motivation and Expectations, MAE). This relationship was also uncovered about the first English course, where the more advanced learners of English (placed in the higher classes) are more likely to disagree with the statements in the items in Factor 2 (DLL). The two correlations combined together suggest that linguistically successful students were more likely to disagree with many of the language learning beliefs described in the BALLI item statements, as previously reported by Fujiwara (2014).

The significant correlations were identified only in relation to the achievements in English, and not in terms of the grade of the Japanese class. This could be possibly due to the difference in the period of the participants' learning the two languages, Japanese and English. All the students were elementary-level learners of the Japanese language (as they were taking an 11-week Japanese language course which was designed for the people who had never studied Japanese before), while they were all advanced learners of English. In the elementary-level language course, the grades are generally vulnerable to many factors and they fluctuate rather easily as a result. Thus, the grade from the Japanese course might not be appropriate as an indicator of the linguistic achievements.

This current study identified the developmental nature of the language learning beliefs at the BALLI's conceptual dimensional levels, yet some limitations need to be acknowledged. First issue is related to the period between the two measurements of the participants' beliefs. It was only 11 weeks apart. It is certainly necessary to have a longer period of time in order to examine this complicated nature of the stability of the language learning beliefs. The inconsistent findings of the studies reviewed earlier (Kern 1995; Peacock 2001; Riley 2009; Wong 2010) that explored the beliefs at each item level might be partially due to their varying length of period of time between the multiple measurements, besides they actually indicated this developmental nature of the beliefs.

The second issue concerns the dimensional structure of the beliefs. Although it was not the focus of this study, the dimensionality was not explored empirically in this study. The dimensions proposed conceptually by Horwitz (1987) were used as the unit of analyses. The developmental nature of the beliefs requires an examination not only at the dimensional levels conceptually proposed by the BALLI developer, but also at the dimensional levels empirically uncovered through the analyses of the participants' response to BALLI.

Although the conclusions will remain tentative due to the limitations described in the sections above, this study certainly made a small but an important step forward beyond the analyses at each item levels in this research area. The study identified an important developmental nature of the language learning beliefs at the dimensional levels.

With the findings, it became easier for the language teachers to make their students' learning more successful, as the types of language learning beliefs that can be modified as a result of the learning experiences are exhibited. The findings thus will guide their efforts in fostering more productive beliefs about language learning.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by a research grant from Mahidol University International College, Thailand. The author would like to thank Ms Ori Green for her kind cooperation in data collection and Mr Tanaporn Ampornnanai for his valuable assistance in manuscript preparation.

References

- Amuzie, G. L., & Winke, P. (2009). Changes in language learning beliefs as a result of study abroad. *System*, 37(3), 366–379.
- Bernat, E., & Gvozdenko, I. (2005). Beliefs about language learning: Current knowledge, pedagogical implications, and new research directions. *TESL-EJ*, 9(1), 1-21.
- Diab, R. L. (2006). University students' beliefs about learning English and French in Lebanon. *System*, 34(1), 80–96.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2005). *The psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Fujiwara, T. (2011). Language learning beliefs of Thai EFL university students: Dimensional structure and cultural variations. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 8(1), 87-10.
- Fujiwara, T. (2012). Beliefs about language learning of Thai students learning Chinese and Japanese: Relationships with past learning experiences and target language variations. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 9(2), 170-182.
- Fujiwara, T. (2014). Changes in Thai university students' beliefs about language learning: Relationships between beliefs and learning experiences, and achievements. *The International Journal of Assessment and Evaluation*, 20(1), 33-44.
- Horwitz, E. K. (1985). Using student beliefs about language learning and teaching in the foreign language methods course. *Foreign Language Annals*, 18(4), 333-340.
- Horwitz, E. K. (1987). Surveying student beliefs about language learning." In by A. Wenden & J. Rubin (Eds.), *Learner strategies in language learning* (pp.119-129). London: Prentice-Hall.
- Horwitz, E. K. (1988). The beliefs about language learning of beginning university foreign language students. *The Modern Language Journal* 72(3), 283-294.
- Kern, R. G. (1995). Students' and teachers' beliefs about language learning. *Foreign Languages Annals*, 28(1), 71–92.
- Kuntz, P. S. (1996). Beliefs about language learning: The Horwitz model." (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED397649).
- Loewen, S., Li, S., Fei, F., Thompson, A., Nakatsukasa, K., Ahn, S., & Chen, X. (2009). Second language learners' beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction. *The Modern Language Journal*, 93(1), 91–104.
- Mori, Y. (1999). Epistemological beliefs and language learning beliefs: What do language learners believe about their learning? *Language Learning*, 49(3), 377-415.
- Nikitina, L., & Furuoka, F. (2006). Re-examination of Horwitz's Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) in the Malaysian context. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 3(2), 209–219.
- Nikitina, L., & Furuoka, F. (2007). Beliefs about language learning: A comparison between novice and intermediate level students learning Russian at a Malaysian university. *The Linguistics Journal*, 2(1), 7-27.
- Peacock, M. (2001). Pre-service ESL teachers' beliefs about second language learning: a longitudinal study. *System*, 29(2), 177–195.
- Rifkin, B. (2000). Revisiting beliefs about foreign language learning. *Foreign Language Annals*, 33(4), 394-408.
- Riley, P.A. (2009). Shifts in beliefs about second language learning. *RELC Journal*, 40(1), 102–124.
- Sakui, K., & Gaies, S. J. (1999). Investigating Japanese learners' beliefs about language learning. *System*, 27(4), 473–492.
- Tanaka, K., & Ellis, R. (2003). Study-abroad, language proficiency, and learner beliefs about language learning. *JALT Journal*, 25(1), 63–85.
- Truitt, S. N. (1995). Beliefs about language learning: A study of Korean university students learning beliefs. *Texas Papers in Foreign Language Education*, 2(1), 1–14. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED416703)
- Wesely, P. M. (2012). Learner attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs in language learning. *Foreign Language Annals*, 45(S1), S98-S117.
- Wong, M. S.-L. (2010). Beliefs about language learning: A study of Malaysian pre-service teachers. *RELC Journal*, 41(2), 123-136.
- Yang, N.-D. (1999). The relationship between EFL learners' beliefs and learning strategy use. *System*, 27(4), 515–535.