

Investigating Pre-Service English as Second Language (ESL) Teachers' Beliefs about Language Learning in a Nigerian University

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Abstract

The needs to pay attention to other affective factors that influence the way students learn and invariably their performance in English as a Second Language (ESL) has become paramount. This study, therefore, investigated language learning beliefs among pre-service ESL teachers in Ekiti State University, Ado Ekiti, Ekiti State. It employed the descriptive research design of the survey type. The population for the study was all Education/English undergraduates of the university while the sample consisted of 160 participants randomly selected across one hundred and four hundred levels. The instrument for the study was 'Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory' (BALLI) adapted from Horwitz (1985). Data were collected and analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Results showed that the pre-service ESL teachers held various language learning beliefs that include beliefs about language learning aptitude, beliefs about the nature of language, beliefs about learning and communication strategies among others. There was also a significant difference in the language learning beliefs of male and female pre-service ESL teachers. Based on the result, it was recommended among others that language educators should begin to pay attention to language learning beliefs of their students since this can go a long way to influence how the students learn the language and invariably their performance in the language.

Keywords: *Language learning beliefs, Pre-service ESL teachers, Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), Nigerian university.*

Introduction

Assessing beliefs about language learning has been an area of interest to researchers in recent times. This is because it has been recognised that the beliefs that students bring with them to the learning situation plays a significant role in the learning process and ultimately in the success, they make about learning. It is now a common practice for researchers to explore learners' variables such as their beliefs, attitudes, and perception among other things in relation to how students learn. These variables are believed to be important contributive factors in the learning process and on the achievement of the students in the long run. Scholars also seem to agree that beliefs serve as background to decision making in the teaching-learning process.

Language learning beliefs have been defined as "general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning, and about the nature of language learning and teaching" (Victori and Lockhart, 1995). According to Richards and Lockhart (1996), learners' belief systems cover a wide range of issues and can influence learners' motivation to learn, their expectations about language learning, their perceptions about what is easy or difficult about a language, as well as the kind of learning strategies they favour.

In the word of Richardson (1996), beliefs about language learning belong to the domain of the affective variable such as attitudes, motivation, anxiety, interest, and self-esteem among others. It is important to study the beliefs of language learners because according to Rokeach in Larisa and Fumitaka (2006) beliefs are a predisposition to actions. This is because beliefs are defining factors of learning behaviour. According to Meskill and Ragelova (2000), as a result of the influence of cognitive psychology, language learners are today seen as active and responsible participants who learn from their own experiences, make their own choices and respond to events as they perceive them. Fakeye (2013) asserts that in learning the English language as a second language, motivation, interest, and attitude are together with belief affect the interest, motivation, and attitude of students to learning.

For more than three decades, researchers have intensified efforts to study learners and teachers' beliefs about language learning in both foreign and second language situations. The major pioneering research was that of Horwitz in 1985 and 1988. She designed the "Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory" (BALLI). The BALLI assesses learners' beliefs within five themes, which are: 1. Beliefs about Foreign Language Learning Aptitude 2. Beliefs about Learning and Communication Strategies, 3. Beliefs about the Nature of Language Learning, 4. Beliefs about Motivations and Expectations and 5. Beliefs about Language Learning Difficulties. Many subsequent researchers have used this inventory to assess language learning beliefs among language learners.

Larisa and Fumitaka (2006) stressed further that beliefs about language learning are context-specific and learners from different cultures may have different attitudes, approaches to and opinions about learning a new language. English language learning in the Nigerian context has a special status as it is a compulsory subject at all levels of the Nigerian education system. In the Nigerian university used for this study, the pre-service ESL teachers are undergraduates studying to become English language teachers. The researcher has observed a seemingly decline in their scores in English language courses compared to their scores in the core education and other courses that they offer in the university. Many of them seem to be frustrated and anxious about their core English language courses in the university. They seem to believe that the English language is a very difficult language to learn. Hence, this study sought to determine their language learning beliefs. Research findings indicate that learners hold both facilitative and inhibitive beliefs about language learning. However, teaching implications have become an issue of primary concern. Researchers have suggested possible measures teachers might take to promote positive beliefs in the classroom and eliminate the negative ones (Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005).

The pre-service teachers seem to perceive the English language as a difficult language. According to Bernat (2004) in the context of a second or foreign language learning beliefs held by students can relate to, inter-alia, the nature of the language under study, its relative difficulty, the usefulness of various learning strategies, the length of time it takes to acquire a foreign language, the existence of language aptitude and the effects of age and gender on second/foreign language acquisition. Researchers are of the opinion that some beliefs are beneficial to learners and some can lead to negative effects on language learning (Mantle-Bromley, 1995). Learners with positive beliefs are more likely to do well in the language learning process than those with negative beliefs. This is because beliefs can affect learners' behaviour and success in language learning. This might be responsible for how researchers in second language teaching and learning have been investigating learners' beliefs about language learning for quite some time now; hoping that an understanding of the beliefs that ESL learners bring to class can be used to make language classes and curricular accommodate learners' beliefs for better lesson delivery. Also, some beliefs that can influence learners negatively in language learning can be modified.

There had been quite some studies on language learning beliefs among ESL learners, especially outside Nigeria and the results have been quite fascinating. However, Vibulphol (2004) observes that little attempt has been made in investigating beliefs of pre-service ESL/EFL teachers. In over a decade after that observation, the situation seems to be the same still. Cui (2014) investigated language learning beliefs among post-secondary, non-native learners of Chinese and teachers of Chinese using quantitative data from BALLI and qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and reported four belief dimensions of motivation for learning Chinese, formal language learning strategy, communication-oriented learning strategy and difficulty of language learning. Mudra (2016) conducted a study among prospective EFL teachers to find out statistical gender difference between male and female students using BALLI and found no significant statistical difference in their language learning beliefs except on two items. Katradis (2016) explores teachers', students', and parents' beliefs about language learning in two modern Greek language programs at the elementary school level in the United States through a survey which included adapted teacher, student, and parent versions of the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) and found that the students' beliefs about language learning and specifically about learning Greek were more positive than those of their respective teacher and parents, despite holding some counterproductive or contradictory beliefs about language learning. Fakeye (2013) conducted a study on Students' Beliefs about English Language, Gender, and Achievement in English language and found that the students held positive beliefs about English language and the relationship between students' beliefs and achievement in the English language was negative. He found no significant relationship between students' gender and their achievement in the English language. The need to investigate more on language learning beliefs especially among pre-service teachers is obvious.

Statement of the Problem

It seems that ESL pre-service teachers often hold some unrealistic beliefs about English language learning that may have affected their performance over a period of time. This is because these beliefs may have influenced their language learning behaviour, approaches, and reactions. They also seem to believe that the English language specifically is a very difficult course to study. It has been observed that the ESL pre-service teachers under study do have low grades in their core English language courses compared to their education and other courses in the university. This has led to quite a lot of them spending more time than necessary in the university. They seem to have a lot of carryover courses in English, and invariably a lot of them become spillover students and end up spending one to three additional years in the university. There also seem to be a paucity of empirical data on pre-service ESL teachers' language learning beliefs in the study area.

Purpose of the Study

This study, therefore, sought to assess the language learning beliefs among ESL pre-service teachers in Ekiti State University, Ado Ekiti. It also determined if there was any difference in the language learning beliefs of male and female pre-service ESL teachers in the study area.

Research Question

1. What are the language learning beliefs among ESL pre-service teachers in this study?

Hypothesis

H_{01} : There is no significant difference in the language learning beliefs of ESL teachers in the study based on gender.

The significance of the Study

This study provides empirical information on the type of language learning beliefs among pre-service teachers. This would assist language educators to know about such affective factors that influence undergraduate performance in English language courses. This will help them offer the right advice to the pre-service teachers. This will also assist the pre-service teachers themselves to be aware of whatever negative beliefs they might hold and make necessary changes.

Methodology

The study employed the descriptive research design of the survey type. The population for the study consisted of all Education/English language undergraduates of the Ekiti State University, Ado Ekiti, Ekiti State. The sample for the study was a total of 160 participants selected through simple random sampling technique. Forty respondents were selected from level 100 to 400 that included male and female students. The instrument for data collection was the 'Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory' (BALLI) adapted from Hortwiz (1985) in Richards and Lockhart (1996). It contains 34 items on a Likert type scale that cover different aspects of language learning beliefs. Some of the original arrangements of the items were rearranged for easy responses from the respondents.

For example item, no 4 was moved to item no 33 while item 15 was moved to item 34 and these altered the original numbering of the items. The researcher personally administered the instrument with the aid of two research assistants. Data were collated and subjected to analysis, and the results are presented as follows.

Results

Research Question 1

What are the language learning beliefs among pre-service ESL teachers in the study?

In order to determine the language learning beliefs of the respondents, their responses on the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) were categorized and analysed under five themes of 1. Beliefs about Foreign Language Learning Aptitude 2. Beliefs about Learning and Communication Strategies 3. Beliefs about the Nature of Language Learning 4. Beliefs about Motivation and Expectation, and 5. Beliefs about Language Learning Difficulties as shown below.

Table 1: Beliefs about Foreign Language Learning Aptitude

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	M	SD
1	It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.	68.8*	30.6	0.6		3.67	0.51
10	People who are good at Mathematics or Science are not good at learning a foreign language.	10.0	25.0	40.0	25.0	2.20	0.93
15	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning its vocabulary.	43.1	41.2	10.6	5.0	3.23	0.89
17	Women are better than men in learning foreign languages.	30.6	25.0	25.6	18.8	2.68	1.10
22	I would like to learn English so that I can get to know English-speaking countries better.	35.6	41.2	17.5	5.6	3.07	0.87
33.	English is: (a) a very difficult language (b) a difficult language (c) a language of medium difficulty (d) an easy language (e) a very easy language	28.1	31.2	20.6	20.0	2.68	1.09
34	If some spent one hour a day learning the language, how long would it take him/her to speak the language very well: (a) Less than a year (b) 1 – 2 years (c) 3 – 5 years (d) 5-10 years (e) you can't learn a language in 1 hour a day	10.6	11.2	30.6	47.5	1.85	1.00

SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation

*Percentages of responses (%)

Items 1, 10, 15, 17, 22, 32, 34 relate to the beliefs about foreign language aptitude. Nearly all the participants believe that it is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language and about 65% declare they disagree with the statement *people who are good at Mathematics or Science are not good at learning a foreign language*. 84.3% of the respondents (84.3%) were convinced that the most important part of learning a foreign language is learning its vocabulary. More of the respondents (55.6%, Mean=2.68, Standard Deviation=1.10) declared that women are better than men in learning foreign languages. More than three-quarter of the respondents (76.8%) like to learn English so as to know English-speaking countries better. More of the respondents (53.7%) declared that it is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it 59.3% of the respondents declared that English is a very difficult language. Only (21.8%) of the students were sure that English could be learned less than a year.

Table 2: Beliefs about Learning and Communication Strategies

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	M	SD
7	It is necessary to know about English speaking cultures in order to speak English.	23.1*	33.8	31.2	11.9	2.68	0.96
9	It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.	20.0	46.9	28.8	4.4	2.83	0.80
12	I enjoy practicing English with the native speakers I meet.	31.2	46.2	18.8	3.8	3.05	0.81
13	It is ok to guess if you did not know a word of English.	17.5	41.9	28.1	12.5	2.64	0.91
18	People in my country feel that it is important to speak English.	42.5	36.2	16.9	4.4	3.17	0.86
19	I feel timid speaking English with other people.	10.0	35.6	25.0	29.4	2.26	0.99
21	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar.	53.1	36.9	8.1	1.9	3.41	0.72

SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree ; D=Disagree ; SD=Strongly Disagree; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation

*Percentages of responses (%)

The second category of items describes learning and communication strategy and comprises items no 7, 9, 12, 13, 18, 19 and 21. In the study, More than half of the students (56.9%, Mean= 2.68, Standard Deviation=0.96) of the respondents believed that it is necessary to know about English speaking cultures in order to speak English. More of the respondents (66.9%, Mean= 2.83, Standard Deviation=0.80) were convinced that it is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one. They (77.4%, Mean=3.05, Standard Deviation=0.81) enjoyed practicing English with the native speakers they met. More of the respondents (59.4%, Mean=2.64, Standard Deviation=0.91) believed that it is right to guess if an individual did not know a word of English. Majority of the respondents (78.7%, Mean=3.17, Standard Deviation=0.86) felt that it is important to speak English. More of the respondents (54.4%, Mean=2.26, Standard Deviation=0.99) disagreed with the statement *I feel timid speaking English with other people*. Most of the respondents (90%, Mean=3.41, Standard Deviation=0.72) strongly believed that the most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar.

Table 3: Beliefs about the Nature of Language Learning

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	M	SD
8	You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly.	21.9*	26.2	28.8	28.1	2.47	1.08
11	It Is best to learn English in an English Speaking Country.	38.1	40.6	12.5	8.8	3.08	0.93
16	It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	62.5	26.2	4.4	6.9	3.44	0.87
20	If beginning students are permitted to commit an error in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on.	38.8	31.9	22.5	6.9	3.03	0.95
25	Learning a foreign language is different from learning other academic subjects.	35.6	33.1	22.5	8.8	2.96	0.97
26	The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from my native language.	31.2	46.9	16.9	5.0	3.04	0.83

SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree ; D=Disagree ; SD=Strongly Disagree; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation *Percentages of responses (%)

The third category contains six items describing the nature of language learning (8, 11, 16, 20, 25 and 26). The study found that most students (56.9%, Mean=2.47, Standard Deviation=1.08) disagreed with the statement: *'You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly.'* More of the respondents (78.7%, Mean=3.08, Standard Deviation=0.93) believed that it Is best to learn English in an English Speaking Country. Majority of the students (88.7%, Mean=3.44, Standard Deviation=0.87) believed that it is important to repeat and practice a lot. More of the respondents (71.9%, Mean=3.03, Standard Deviation=0.95) believed that if beginning students are permitted to commit an error in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on. More of the respondents (68.7%, Mean=2.96, Standard Deviation=0.97) believed that learning a foreign language is different from learning other academic subjects. Majority of the respondents (78.1%, Mean=3.04, Standard Deviation=0.83) believed that the most important part of English is learning how to translate from my native language.

Table 4: Beliefs about Motivations and Expectations

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	M	SD
23	It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language.	31.9*	26.2	30.6	11.2	2.79	1.02
27	If I learn English very well, I will have an opportunity for a good job.	40.0	37.5	16.2	6.2	3.11	0.90
29	I want to learn to speak English well.	55.6	40.0	3.8	0.6	3.51	0.60
30	I would like to have English speaking individuals as friends.	43.1	43.8	10.6	2.5	3.27	0.75
31	Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	44.4	43.8	9.4	2.5	3.30	0.74

SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation *Percentages of responses (%)

The fourth category comprises four items (23, 27, 29, 30 and 31), which address motivations and expectations. More of the participants (58.1%, Mean=2.79, Standard Deviation=1.02) believed that it is easier to speak than understand a foreign language. The respondents (77.5%, Mean=3.11, Standard Deviation=0.90) strongly endorsed mastery of English as a mean of securing a good job. Majority of the respondents (95.6%) desired to learn to speak English well. They (86.7%, Mean=3.27, Standard Deviation=0.75) preferred having English speaking individuals as friends. Majority of the respondents (88.2%) believed that everyone could learn to speak a foreign language.

Table 5: Beliefs about Language Learning Difficulties

S/N	ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	M	SD
14	I have a special ability for learning foreign language.	22.5*	55.6	14.4	7.5	2.93	0.82
24	It is important to practice with cassettes or tapes.	30.0	43.1	20.6	6.2	2.97	0.87
28	People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.	26.9	41.2	21.9	10.0	2.85	0.93

SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree ; D=Disagree ; SD=Strongly Disagree; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation *Percentages of responses (%)

Items 14, 24 and 28 relate to the beliefs about language learning difficulties of the students. The students agreed that they have a special ability for learning a foreign language (78.1%, Mean=2.93, Standard Deviation=0.82). They also believed in the need to practice with cassettes or tapes (73.1%, Mean=2.97, Standard Deviation=0.87). More of the students (68.1%, Mean=2.85, Standard Deviation=0.93) believed that people who speak more than one language are very intelligent.

Hypothesis

There is no significant difference in the language learning beliefs of male and female ESL teachers in the study.

Language Learning Beliefs	Gender	N	Mean	SD	df	t	P
Language learning beliefs	M	74	89.66	8.45	158	2.441	0.016
	F	86	86.23	9.20			
Foreign language aptitude	M	74	22.96	2.12	158	1.634	0.104
	F	86	22.40	2.22			
Learning and communication strategy	M	74	22.96	3.41	158	0.803	0.423
	F	86	22.51	3.60			
Nature of language learning	M	74	18.58	2.94	158	2.391	0.018
	F	86	17.53	2.60			
Motivations and expectations	M	74	12.81	2.14	158	1.919	0.057
	F	86	12.19	1.98			
Language learning difficulties	M	74	9.09	1.76	158	2.283	0.024
	F	86	8.45	1.78			

*p<0.05, M= Male, F=Female

The result of the independent sample t-test revealed that there was a significant difference in the language learning beliefs between male and female ESL pre-service teachers in the study [t(158)=2.441, p<0.05] in which the mean score of male students was higher (89.66) compared to female students (86.23). Similarly, there was a significant difference between male and female students’ belief about the nature of language learning [(t(158)=2.391; p<0.05) and language learning difficulties [t(158)=2.283; p<0.05) at 0.05 level in each case. However, the mean difference between male and female students’ foreign language aptitude [t(158)=1.634; p>0.05),

learning and communication strategy [$t(158)=0.803$; $p>0.05$), motivation and expectation [$t(1568)=1.919$; $p>0.05$] was not statistically significant at 0.05 level in each case.

Discussion

Findings from the study showed that the pre-service ESL teachers under investigation had beliefs about language learning based on the five themes of BALLI; beliefs about foreign language learning aptitude, beliefs about learning and communication strategies, beliefs about the nature of language learning, beliefs about motivation and expectation and beliefs about language learning difficulties. This finding is in line with the assertion of Richard and Lockhart (1996) that learners' belief systems cover a wide range of issues and can influence learners' motivation to learn, their perceptions about what is easy or difficult about a language, as well as the kind of learning strategies they favour. This finding also agrees with the findings of Cui (2014) who found four language learning belief dimensions based on BALLI in his study of post-secondary non-native learners of Chinese.

The study also revealed a significant difference in the language learning beliefs of male and female pre-service ESL teachers, the mean score of male students (89.66) was higher than that of female students (86.23). There were also differences in the language learning beliefs of the nature of language learning and language learning difficulties. This is in dissonance with the findings of Mudra (2016) who found no significant statistical difference in the language learning beliefs of male and female students in a higher education context.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that pre-service English as Second Language teachers hold various beliefs about language learning. These beliefs also differ according to their gender. It is recommended therefore that language educators should begin to pay attention to the issue of learners' beliefs as a major factor that can influence the way learners learn particular languages. Learners too should begin to pay attention to their own language learning beliefs so as to guard against those that might be detrimental to their language learning progress.

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