English language learning beliefs, learning strategies

and achievement of Masters students in Thailand

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Abstract

This research study sought to understand the perceptions about English language learning of 220 Thai graduate students studying for Masters degrees at a public university in Thailand. The students were questioned about their beliefs, strategies and achievements as English language learners. The data collected through these closed and open-ended questionnaires were then analysed quantitatively. To explore their personal views in more depth, 35 students from the larger group were selected for interviews. The study findings reveal various beliefs about English language learning as well as similarities and differences in the students' use of strategies which were all relevant to their learning achievement. Surprisingly, a large number of the students considered themselves to be unsuccessful English language learners whereas only a small percentage of the students, with greater use of learning strategies, rated themselves as high achievers. Significant correlations between students' beliefs about English language learning and their use of learning strategies indicate that the beliefs to some extent related to strategy use. The findings can be a valuable resource to consider appropriate ways of using students' perceptions to improve English teaching and learning practice.

Introduction and contextual background

This study was initiated in response to concerns about the effectiveness and success of English language learning programs at a Thai public university. A majority of student graduates, from the survey of client satisfaction administered by the university in 2010, apparently lacked English language proficiency even though they had passed the compulsory English courses which were a requirement for completion of their degrees. The question 'How can we help students learn English more efficiently?' thus became the focus of attention of the researcher and English language teachers in the context of this study.

The area of inquiry selected is in accordance with the views of many scholars in the field of second language acquisition (e.g., Wenden, 1986; Abraham & Vann, 1987; Horwitz, 1987). These

researchers assert that learners' preconceptions about language learning are likely to affect the way they use learning strategies and learn a second language. Investigation of the relationship between learners' beliefs about language learning and strategy use can provide teachers with a better understanding of their students' expectations of, commitment to and satisfaction with their language classes (Horwitz, 1988). It is thus hoped that findings from the current study will shed valuable light on teaching practices and their effectiveness and consequently assist to improve students' English language learning outcomes.

Literature review

Language learning beliefs

It is a widely-held proposition that language learners hold beliefs about their language learning even though they may not always be clear or deliberately thought out (Horwitz, 1987). Such beliefs about language learning have sometimes been called 'mini theories' of second language acquisition (Hosenfeld, 1978; Wenden, 1986). They are elsewhere defined as 'psychologically held understandings, premises or propositions about the world that are felt to be true' (Richardson, 1996: 103) and 'general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing learning and about the nature of language learning' (Victori & Lockhart, 1995: 224).

It is clear that learners' beliefs play an important role in students' experience and their success or failure as language learners. Several researchers note that learners who consider beliefs important for English language learning show higher degrees of perseverance in their learning tasks (see, e.g., Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Cotterall, 1999). Thus, knowledge of their learners' beliefs about language learning may provide language educators with a better understanding of their students' expectations of, commitment to, success in, and satisfaction with their English classes (Horwitz, 1988). With these considerations in mind, teachers can make more informed choices about teaching and are able to adopt a more responsive approach to the organisation of learning opportunities in their lessons (Cotterall, 1999; Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005).

Dr Elaine Horwitz, one of pioneering researchers on language learning beliefs, developed the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) to assess students' and teachers' beliefs regarding a variety of issues relating to language learning (Horwitz, 1987, 1988, 1999). Since its inception, the BALLI has been used extensively in small and large scale research studies to investigate the links between beliefs and language proficiency as well as strategy use, and also the impact of culture on beliefs in various contexts (e.g., Kern, 1995; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Mori. 1999; Yang, 1999; Shimo, 2002; Siebert, 2003; Tercanlioglu, 2005; Nikitina &

Furuoka, 2006; Bernat & Lloyd, 2007). All of these studies support the contention that learner beliefs about language learning are context specific.

Language learning strategies

Language learning strategies are defined as specific actions, behaviours, steps or techniques which can facilitate the storage, retrieval or use of the new language in a specific context (Oxford, 1989, 1990; Biggs, 1993). Strategies also include the tools for the self-directed involvement of students in their learning which is viewed as necessary for developing their communication skills. Learning strategies are often considered to be the outer layer of the onion, implying that they are most influenced by the environment and a variety of constructs such as instructional preferences, learning style and cognitive style (Curry, 2002). In light of these considerations, the term 'language learning strategy' was defined for the purpose of this research as including specific actions consciously employed by the learner for the purpose of learning. In other words, language learning strategies are what learners do to learn language and relate to learners' characteristics, learning styles and learning achievement.

Numerous studies indicate a connection between Rebecca Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and second language performance scores (e.g., O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Mullins, 1992; Green & Oxford, 1995; Olivares-Cuhat, 2002; Griffiths, 2003; Magogwe & Oliver, 2007). In addition, it is generally accepted that the use of language learning strategies is linked with achievement in the second language classroom and helps students become independent learners. Factors such as achievement or proficiency, course level, cultural background, age and gender are among those that affect language learners' choice of and preference for learning strategies.

Language learning achievement

Achievement or proficiency is determined in a variety of ways by researchers: self-ratings (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989); language achievement tests (Phillips, 1991); entrance and placement examinations (Mullin, 1992); years of language study (Watanabe, 1990); language course grades (Mullin, 1992); and career status (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989). Language learning achievement or proficiency has also been consistently linked to strategy use (Green & Oxford, 1995; Khaldieh, 2000; Wharton, 2000). However, the relationship is more complex than a simple linear connection between building up strategy use and improving achievement levels, and depends greatly on the type of strategy employed. Chen, for example, in her study of Chinese EFL learners concluded that higher achieving learners actually used fewer communication strategies, despite the fact that they used the strategies more effectively than lower achieving students (Chen, 1990). At the same time, the correlative or causal

nature of this relationship cannot be proven and, as such, it cannot be determined whether language learning achievement occurs before, after or concurrently with strategy use.

For the present study, language learning achievement was simply determined on the basis of the students' self-ratings (derived from their personal judgement) and the grades given by their English teachers. This measure was adopted to address the observation that many students with high grade point averages showed rather poor English communication skills. Grades can merely reflect students' performance rather than their true competence (Suwanarak & Phothongsunan, 2008).

Relationship of learning beliefs, strategies and achievement

In contrast to the research findings of Chen (1990), many studies of the relationship between language learning achievement and the use of language learning strategies indicate that high achieving learners use a greater number and wider variety of language learning strategies. Despite these findings, there has been no empirical verification to say that a causal relationship exists between high achieving language learners and their language learning strategy use.

It has been asserted that in practice more strategy use is helpful to some learners in enhancing their language learning achievement or proficiency (e.g., Skehan, 1989; Green & Oxford, 1995; Halbach, 2000). However, it has also been noted that it is difficult to determine whether strategy use contributes to learning achievement or learning achievement influences strategy selection (MacIntyre, 2000). A key American study of mainly Spanish-speaking learners revealed that students at all levels reported extensive use of language learning strategies (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper & Russo, 1985). Conversely, Rebecca Oxford, another prominent researcher in the field, maintains that lower achieving students do not use fewer learning strategies than their counterparts. Rather, they tend to use learning strategies inefficiently – without taking into consideration their own learning style preferences (Oxford, 1993). Other research has focused on the type of learning strategies that are most prevalent or beneficial for high achieving students. These include cognitive strategies, such as looking for patterns and reading for pleasure in the target language, which are the strategies used by high achieving students (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989). On he basis of all of these studies it appears that high achievers display greater use of metacognitive strategies to manage their own learning than do low achieving learners, and thus that there is a strong correlation between this type of strategy and language learning achievement.

There is also a body of evidence which suggests that beliefs about language learning have much influence on learning achievements and experiences (e.g., Schommer, 1990; Wen & Johnson, 1997; Horwitz, 1999; Sakui & Gaies, 1999). An empirical study conducted in China showed how learners'

beliefs are likely to be a primary factor in strategy use and language learning achievement. The findings showed a direct causal relationship between gender, first language (L1) and second language (L2) proficiency and vocabulary use, learning strategies and second language proficiency, and learning achievement (Wen & Johnson, 1997).

Methodology

Research questions

Three research questions were developed based on the principal objective of this study:

1   What beliefs do Masters students hold about English language learning?
2   What strategies do the students use for learning English?
3   What are the relationships between beliefs, strategies and achievement in English language learning for these students?

Data collection and analysis

Two data collection methods – a questionnaire and an individual interview – were employed. All of the 220 student participants provided demographic information and details of their English language learning backgrounds in the first part of the questionnaire. Then, in the second part, they indicated their responses to 34 statement items adapted from Horwitz's BALLI and 50 statement items adapted from Oxford's SILL on a five-point *frequency of use* rating scale. Participants then rated their English learning achievement into three different levels: high, intermediate and low. Finally, in response to the open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked to provide their perceptions of the relationships between beliefs, strategies and achievement in relation to English language learning. The data obtained at this stage were used to select the 35 student participants for the in-depth interviews conducted in the next phase of the project.

Several statistical approaches were used to analyse the quantitative data from the questionnaire: descriptive statistics, factor analysis, Pearson *r* correlations and Cronbach's alpha test. Considered along with the quantitative data, qualitative data from the open-ended question and the interview were content analysed by using interpretive analysis methods of topic ordering and constructing categories.

Quantitative findings

Descriptive analysis of the BALLI

A factor analysis using the BALLI data showed that participants believed that the following factors were important for English language learning:

1   motivation for and the nature of learning English

2   self-efficacy and confidence in learning English

3   formal learning beliefs, and

4   foreign language aptitude.

The great majority of participants (80%) agreed that younger children were likely to have better aptitude for learning English and almost three quarters believed that some people possess a special ability for learning English. More than half of the participants (67%) agreed that everyone can learn to speak English. Somewhat surprisingly, only a very few participants (9%) considered English to be very complicated to learn and many (72%) felt that English was easier to learn than other languages.

The perceptions of the students about the nature of English language learning were more diverse and to some extent incongruous. A large majority (79%) believed that knowing about English-speaking cultures was important for interacting with other English language speakers in oral communication contexts whereas only a very small percentage of the students (15%) believed grammar to be important for English language learning. Most students (67%) asserted that memorisation was vital for language learning.

Interestingly, almost all of the students (91%) believed that regular practice was very important for improving their language learning and communication skills. Regarding motivation and expectations, a large number of the students (89%) supposed that Thai people consider it important to speak English well. They believed that they would have better opportunities to get a good job if they learned English to a high degree of proficiency.

Factor analysis of the BALLI

A scree plot test was employed to refine the data relating to participants' beliefs about English language learning. The first belief factor dimension incorporated English language practice, having an excellent accent, the role of English for career advancement and audio media for improving listening and speaking skills. The second belief factor dimension included self-confidence and efficacy. By learning to speak English well, most of the students held a belief that they would become more acquainted with native speakers of English and their cultures. The third belief factor dimension covered rote learning, translation, grammar, memorising vocabulary and error correction in sentences. The fourth belief factor dimension related to younger children's special aptitude for language learning – the participants firmly believed that it is a case of 'the younger, the better'.

Descriptive analysis was employed to examine the students' language learning strategies. A large number of the students (81%) showed medium to high usage of learning strategies. However, more than half of the students (58%) rarely applied new English words in sentences as a memorising technique. In addition, 43% of participants revealed that they never referred to a dictionary when they didn't know the correct English word required. Many students (64%) reported that they always guessed the meanings of unfamiliar words. In terms of affective strategies, a large proportion of the students (71%) indicated that they never practised English with other students or native English speakers and 62% indicated that they never made inquiries in English. 47% of the students stated that they never tried to ease anxieties associated with English language usage.

It was also found that 63% of the students professed to have good social learning strategies; they always asked either their teachers or native English speakers to repeat words or to speak more slowly when unable to keep up with a conversation. Interestingly, most of the students (85%) reported a high usage of cognitive strategies; they learned new words by writing repeatedly and were actively motivated to monitor and evaluate their learning progress.

Factor analysis of the SILL

Overall, the participants showed only a medium level of strategy usage during English language learning as measured by the SILL. Factor analysis was used to rank six types of learning strategies: compensation strategies, cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, memory strategies, social strategies and affective strategies.

The results showed that the most popular strategies were asking questions in English, trying to converse with other people and starting conversations in English, and learning about native English speakers' cultures. Some of the students' favoured language learning practices included watching TV shows and movies with English dialogue and writing letters, messages or notes in English. Metacognitive strategies that rated highly included adopting study planning techniques, reading improvement protocols and learner self-evaluation tools. In terms of memorisation strategies, the students indicated that they learned English by rote and remembered new words through the use of visualisation.

A number of compensation strategies were used by students to improve their English communication skills. These included predicting the correct meaning of words, making use of gestures to carry on an English conversation and using synonyms in place of unfamiliar vocabulary. In terms of cognitive strategies, students tried to avoid translating every single English word and made efforts to summarise information in a text. Affective strategies were the least used. For example, students were unlikely to

express their feelings when they encountered learning problems even though they appreciated that even their small successes in learning English could help to keep them motivated.

Correlations of learning belief and strategy variables

Pearson *r* correlation coefficient tests were used to investigate and assess the relationships between learners' beliefs and their strategy use. The results of these tests revealed significant correlations between some of the four belief variables and the six strategy variables. In other words, some beliefs were found to either constrain or facilitate the use of certain language learning strategies. Data yielding a *p* value of .01 and .05 indicated that the factor scores of beliefs and strategies were significantly correlated, with correlation coefficients ranging from -.11 to .48. The strongest correlation was between the students' beliefs about motivation and the use of compensation strategies (*r* = .48) whereas the correlation between beliefs about foreign language aptitude and memory strategies was the weakest (*r* = -.11).

Beliefs about self-efficacy and confidence in English language learning and beliefs about foreign language aptitude were positively correlated with social and practical learning strategies (*r* = .47 and .27 respectively). Noticeably, formal learning beliefs had a negative correlation with social and practical learning strategies (*r* = -.19). There were also several other weak correlations between learning beliefs and strategies. For example, beliefs about learner motivation and the nature of learning English had only a slight correlation (*r* = .12) with memory strategies, and these strategies were also negatively correlated (*r* = -.11) with beliefs about foreign language aptitude. Likewise, cognitive strategies did not much relate to beliefs about self-efficacy and confidence in learning English (*r* = .15). Beliefs about formal learning and foreign language aptitude were also weakly correlated with affective strategies (*r* = .18 and .13 respectively).

From the quantitative data collected, it was evident that beliefs about self-efficacy and confidence in learning English were closely correlated with most strategies – social and practical learning strategies, metacognitive strategies, memory strategies and cognitive strategies – while the other beliefs were correlated with very few.

Learning strategies and learning achievement

Generally speaking, the higher the self-assessed level of language learning achievement, the greater the number and frequency of language learning strategies the students reported they used. About half of the students (54%) evaluated themselves as low achievers in English language learning. Noticeably, most of the low achieving students and the intermediate achievers were likely to use

compensation strategies (*M* = 3.11 and 3.45 respectively). The high achieving students seemed to place great value on self-efficacy and confidence in learning English whereas they rarely applied memory strategies to their English language learning.

Qualitative findings

From the responses to the open-ended question in the questionnaire and the individual interviews with 35 students, it was clear that the students recognised the value of learning English. In particular, they believed English language learning to be useful not only for academic success and communication with other people internationally, but also for better job opportunities in Thailand.

Metacognitive strategies figured highly in the students' responses. These included monitoring their own learning processes and setting learning goals, being confident and fearless of making mistakes when learning to speak, and seeking exposure to English as often as possible. Compensation strategies, such as using a dictionary when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary and analysing the prefixes and suffixes of new words were also evident. In addition, memory strategies were employed; for example, students memorised whole sentences from texts, recited 50 new words every day and tried to incorporate two or three newly memorised words in English conversation.

It seemed that most of the students had positive attitudes towards English language learning. They acknowledged that to achieve the learning goal required a great deal of time and effort; there was no short cut to becoming a good language learner. In this regard, two students insisted that they would never give up learning English until they achieved success. Even though many students adhered to traditional learning methods (e.g., learning grammar and memorising new words) to reach their learning goals, a significant number believed that learning English grammar and reading in the classroom were less practical than learning for communicative purposes.

Some of the students agreed that the learning environment played an important role. They recognised that it was easier to learn the English language in a natural or authentic setting. Four participants described their ideal learning environments to be one in which they could study English in a country where it is spoken as a native language, or by working for an international organisation. Regarding functional and formal practice strategies, three students revealed that they usually practised English via Internet chats with native English speakers. Several other unique strategies were reported by a number of students, such as listening to English songs and singing along as often as possible, writing down dialogue from movies and making notes in English.

Discussion and implications

Even though this formal English learning context at graduate level appears to be less conducive to English learning practices than in other international institutions, it was clear that the Thai students' beliefs about English language learning and the flexible use of English learning strategies played an important role in their learning of the language. Although many students believed in the effectiveness of traditional learning methods (e.g., grammar learning and rote learning), a significant proportion were more inclined to use social and practical learning strategies and considered conventional learning methods less useful for communicative purposes. Hence, English teachers should focus more on classroom activities based on the concepts of communicative teaching and learning and they should try to encourage their students to use strategies involving conversational practice which could help them to improve their communicative competence. This may cultivate an approach to student-centred learning of English in the Thai graduate context and finally bring greater levels of achievement and confidence in their English language learning for these students.

In addition, the students who rated themselves as high achievers showed a higher use of learning strategies than did those who considered themselves as low achievers. Likewise, various researchers (e.g., Nation & McLaughlin, 1986; Nayak, et al., 1990; Bialystok, 2001) have postulated that students who consider themselves as high achieving learners of English show greater potential to learn a new language and possibly have superior abilities in using English like bilinguals. Sociocultural implications can be focused on the fact that graduate students in a Thai university context have come from various backgrounds in terms of English proficiency, schooling system and teaching practices; as a result, these factors to some extent may have affected the students' beliefs about English language learning and their preferences for learning strategies.

Learner motivation was another factor influencing the students' learning beliefs and their choices of learning strategies. Most of the students held strong instrumental motivation for learning English on account of self-imposed or other pressures at home as well as being more motivated to learn English for academic purposes and better job opportunities rather than for the purpose of social interaction. In this regard, foreign language educators and curriculum developers of graduate programs should take into account the fact that English language learning is highly likely to be in demand in the graduate context. The development and implementation of foreign language curricula at a national level should also take heed of such factors. Publishers of learning materials at all levels of English language proficiency should be well aware of the beliefs and different approaches to English language learning of graduate students.

Moreover, there was a reciprocal correlation between students' beliefs and their use of learning strategies; that is, the beliefs to some extent confined the strategy use (Yang, 1993). For that reason, investigations of students' beliefs about language learning should be combined with strategy training and carried out in regular English classes. For example, strategy-based instruction could be used with the aim of supporting students to develop more effective learning strategies and practical ideas for their learning. Several prior studies also argue about the effectiveness of appropriate strategy training on learners' autonomous and independent learning (e.g., O'Malley, et al., 1985; Wenden, 1991; Chamot, 2001; Oxford, et al., 2004). Thus, strategy training in the classroom could be used to enhance students' awareness of effective English language learning strategies and their optimal methods of implementation; as a result, students' proficiency levels in English could be improved on the whole. For belief and strategy training, teachers should explicitly concentrate on issues of effective strategy use and mistaken or unrealistic beliefs about English language learning through activities such as classroom discussions about learning English. After identifying the students' beliefs with regard to English language learning, teachers can implement practical measures to address mistaken beliefs and give emphasis to beliefs which will enhance students' progress in English language learning.

This study gives additional support to the contention that there are relationships between learning strategies and learning achievement (Takeuchi, 2002). Teachers, therefore, should embrace these relationships and make use of strategies that have a positive correlation with English learning achievement as an integral part of their teaching practice. Further, teachers ought to contemplate whether they could use more subtle ways to find out the most beneficial strategy use for students in their English classes. Perhaps teachers could apply more integrated techniques by offering a learning strategy model which would be the most helpful to all students in class and present other language points as part of the normal teaching process (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). Students acquire a better understanding of how to learn when language content is integrated with strategies for learning. As a result, teaching and learning materials will be more retrievable, memorable and comprehensible for learners.

Conclusion

On the whole, this study provides a useful reminder that not only do students' beliefs about language learning affect their use of learning strategies, but also that their level of English language learning achievement influences the frequency of use and choices of learning strategies and their beliefs about English language learning. Teachers of English must take these belief and learning strategy variables into account in order to enhance language teaching and learning.

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