The relationship between foreign language anxiety and belief toward FLL among children EFL learners

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The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between foreign language anxiety and beliefs about foreign language learning among children in the Iranian context (at Navid Language Institute) as well as comparing their beliefs with that of their teachers. In this study 42 linguistically homogeneous female students were selected after the Nelson test and were subjected to BALLI and FLCAS designed by Horwitz (1987). For answering the second research question, also 9 teachers were selected. After test administrations, the data from two questionnaires were analyzed statically. The findings revealed that children EFL learners hold the same idea with regard to BALLI and FLCAS. In order to compare both BALLI questionnaires completed by the students and teachers an independent sample t-test was applied. The findings reveal that teachers and students hold almost similar ideas with regard to their responses to BALLI and the result of t-test sample. The findings are in line with previous studies in this area.

Keywords: Foreign Language Anxiety, Beliefs about Language Learning, FLCAS, BALLI, Children EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

Among many different affective variables, anxiety has been considered very important and many studies have been undertaken to explore it since 1970s. As far as language learning is concerned, reviewing the related works reveal that the cause of such anxiety has been the major concern and consequently some internal and external factors which may increase or decrease the level of anxiety one feels while learning a second language have been posited. Anxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system (Horwitz, 1986). It is usually classified in to trait anxiety, state anxiety and situation-specific anxiety. Scovel (1978) believes that trait anxiety refers to “a permanent predisposition to be anxious”. Brown (2001) considers state and situation-specific anxiety in relation to some particular event or situation. Language anxiety, the concern of this thesis, belongs to last category, which refers to the apprehension experiences when a situation require the use of a second language with which the individual is not fully proficient (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1993).

For this anxiety, Young (1991) identified six potential sources of language anxiety from three aspects: the learner, the teacher, and the instructional practice. He claimed that language anxiety is caused by a) personal and interpersonal anxiety, b) learner beliefs about language learning, c) instructor beliefs about language teaching, d) instructor-learner interactions, e) classroom producers, and f) language testing. Young (1994) described that these sources of language anxiety are interrelated.

Among these factors, beliefs about language learning will be noticed in this study. Because learner’s beliefs toward FLL shape one’s thinking, they could be an effective factor in learner’s anxiety. Also in learning context, the beliefs that students bring to the classroom have been recognized as a main factor in the learning process. In the last three decades, there has been a shift in focus in the field of second language acquisition from teaching methods to learner characteristics. It has become clear that much of responsibility for success in language learning may rest with the effort of individual
learners. Consequently, numerous studies have been conducted from learners’ perspective, and these perspectives have come to inform the field of language pedagogy. Among these perspectives, there are learner’s beliefs about language learning including past experience, culture, context, and numerous personal factors (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005).

Learner beliefs, according to Richardson (1996) are “psychologically held understanding, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true”. Since learner beliefs about language learning may be among the accessible to change by the learner (Horwitz, 1987) they are important to consider. For example, Horwitz (1987) states from her own experience that many anxious language learners believe that they are supposed to understand every word in their foreign language class. Young (1991) adds that unrealistic beliefs about the importance of correctness in grammar or pronunciation or about the time it takes to learn a foreign language, can also lead to frustration and anxiety.

In the classroom context, the perception, beliefs attitudes, and metacognitive knowledge that students bring with them to the learning situation have been recognized as a significant contributory factor in the learning process and ultimate success (Breen, 2001). For example, foreign language students may hold strong beliefs about the nature of the language under study, its difficulty, the process of its acquisition, the success of certain learning strategies, the existence of aptitude, their own expectations about achievement and teaching methodologies. Identification of these beliefs and reflection on their potential impact on language learning and teaching in general, as well as in more specific areas such as the learners’ expectations and strategies used, can inform future syllabus design and teacher practice in the course. Pedagogy has the capacity to provide the opportunities and conditions within which these learner contributions are found to have a positive effect upon learning and be more fully engaged (Breen, 2001; Arnold, 1999).

In order to identify and measure foreign language anxiety, Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) developed the foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS). It has 33 question items that is respondents ask to respond to situation specific to foreign language anxiety. FLCAS has been widely adapted by many researchers to explore learners’ foreign language anxiety (Aida, 1994; Ganschaw et. Al, 1994; Ganschow and Spark, 1996).

Different researchers have examined learners’ beliefs about language learning for different purposes. For example, Cortazzi (1990) studied culture-related differences in beliefs. Mantle-Bromley (1995) and Wen and Janson (1997) investigated the link between beliefs and proficiency. McDonough (1995) and Victory and Lockart (1995) investigated the impact of beliefs on language learning.

In a series of studies, Horwitz developed three different instruments to identify teachers and students’ perceptions on a variety of issues and controversies related to language learning. First, a teacher’s version of the BALLI (1985) was developed to measure instructor’s beliefs in four major areas: foreign language aptitude, the difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, and appropriate language-learning strategies. It consisted of 27 Likert-scale items based on free-recall protocols of 25 language teachers of different cultural backgrounds. Teachers were asked to list their beliefs about language learning, other people’s beliefs about language learning, and their students’ beliefs about language learning. Horwitz developed the second instrument, the ESL/EFL version of the BALLI (1987), to assess students’ beliefs about the nature of language and the language learning process. The ESL/EFL BALLI included 33 items across five major areas: foreign language aptitude, the difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivations. Horwitz (1988) designed another version of the BALLI to assess the beliefs of American students of foreign languages about language learning. These instruments were designed based on statements derived from a free-recall activity by university students of foreign languages in the United States.

Major research on language learning beliefs was carried out by Horwitz (1985) who developed the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) to assess teacher and student opinions on variety of issues related to language learning. This was used in three large scales American studies (Horwitz, 1988; Kern, 1995; Mantle-Bromley, 1995) and showed that learner/teacher beliefs differed significantly on only a few items: 1) learners underestimated the difficulty of language learning; 2) they held misconception about how to learn foreign languages; and 3) they gave more value to accent than teachers did. Kern concluded that learner beliefs are “quite well entrenched” (1995) and do not automatically change when learner are exposed to new methods, Mantle-Bromley (1995) found that learners with realistic and informed beliefs are more likely to behave productively in class, work harder outside class, and persist longer with study.

During the last two decades significant advances between teacher and learner beliefs have been made and the connection between teacher beliefs and educational practice has been established (Borg, 2003). However, there is still paucity in literature reporting the relationship between language teacher’s beliefs and their students’ beliefs about language learning. Understanding the gap between teacher and learner beliefs is the first step to bridge the gap. Peacock (1998) conducted a research on teacher and learners’ beliefs about useful activities for EFL in Hong Kong. A considerable mismatch between learner and teacher beliefs was found. Learner rated error correction and grammar exercises much higher, and pair work and group work much lower than
the teachers. Peacock concludes that this wide gap certainly had a negative effect on learners’ linguistic progress, satisfaction with the class, and confidence in their teachers. Finally Peacock proposes that teachers consider giving more autonomy in choosing activities, and make clear to learners the rationale behind unpopular activities, particularly group work and pair work.

Therefore, the major purpose of this study is to examine the foreign language anxiety and its relation to beliefs toward FLL among children learners of EFL. Among different affective variables, anxiety has been considered very important. During Foreign language learning, cause of anxiety has been a major factor which may increase or decrease the level of anxiety.

### Purposes of the Study

This study aims at investigating foreign language anxiety and its relation to beliefs toward FLL among children learners of EFL. As Young (1991) was mentioned six possible sources have been considered for such anxiety. Among these factors beliefs about language learning will be noticed in this study. Because learner’s beliefs toward FLL shape one’s thinking, they could be an effective factor in learner’s anxiety. Also in learning context, the beliefs that students bring to the classroom have been recognized as a main factor in the learning process. The main focus of this study will be on children in Iranian context.

Reviewing the related literature reveals that although great deals of researches have been conducted on foreign language anxiety and beliefs toward FLL, little research has examined the relationship between these two variables among children. This study aims to investigate not only foreign language anxiety and beliefs towards foreign language learning among children in the Iranian context by using Horwitz’ FLCAS (Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale) and BALLI (Beliefs About Language Learning) but also the relationship between these two variables and the potential gap that may exist in the learners’ and teachers’ beliefs toward foreign language learning. The main focus of this study will be on children in Iranian context.

### Research hypotheses

Based on the questions cited above, this study aimed at testing the following null hypotheses:

**Null Hypothesis 1:** There is no relationship between learners’ anxiety level and learners’ beliefs toward FLL among children EFL learners at Navid English Institute.

**Null Hypothesis 2:** There are no mismatch between learners’ beliefs and their teachers’ beliefs toward FLL among children EFL learners at Navid English Institute.

### METHODOLOGY

#### Participants

In the initial phase, 80 female students were registered in English class at Navid English institute were selected randomly. Age of participants ranges from 11 to 15 years. They were given Nelson test as a placement test. After administrating the test, 42 students in elementary level were selected based on their scores (students with scores 28-47) in placement test. In order to answer second research question, nine of their teachers were selected.

#### Instruments

**Nelson test**

In order to determine the general proficiency level of the participants and to screen them, in this study, Nelson test was performed to homogenize the participants linguistically.

**Foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS)**

The foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS) is a “self-report” measure that assesses the degree of anxiety, as evidenced by negative performance experiences and social comparisons, psychological symptoms, and avoidance behaviors” (Horwitz, 1986). FLCAS contain 33 items that yield a composite score ranging from 33 to 165. Each item has a five-point Likert scales ranging from 1) strongly agree, 2) agree, 3) neither agree nor disagree, 4) disagree to 5) strongly disagree. Item 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 25, 26, 29, 30, 31, and 33 represent high anxiety. Items 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 18, 22, 28, and 32 represent lack of anxiety. Therefore, the total scores of the scale range from 33 to 165 with high scores indicating high levels of foreign language anxiety. Because of the age of the participants in this study and preventing misunderstanding, a Persian version of FLCAS was used.

### Research questions

According to the stated problem, the following research questions have been addressed in this study:

**Research question1:** What is the relationship between learners’ anxiety level and learners’ beliefs toward FLL among children EFL learners at Navid English Institute?

**Research question2:** Are there any disparities between learners’ beliefs and their teachers’ beliefs toward FLL among children EFL learners at Navid English Institute?
Belief about language learning inventory (BALLI)

The belief about language learning inventory (BALLI) was developed by Horwitz (1988) to identify students' beliefs about language learning. It has teacher and student version to collect data. The teacher version has 27 items (Items which are directly related to learner beliefs (items 12, 15, 18, 23, and 31) were excluded from the scale) and student version has 34 items. Each item has five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strong agreement) to 5 (strong disagreement). Both versions contain statements related to the following categories:

1. The difficulty of language learning: Items 3, 4, 15, 25 and 34.
2. Aptitude for language learning: Items 1, 2, 6, 10, 11, 16, 19, 30 and 33.
4. Learning and communication strategies: Items 7, 9, 13, 14, 18, 21, 22 and 26.

All respondents were required to rate their agreement to each statement on the Likert scale from 1 (Strongly agree) to 5 (Strongly disagree). The BALLI, as Horwitz (1985) puts it, could be “helpful to teachers both determining popular beliefs of their students as well as identifying minority groups or individuals with differing options”. Because of the age of respondent and the ease of responding, questionnaires (FLCAS and BALLI) were translated into Persian language and the Persian versions of both questionnaires were used for the current study. It was simplified because the original scale was designed for adult students.

Procedure

In the initial phase, the placement test was administrated to 80 female students registered in English class at Navid English Institute. In order to control the sex variable, the male students were excluded from this study.

In the second phase, the selected students (children) were asked to complete both FLCAS and BALLI questionnaires. Meanwhile, for answering the second research question, their teachers also completed the teacher version of BALLI. Before answering the scales, they were given the necessary instruction and time. In order to answer the first research question, the FLCAS and BALLI of each participant were analyzed. As far as FLCAS is concerned, for each student a score between 33 and 165 was given on the basis of the responses to each item. The relationship between anxiety and beliefs was also determined through Pearson Correlation. The results of the second research question were also described through comparing learners’ beliefs with that of their teachers. The results of the tests and questionnaires will be presented in the next chapter.

Data analyses and Discussion

This section deals mainly with the analysis of the 42 linguistically homogeneous female students’ responses given to the BALLI and FLCAS items. The results which were obtained in this study are presented below for the two null hypotheses separately.

Addressing the First Null Hypothesis

For testing this hypothesis, the data gathered through the two questionnaires which were given to the students—that is, BALLI questionnaire and FLCAS—had to be compared to see if there is a correlation between them. Table 1 indicates the descriptive statistics for the two questionnaires.

Table 2 depicts the results of the correlational analysis. This table clearly indicates that the two sets of students’ questionnaires were highly positively correlated (r = .448, p = .003). Therefore, the first hypothesis which states that “there is no relationship between learners’ anxiety level and learners’ beliefs toward FFL among children EFL learners” can be rejected, and it can be claimed that the students hold the same idea with regard to BALLI and FLCAS.

Concerning the first research question, the responses to the BALLI items reveals that the participant’s scores ranged from 32 (Min) to 96 (Max) with a mean of 75/14 and a standard deviation of 13/75. The composite scores of 42 participants for FLCAS items ranged from 29 to 93, with a mean of 58/45 and a standard deviation of 12/150. 29 was the Min score and 93 was the Max score.

In the previous studies which applied the FLCAS to examine learners’ foreign language anxiety at college level or high school level, Aida (1994), Liao (1999), and Chang (1999) obtained 96.7, 97.79, and 97.78 respectively for the mean of their participants’ scores of foreign language anxiety. The mean of all participants’ scores of the FLCAS in this study was 58.45, which was
lower than the same previous ones. Also, the result was not correspondent with that in the previous studies (Gardner, et al., 1987; Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986; Oh, 1996). This findings indicated that participants of foreign language anxiety were not very homogenous.

The relationship between beliefs and foreign language anxiety, the main concern of this study was investigated through Pearson correlation analysis. Analysis shows that correlation coefficient (r = 0.448) and (p = 0.03). So the first hypothesis which states that “There is no relationship between learners’ anxiety level and learners’ beliefs toward FFL among children EFL learners” can be rejected. Therefore the findings revealed that Iranian children EFL learners hold the same idea with regard to BALLI and FLCAS.

Addressing the second null hypothesis

In order to test the second hypothesis, the researcher compared the BALLI questionnaires completed by the students and BALLI questionnaires completed by the teachers. Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for this comparison, and Figure 4-2 illustrates the means in bar form.

As it can be seen in Table 3, the two means seem to be different. To find out whether or not this difference is significant, an independent-sample t-test was applied. Table 4 shows the results of the t-test.

According to Table 4, the amount of t-observed (-.838) is not high enough to be significant (p= .406); in other words, the teachers and the students hold almost similar idea with regard to BALLI. Therefore, like the first hypothesis, the second null hypothesis stating that “there are no mismatch between learners’ beliefs and their teachers’ beliefs toward FFL among children EFL learners” can also be rejected. Next chapter, that is chapter five, discusses the results in detail and concludes the study.

In order to compare both BALLI questionnaires completed by the students and teachers an independent sample t-test was applied. The finding reveals that the teachers and students hold almost similar idea with regard to their respondents to BALLI and result of t-test sample. The finding did in line with previous studies (Buyukyazi, 2009; …). According to findings of this study, any small differences found in the beliefs between teachers and students could be due to measurement error, differences in participant populations (changing over time, from person to person, for example), or the instructional content of specific classes.
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSION

While other studies of foreign language anxiety focused on either college or high school level, this study focused on primary school level. On the basis of the findings of this study, several conclusions can be made. First of all, the results revealed that the beliefs of the participants in this study were different from the results of other conducted studies. The findings provide evidence that learners’ beliefs can vary based on their cultural background and previous experiences (Horwitz, 1987).

Secondly, in the previous studies which applied the FLCAS to examine learners’ foreign language anxiety at college level or high school level, Aida (1994), Liao (1999), and Chang (1999) obtained 96.7, 97.79, and 97.78 respectively for the mean of their participants’ scores of foreign language anxiety. The mean of all participants’ scores of the FLCAS in this study was 58.45, which was not the same as the previous ones. This finding indicated that foreign language anxiety of elementary school students in Iran did not reach the same extent as that at different school levels. In other words, the tendency of foreign language anxiety of the elementary students in Iranian EFL was not obvious.

RECOMMENDATION

First, the participants of this study were female students whose register in English institute and possibly this would influence their level of anxiety as well as the beliefs they hold toward English. It is seems necessary to conduct other similar students in other institute before making any generalization.

Second, the only two self-report instruments used in this study (FLCAS, BALLI) may not suffice. Therefore, it is recommended to supplement such instruments with observations or interviews in order to gain richer data on both anxiety and beliefs.

Third, since all the participants of the present study were female children, the role of sex was ignored. It is recommended to content other studies in which the role of sex on both the level of anxiety and held beliefs be investigated.

Another factor that could be concern in future studies relate to context specificity. For example institute sample and school sample, may be students with special beliefs come to institute but in the schools there are different students with different beliefs. And found that learners’ beliefs about language learning differed by governmental and non-governmental contextual setting. However, individual learner differences such as personality might play a greater role than the factors considered in this study. In other studies, individual factors such as language proficiency, motivation, anxiety, attitude, and self-efficacy have been found to play a role in language learner beliefs (Huang and Tsai, 2003; Banya and Cheng, 1997; Truitt, 1995).

REFERENCES


