

Learning English: Students' beliefs and learning strategies

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Abstract

This study was conducted to uncover the English learning beliefs and strategies of Pakistani students. We theorised that different students adopt different strategies based on the beliefs possessed by them regarding learning a secondary language. In order to find which types of belief Pakistan students possess and which strategies they adopt to learn the English language, we used factor analysis to find out the salient beliefs and strategies. Correlational analysis was carried out to reveal the relationship among belief factors and strategy factors. Our study has arrived at different finding which is distinctive of Pakistan culture. We found that Pakistani students were frequently employing affective strategies and compensation strategies to learn English language. A strong correlation was found between learners' self-efficacy beliefs, beliefs about difficulty of English language learning and affective strategy. These finding depict the impact of particular social environment and specific cultural practices adopted in different societies regarding learning a second language.

Key words: learners' beliefs; language; English; learning strategies; Pakistan

Introduction

Since last few decades the learning of English as a second language has been a major paradigm shift in Pakistani educational system. Now as the tools and methods of learning have been improved with the passage of time, it has been great emphasis on the pupil to learn the language independently. Second language learning has been associated with better performance and as an additional quality. A natural question about learning second language is whether this learning is associated with certain types of beliefs which prompt to people to adopt some specific strategies to learn the language. These strategies are the techniques and tools adopted by the learners to make its learning enjoyable, faster, effective, easier and amenable to new circumstances and situations (Oxford, 1990).

The definition adopted by the Oxford reflects that learning the language become an autonomous adventure. With the passage of time, they become self-dependent and self-evaluator. They become capable to assimilate the new information and techniques even beyond their learning premises such as schools and Colleges. Literature on the language learning strategies

demonstrate that these strategies are affected by many variables such as family back ground, cultural context, students' proficiency, anxiety and their learning beliefs (Suwanarak, 2012; Bernat, 2006; Peacock, 2001; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1994; Hong, 2006). Students' beliefs about language learning can provide us best insight to learn the strategies adopted by them. In order to learn new language that strengthen their language learning belief system and shed off the dysfunctional beliefs that harmful and fruitless for their learning (Inceçay, 2011; Christison and Krahnke, 1986).

A student in Pakistan may have different beliefs about language learning as compared to a student in another country. Language learning beliefs are formulated in the broader social environment of the pupils. Such beliefs are product of their unique experiences, formal and non-formal training, cultural background and group experiences (Malcolm, 2005). So as the beliefs are context specific, so the strategies are also context specific. People holding different beliefs adopt different strategies. Such beliefs are the reflections of cultural aspects of learning and mentoring, what people believe as normative and cultural origin of

such beliefs (Tang, M., & Tian, 2015; Cortazzi & Jin, 1997).

Our beliefs are the theories formulated by us about social phenomenon. In the same way the language learners fabricate mini theories about their second learning that shape the way to learn a new language (Hosenfeld, 1978). Such belief structures may vary from individual to individual depending upon the motivation and emotional engagement. Such beliefs are not static but fluid which change with the passage of time, change in the cultural and educational experience (Ellis, 2008).

In the context of Pakistan, English enjoys a dominant status as a real second language. English is also used as an official language. Due to its colonial background, many researchers also believe that English language is used as a tool of domination and exclusion in the country (Piler, 2012). English is a compulsory subject at schools in the country. It is also a language of higher education and almost 100% dissertations in linguistics and pure sciences and social sciences are written in English at the graduate and postgraduate level in the Pakistan. English is compulsory subject at school level in Pakistan now a days and they are made to believe that English is essential to social mobility. Recently the government has introduced the English at primary level and many public sector schools offer classes both in Urdu medium and English medium. Newly inducted teachers are trained to speak English in the class. Students are trained to greet their teachers in English.

Previous research revealed that with the change in the beliefs about second language learning, the students adopted more effective ways to learn the language (Malcolm, 2005). In another study, it was found that learners' positive beliefs about language learning strongly affected their capabilities for new language achievement. Those who have accepted it as a challenging task are more assertive and shown more perseverance to learn the new language. They were less affected by dysfunctional beliefs and were more eager to perform independently (Yang, 1999). In this study, we investigate that learning strategies are strongly

associated with the learning beliefs hold by the students. This study explores which types of learning beliefs are possessed by Pakistani Second language students and which types of strategies are adopted by them to learn English as second language.

Although there is great emphasis in Pakistan and a great debate exists on the importance of English learning, there is dearth of literature about how pupils' beliefs of learning English language and what types of belief are correlated with which types of learning strategies. Although the constitution of Pakistan holds that Urdu is national language of the country, it has not achieved its status as an official language. Now and then many political and social movements have emerged in the country to implement Urdu in the offices of Pakistan. Many Urdu lovers also filed writ petitions in Supreme Court of Pakistan to implement Urdu in all spheres of life in the country which was granted by the apex court. However Urdu has failed to make its roots due to not being the language of science and technology. Secondly the colonial power United Kingdom introduced English in the schools of subcontinent. Soon it became the language of elites in the country and it is in their interest to promote and keep it as an official language. This study revolves around following three research objectives:

1. To find out the English language learning beliefs among university students.
2. To find type of learning strategies employed by Pakistani students to learn English.
3. To uncover what type of relationship exists between these beliefs and strategies.

2. Literature review

Language learning beliefs and strategies have been researched together in many previous scientific investigations. However learning language is not a static process. It is more fluid, elusive and reiterative (Wenden and Rubin, 1987; Ellis, 1994; Gu et al., 1995). Strategies to learn the language cannot be quantified in two or more categories. It is a long term process which involves self-

engagement, motivation, self-efficacy and belief in one self. The pioneering work in the field of learning language was conducted by Rubin (1975). She devised the strategies which are employed by the non-native speakers to speak and learn new languages. She claimed that linguistics are so far unable to characterise the tools and techniques of leaning new languages. She theorised that we usually adopt three types of strategies to learn and communicate in a new language. These strategies are learning strategies, communication strategies and production strategies. Tarone (1981) argues that by using production strategy we tend to simplify the linguistic test in order to cut our efforts. Learning strategies are employed to learn a new language while communication strategies are employed immerse oneself into sociolinguistic context and converse with others to get social competency.

Learning strategies are not culture specific, however they me be individual specific. Students in the same class apply different strategies to learn new language. Each student employs different tools and techniques to gain competency. For example one student uses gesture to comprehend it, other may use root and lexicons, while other may use guessing techniques to learn new language (Oxford, 1994). Such techniques are not directly observe by the researchers. They are mental constructions of the students. For example students can use rote learning, skimming techniques, translation and back translation techniques, they can use main idea of the text depending upon their moods, beliefs and available tools and instruments. Every technique has its own limitations and benefits for the students. Some students take notes in their diaries, other make note card while others may use direct methods such as watching movies, listening music. Objectively the strategies can be clear cut found through structured questionnaires (Chamot, 2004). In this study we used semi structured questionnaire to identify the strategies of language learning among university students.

A popular theory in language learning holds that language can be learned through direct and indirect methods. Direct learning involves actual practice method to lean new language. It involves

memorisation, taking feedback. This technique involves reasoning and guessing (Rubin, 1981). Such practices help the students to learn language quickly and efficiently. At the same time learning and communication cannot be combined because learning involves input while communication involves out process (Brown, 1980).

A study conducted by Wong- Fillmore (1979) demonstrated that school children employ two types of language learning strategies at the same time. The study was conducted in a play situation and researcher noted their style of learning. Based on the students' activities, she identified that school children were using two strategies at the same time. Those who had good interpersonal skill employed social strategy. They interacted with each other, got feedback and help from their classmates. By using cognitive strategy, the students learnt new words and shared with their group. This study argues that group learning and interpersonal skills are major variable to learn a new language.

Students employ numerous language learning strategies in the USA as well (O' Malley et al., 1985). They conducted a research on A level students and found that they were employing twenty six techniques to learn the new language. Through factor analysis they grouped these strategies into three groups. These strategies include social, cognitive and metacognitive. All these techniques were identified by Oxford (1990) and Rubin (1981) as well. Oxford (1990) further identified compensation strategies as well. This strategy is utilized when a learner has limited knowledge of a language. Metacognitive and cognitive strategy involves mental processes. They invoke abstractions and mental thoughts. They act as a processor of information. Metacognitive strategy involves monitoring and supervising their own learning process through self-regulating and concentration. Affective strategy involves the management of one's emotions, keeping one's morale high, self-appreciation and self-rewarding. It involves reinforcing one's skills and talking with oneself (Caudery, 1999). Social strategy involves making groups, sharing information, cooperating with each other and communicating with native

speakers Oxford (1990). We have adopted Oxford (1990) taxonomy to unearth the language learning strategies of Pakistani students. In order to find the learning strategies of the students we employed strategy inventory for Language Learning (SILL) designed by Oxford (1990). Language learning does not occur in a vacuum. It is influenced by an individual's personal experience, his beliefs and overall social environment. Rubin (1975) argues that beliefs play a significant role in learning a language. These beliefs are held by the learners as true. She states that these beliefs act as catalysing agent to learn a new language. These beliefs are mental constructions of the individuals which serve as guideline for learning outcome and learning behaviour (Benson and Lor, 1999). Beliefs are the understanding of the world which we consider as true. These are the propositions which serve as guideline about the nature of social reality and help us to cope with different situations (Richardson, 1996). Richardson (1996) argues that beliefs act as filter to reach out a conclusion. These beliefs also prompt learning strategies, learning practices. For example many people believe that learning a language without learning a grammar is also possible (Arnold, 1999; Horwitz, 1987).

Barcelos (2003) adopted a normative approach to identify the role of wider social environment in language learning. The studies conducted following the normative approach perceive beliefs as "indicators of students' future behaviours as autonomous or good learners" (Barcelos, 2003). This approach considers empirical research as valid and discards any possibility of speculations or subjectivity. Early research that followed the normative approach was limited to classification and identification of beliefs, but later studied their relationship to other variables as well. Belief studies that follow cognitive school of thought concentrate on "the normative approach of social and behavioural sciences" (Bernat, 2008: 12). Language learners' beliefs are investigated through surveys and questionnaires in the normative approach. The survey and questionnaire format has many advantages. For instance, it can take into account a large number of respondents and uses descriptive statistics for data analysis. It also offers

researchers' opportunity to collect data outside their contexts and aims to make generalisations, but a possible disadvantage is that learners may not be able to reflect about their beliefs objectively (Ellis, 1994). The studies that have been conducted following the normative approach either followed the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) in its original format (Yang, 1999) or adapted it (Mantle-Bromley, 1995). Many studies conducted to identify language learning strategies found that beliefs are context specific and they are correlated to learning approaches. Wenden (1987) conducted a study with twenty five students by adopting metacognitive approach to understand the students' learning strategies. He concluded that self-reflection and self-monitoring were the techniques adopted by students to evaluate their language learning proficiency. Malcolm (2005:1) supports context-specificity of beliefs and recognizes that they are reshaped and "refined in relation to changing contexts and experiences". The context specific approach entails qualitative research approach. It involves triangulation method to capture the context specificity and extracting the lived experience of the language learners (Barcelos, 2003).

Bernat (2006) studied the beliefs of students from eighteen different countries at Austin University and observed whether learners' beliefs fluctuate across various contexts. The results of the study show that beliefs held by the students. She found that students' belief about language learning did not show any variation across different context. She conducted her research in 18 countries. Her study discarded the null hypothesis that specific beliefs have their origin in specific contexts. Contrary to above findings, researchers on language learning beliefs argue that beliefs are not static entity. Rather they state that our beliefs are context driven. Beliefs are dynamic and fluid which are constantly in flux (Benson and Lor, 1999; Ellis, 2008). In this study we argue that Pakistani students' beliefs about language learning context specific and dynamic. However this study does not measure dynamism in belief system because our data are cross sectional in nature (Oxford et al., 2002)

3. Methods and materials

A survey or questionnaire format was used to assess the beliefs and strategies of the students learning English as a second language. Data were collected from the students at Bahauddin Zakaria University, Multan. Two survey instruments namely Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) and Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) were administered to 76 Pakistani ESL students. Factor analysis and principal component analysis were run to extract the students' language learning beliefs and strategies. Pearson correlation was employed in order to find the nature of relationship among these factors. Before data collection, pilot testing of BALLI and SILL was carried out to contextualise these inventories. At this stage the questionnaires were administered on 10 University students. These students were not included during final data collection stage. Students were asked to give their feedback regarding the relevancy and clarity of the statements. On the basis of students' response modifications were made accordingly. Item V13 of BALLI states that "I enjoy practicing English with the Australians I meet". This item was reworded as "I enjoy practicing English with my friends, classmates and teachers". Item V26 of BALLI states that "It's important to practice with cassettes/tapes". This item was reworded as "It's important to practice with the help of videos on you tube". Item Q6 of SILL states that "I use flashcards to remember new English words". This item was reworded as "I use mobile phone app to remember new English words daily". Item Q14 of SILL "I start conversations in English" was reworded as "I try to start conversations in English in University". Item Q19 of SILL "I look for words in my own language (.....) that are similar to new words In English" was reworded as "I look for words in my own language (Urdu) that are commonly used in everyday language e.g. Loud Speaker." Item Q46 of SILL "I ask English speakers to correct me when

I talk" was reworded as "I ask my friends/classmates to correct me when I talk". Item Q48 of SILL "I ask for help from English speakers" was reworded as "I ask for help from those who speak English well". Item Q49 of SILL "I ask questions in English to other students or native English speakers." Was reworded as "I ask questions in English to other students". Qualitative data were obtained through two open ended questions given at the end of BALLI. These questions asked the respondents to describe any ideas about learning language other than listed in the BALLI.

4. Data Analysis

The quantitative data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0. The factor analysis (varimax rotation) and the principal component analysis were run to reduce 50 SILL and 34 BALLI variables. These variables were classified into five factors for BALLI and six factors for SILL. Table 1 and Table 2 are given below to depict the name of and value of Cronbach Alpha.

The value of Cronbach's alpha for the fifth BALLI factor was calculated very low, so the BALLI was further reduced into four factors. Since the value of + or - 40 factor loading is seen significant (Stevens, 1996), the variables, in rotation matrix, with factor loadings below than 40 were discarded.

In order to dig deeper the beliefs about a learning a foreign language such English language, few University students' were asked about why learning English is important for them and what are the consequences if they do not learn English? These responses were coded and categorised to draw the conclusion.

Table 1 Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) factors

No	Name of Factors	No. of items	Value of Cronbach's alpha
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1	Formal oral practices	6	.658
2	English language learning difficulty	6	.664

3	Self-efficacy	4	.586
4	Foreign language learning	5	.518

5	Value of learning English	5	.468
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Table 2 Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) factors

No	Name of factors	No. of items	Value of Cronbach's alpha
1	Affective Strategies	8	0.775
2	Cognitive Strategies	7	0.759

3	Social strategies	10	0.816
4	Functional strategies	9	0.760
5	Memory strategies	6	0.659
6	Compensation Strategies	5	0.624

5.3 Correlational Analysis

The Pearson correlation was run to uncover the nature of relationship between language learning beliefs and learning strategies. The table given below (See Table 3) depicts that beliefs for formal language learning are negatively correlated to functional strategies, and beliefs about the

difficulty and nature of learning English are positively correlated to affective strategies, but negatively correlated with cognitive and social strategies. The analysis results also show that self-efficacy beliefs are positively correlated to affective as well as social strategies.

Table 3 Relationship between the learners' beliefs and learning strategies

	Affective strategies	Cognitive strategies	Social strategies	Functional strategies	Memory strategies	Compensation strategies
Beliefs for formal oral practices	.044	-.211	.192	-.228*	-.014	.049
Beliefs about difficulty of learning English	.465**	-.344**	-.338**	.211	.042	-.154
Self-efficacy beliefs	.369**	.069	.231*	.082	.212	.010
Foreign Language aptitude	1.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

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

5.4 Qualitative data analysis

The last items of the belief inventory (V35) and the strategy inventory (Q51) were designed to dig

deeper into learning beliefs and strategies of the students. Open ended questions were asked by the researchers to 20 students after they had completed

their closed ended section. Students reported different types of strategies to learn the English. Some students reported that English can be best learnt by watching English movies, listening English music, talking with an English speaking internet friend, computer/tablet games and other internet sources such as social media sites. Regarding their learning beliefs, students reported that early education in English medium schools is good source of English language learning. Students also reported that living in an English speaking country is one of the best method to learn this language. It is noteworthy that these two open ended questions do not provide sufficient information about varied language learning beliefs and learning strategies.

6. Discussions and Conclusions

This study was conducted to uncover the English learning beliefs and strategies of Pakistani students. We theorised that different students adopt different strategies based on the beliefs possessed by them regarding learning a secondary language. In order to find which types of belief Pakistan students possess and which strategies they adopt to learn the English language, we used factor analysis to find out the salient beliefs and strategies.

During factor analysis of language belief inventory four factors demonstrated salient factor loading. These four factors were students' beliefs about difficulty of English language learning, oral and formal practice to learn the language, students' self-efficacy and aptitude of the students to learn foreign language. The factor analysis of the learning strategies revealed six strategies named as affective strategies, cognitive strategies, social strategies, functional strategies, memory strategies and compensation strategies.

During correlational analysis we found that affective strategies were highly correlated with self-efficacy beliefs and beliefs about difficulty of learning of English language. It depicts that students believe that students are capable to learn English as a secondary language. They believe that they are endowed with special abilities to learn a new language. A positive correlation was found between effective strategy shows that respondents

were willing to nourish their language learning ability and they were nurturing it with the passage of time. They were eager to pay attention to someone speaking English. Students were trying to overcome their hesitation and tininess. They were aware of feelings of nervousness during English speaking. Students were eager to obtain feedback from the class fellows regarding their English speaking capability. They were writing down their experience and feelings regarding English language leaning.

The results revealed that there was a significant correlation between effective strategy beliefs about difficulty of English learning. This relationship suggests that students frequently utilize effective strategies to break the cycle of nervousness while they speak English. These findings are distinctive to Pakistani culture where people believe that learning a foreign language is special ability which is not possessed by everyone. Students also overcome their perceived difficulty of learning English language by employing affective strategies.

Correlational analysis showed that students' beliefs about language learning difficulty were negatively associated with social strategies and cognitive strategies. This depicts that Pakistani students were not employing cognitive and social strategies to learn the English language speaking. In order to overcome their nervousness, they were using effective strategy as mentioned earlier. Oxford (1996) and Griffiths (2003) argue that in order to keep their morale high and control their emotions, some best language learners use effective and social strategies. They keep an eye on their task, ask for help and feedback. Such learners are very effective at managing their feelings, overcome their fear and remain stress free. Best learners use effective and social strategies to improve their language learning capabilities. This sense of self efficacy gives them more confidence and courage to speak a new language.

A weak correlation was found between functional learning strategies and formal oral practices to learn the language. However, this finding depicts that students were eager to

communicate in English even when they were not able to speak correctly. They believe that it is normal for novice learners to make mistakes which will be rectified with the passage of time. This finding also depicts some sort of hesitation on the part of students. It shows that students who were afraid of making mistakes during English speaking were not employing functional strategies. A weak correlation was found between students' self-efficacy beliefs and social strategies. It depicts that students believe that English language can also be learnt by speaking with native English speakers. Overall, correlational analysis revealed that students were employing affective strategies to enhance their language learning capabilities and to overcome their sense of fear and nervousness. Students were also employing their social and affective strategies to augment their learning capacities and increasing their self-efficacy.

Our research demonstrate that the students hold very high level of instrumental motivation to learn English as secondary language. They are very realistic and positive about learning English. Majority of them wanted to learn English and believed that this language can be spoken fluently with the passage of time. Students indicated that speaking English is culturally prestigious and gives us opportunity to open new avenues of life. These findings support the study conducted by Ytsma (2007). Ytsma conducted a study to understand the English language leaning trends among Pakistani students. Based on his findings, he concluded that Pakistani students were highly positive about learning English. They were ready to comprehend and read English effectively. Our results show that formal oral practice and difficulty of English learning were major beliefs of the students.

Our findings indicate that majority of the students used compensation strategy to learn and speak English. These findings concord with many previous studies conducted by Hong, (2006), Yang (1999), Ehrman & Oxford (1995) and Kim (2001). These researchers conducted studies in different countries and found that compensation strategies was most frequently employed by the students learning the English language. Here we observe that in case of English language learning, many

countries do not exhibit cultural differences. Ling with compensation techniques, Pakistani students also reported other strategies at medium range. These strategies include metacognitive, affective, cognitive and social strategies.

Our research uncovered many similarities and dissimilarities with past research regarding the relationship between beliefs of the students to learn a second language and learning strategies employed by them. Yang (1999) conducted a study on Taiwanese students to see the relationship between students' English language learning strategies and their learning strategies. He found that there was a strong association between Taiwanese students' self-efficacy beliefs and all types of learning strategies. He further found that functional strategy was highly correlated with self-efficacy beliefs. Study conducted by Hong (2006) showed that there was a strong relationship between learners self-efficacy and all other learning strategies except compensation strategies. Our study revealed that there was a strong relationship between students' self-efficacy beliefs and affective and social strategies. This study also reports that Pakistani English language reported a positive correlation between difficulty of English language learning and affective strategy. But a negative correlation was found between difficulty of English language learning beliefs and cognitive and social strategies. The significant correlation between difficulty of English language learning and affective strategies is major finding of our study. This finding is distinctive of Pakistani culture.

This evidence proves that these learners overcome their feelings, regarding nervousness for speaking English and perceived difficulty of learning English language, by employing only affective strategies. This explains why 67.1% learners reported to relax when they were scared of using English. Oxford (1996b) argues that good language learners employ affective and social strategies to keep them motivated. Griffiths (2003) proves that good language learners employ affective strategies to remain positive and stress-free. The respondents of our study reported that they trying utmost to overcome their hesitation and

nervousness while communicating in English. These participants can be categorised as smart language learners who are eager to transcend all the language learning barriers. Students were continuously keeping their morale high to speak English. In this regard they were adopting social and affective strategies.

The students were very optimistic about learning English language. Compensation strategy was one of the salient learning strategy employed by the students. This depicts that students were very pragmatic about learning and speaking new language. These learners' affective strategies use was significantly correlated to self-efficacy beliefs and beliefs about the difficulty of language learning. The significant correlation between two belief factors, beliefs about the difficulty of language learning and self-efficacy beliefs, and affective strategy use is distinctive to the Pakistani culture.

Our study has arrived at different finding which is distinctive of Pakistan culture. We found that Pakistani students were frequently employing affective strategies and compensation strategies to learn English language. A strong correlation was found between learners self-efficacy beliefs, beliefs about difficulty of English language learning and affective strategy. These finding depict the impact of particular social environment and specific cultural practices adopted in different societies regarding learning a second language. The major limitation of this study is that it does not capture the dynamism of beliefs which are context driven.

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