



An Analysis of Pakistani ESL Learners' L2 Learning Beliefs

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Abstract

This paper studies the foreign/second language (L2) learning beliefs of Pakistani students of English. Using Horwitz's Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), data were collected from 183 undergraduate students of arts and humanities through a random sampling technique. The analysis involved both descriptive and inferential statistics. The results indicate that Pakistani students generally hold positive beliefs about L2 learning. They were also found to associate most significance with beliefs related to motivation and expectations, and least to those of L2 aptitude. Moreover, they also showed gender-based variations in their beliefs about L2 learning in two out of five categories of L2 beliefs; namely, the difficulty of L2 learning, and the nature of L2 learning. Based on the findings of the study, implications were suggested to improve English language pedagogical practices in the Pakistani context.

Keywords: L2 learning beliefs, ESL, Gender differences

1. Introduction

Foreign/Second language learning is influenced by factors such as motivation, anxiety, self-esteem, and attitudes (Diab, 2006). There is a considerable amount of research indicating how such factors affect the L2 learning process. Learners' beliefs are also reported to have a significant role in the L2 learning process (Bidari, 2021). Generally, beliefs can be defined as psychologically held opinions and understandings about the world that are held to be true (Richardson, 1996). In the L2 learning context, beliefs may be called assumptions that the learners of L2 hold about themselves, about the factors that influence L2 learning, and about the nature of L2 teaching/learning processes (Victori and Lockhart, 1995).

Numerous studies have reported that L2 learning beliefs affect learners' achievements (Dornyei, 2005; Hall, 2011; Yaman, 2012). Positive beliefs about L2 learning enhance the L2 learning process and vice versa. Understanding learners' L2 learning beliefs also enables L2 teachers to understand the strategies and approaches used by the learners of L2 (Horwitz, 1987, 1999; Bidari, 2021). L2 learning beliefs are also linked with and influenced by factors such as self-esteem, attitude, motivation, etc. (Oh, 1996; Langston & Sykes, 1997; Siebert, 2003; Bernat, 2006).

Psychologists investigated and found some significant gender-based differences in social behavior, cognitive activity, and general verbal ability of people. Consequently, researchers in SLA studied gender effect on L2 learning (Bacon & Finnemann, 1992). Gardner and Lambert (1972) and Muchnick and Wolfe (1982) reported gender differences in the motivation and attitude toward L2.

Many researchers have conducted studies in various contexts and regions of the world on L2 learning beliefs and have found significant gender-based variations in L2 learning beliefs with either males or females holding more positive beliefs about L2 learning such as beliefs about the duration required to learn L2, the role of intelligence in learning L2, degree of enjoyment in using L2 with native speakers, the role of aptitude in learning L2, etc. (Siebert, 2003; Bernat and Lloyd, 2007; Oz, 2007; Yaman, 2012; Barkhordar & Rastegar, 2012; Daif, 2012; Nahavandi & Mukundan, 2014; Ali & Senturk, 2019). Some researchers, however, reported that there were no significant differences in the beliefs held by male and female learners of L2 in their studies (Tercanlioglu, 2005; Bagherzadeh, 2012; Mesri, 2012; Ashraf & Ali, 2018).

The English language plays a major role in the modern globalized world, not only connecting people from diverse cultural backgrounds but also mediating people in the spheres of politics, education, business, and technological advancement (Hadi, 2020). In Pakistan, the importance of the English language cannot be overemphasized, due to its role in social, political, economic, and educational development. It is the state and official language of Pakistan, and is used by the powerful elite; hence, associated with power in Pakistan (Zaidi and Zaki, 2017; Rahman, 2019). Thus, teaching and learning of English language are crucial at both national and individual levels in Pakistan. This, together with the contradictions in findings of the studies carried out in various regions and contexts of the world concerning gender influence on learners' L2 learning beliefs, create a scope for a study of similar nature to be conducted in the Pakistani context, where English is used as a second language. Furthermore, the patriarchal society of Pakistan that offers more opportunities for education and job to men than women emphasizes the need to study the role of gender in the L2 learning beliefs of Pakistani learners of English. The current study seeks to answer the following research questions.

- What are the L2 learning beliefs of Pakistani ESL students?
- Are there any gender-based differences in the L2 beliefs of Pakistani learners?

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2. Methodology

2.1. Sample

A sample of undergraduate arts and humanities students from the University of Malakand, Pakistan, was selected through random sampling for the study. 183 students learning English as an obligatory course participated in the study. The numbers of male and female students were 105 and 78, respectively.

2.2. Instrument

The instrument used was based on Horwitz's (1987) Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), widely used by many researchers to study the L2 learning beliefs of students (Kunt, 1997; Yang, 1999; Siebert, 2003; Nikitina & Furuoka, 2006; Bernat & Lloyd, 2007; Daif, 2012; Nahavandi & Mukundan, 2014).

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected with the consent of the respondents during their class time. The data were analyzed with the help of SPSS Version 22.0. The analysis involved both descriptive and inferential statistics.

3. Results

The results of the study were presented in tabular form. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for all five areas of the L2 learning beliefs of the learners.

Table 1: L2 Learning Beliefs of the Students

Factor	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
L2 Aptitude	183	3.36	0.37
The difficulty of L2 Learning	183	3.58	0.51
Nature of L2 Learning	183	3.90	0.49
Learning and communication Strategies	183	3.66	0.43
Motivations and Expectations	183	4.26	0.40

The respondents show the highest degree of agreement with the statements belonging to the category Motivations and Expectations. Next comes the category Nature of L2 learning, followed by Learning and Communication Strategies, and the Difficulty of L2 Learning. L2 Aptitude receives the lowest level of agreement of the learners. This appears to suggest that students are cognizant of the important role of motivation and expectations in learning L2. They associate rather less importance with the role of aptitude in L2 learning. The mean values of the categories reflect the overall positive attitude of the learners with regard to their beliefs about L2 learning. Table 2 shows the inferential statistics used to determine gender-based variations in L2 learning beliefs. Independent samples t-tests were used to analyze the data for gender differences.

Table 2: Group Differences and Independent Samples t-Test Statistics

Factor	Male (N=105)		Female (N=78)		Levene's Test		t-Test for Equality of Means		
	Mean	Std.D	Mean	Std. D	F	Sign.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
L2 Aptitude	3.36	.35	3.36	.41	1.78	.18	.10	181	.92
The difficulty of L2 Learning	3.52	.56	3.66	.43	6.42	.01	1.98	181	.05
Nature of L2 Learning	3.98	.51	3.81	.46	2.92	.09	2.35	181	.02
Learning and Communication Strategies	3.62	.44	3.70	.41	.46	.50	1.241	181	.22
Motivations and Expectations	4.25	.42	4.27	.37	.74	.39	-.325	181	.75

The two categories that show significant gender differences are Difficulty of L2 Learning ($t = 1.98$, $df = 181$, $p = 0.05$), with females showing a higher level of agreement with the beliefs (Female mean = 3.66, Male mean = 3.52), and Nature of L2 Learning ($t = 2.35$, $df = 181$, $p = 0.02$), with males showing a higher level of agreement with the statements of the category (Male mean = 3.98, female mean = 3.81). The remaining categories of L2 learning beliefs did not show any significant differences for gender.

4. Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to investigate Pakistani ESL students' L2 learning beliefs and to identify any group differences in their beliefs from a gender perspective. The findings suggest that the learners hold positive beliefs about L2 learning, which is a useful approach towards learning a foreign/second language as it positively affects the outcome of the L2 learning process. The strongest agreement of the learners was found in relation to the category Motivations and Expectations. This result is supported by the findings of Sioson (2011),

Bagherzadeh (2012), Jafari & Shokrpour (2012), Hayati (2015), and Ghafor, Ahmad, and Mustafa (2022), who also reported this factor of L2 learning beliefs as dominant among all factors. Motivation, being a powerful impetus in all forms of learning, is often reported as one of the most influential factors affecting L2 learning. Gardner and MacIntyre (1991) argued that motivated learners are very active in L2 class activities and tasks. Interestingly, the respondents did not attach much importance to the beliefs about L2 aptitude compared to other categories, which appears to suggest that instead of believing in a natural ability to learn L2, they had stronger faith in the goals and expectations they set for themselves and the strategies and hard work they apply to achieve the desired goals. This result is in line with the findings of Bagherzadeh (2012) and Ariani and Ghafournia (2016), who also reported L2 aptitude as the category reflecting the lowest mean value in their respective studies. In regard to the second research question, the findings revealed that Pakistani ESL students differed in some of their beliefs about L2 learning from a gender perspective. This finding is supported by the findings of the researchers like Siebert (2003), Bernat and Lloyd (2007), Oz (2007), Yaman (2012), Barkhordar & Rastegar (2012), Daif (2012), Nahavandi and Mukundan (2014). It is, therefore, contrary to the findings of the researchers who did not report gender differences in L2 learning beliefs such as Tercanlioglu (2005), Bagherzadeh (2012), and Mesri (2012). The higher level of agreement of male students with the items from the category Nature of language learning with an emphasis on formal aspects of L2 such as grammar and lexis often impedes learners' tendency to engage in tasks requiring the communicative aspect of L2 learning (Horwitz, 1988). It can be argued that the socio-cultural behavior of the two genders may be the cause of the gender-related variations in the L2 learning beliefs of the learners (Baker, 1992).

5. Conclusion

The study was conducted with a view to examine the L2 learning beliefs of Pakistani learners of English and to identify any gender-based variations in their beliefs. Overall, the L2 beliefs of the students were found positive. Moreover, some significant gender-based variations were also discovered in their beliefs. The results support the argument of researchers like Siebert (2003), Oz (2007), and Iqbal and Yongbing (2017) regarding the role that gender plays in learners' L2 learning beliefs.

This study also offers implications for pedagogy, viz: 1. L2 teachers can identify learners' beliefs about L2 learning and eliminate any mismatch between their beliefs and the beliefs of their students as a conflict in the beliefs of teachers and students can adversely affect the satisfaction level of the learners with their L2 class and might lead to discontinuation of their study (Alhamami, 2020). 2. L2 teachers can adopt a methodology that brings classroom practices and L2 learners' beliefs closer in order to achieve better results. 3. The syllabus designers can accommodate learners' beliefs, needs, and preferences in the syllabus.

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