

Beliefs about language learning and their relationship to proficiency

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This paper reports on a study that investigated the beliefs about language learning of 202 EFL students and 45 EFL teachers in the Department of English at the City University of Hong Kong. The primary aim of the study was to determine if the differences between student and teacher beliefs about language learning affect proficiency. Secondary aims were to develop hypotheses about the origins of Chinese learner beliefs about language learning, and to check the correlation between learner self-rated proficiency and tested proficiency. Data were collected using a 34-item self-report questionnaire (Horwitz's BALLI – Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory), a comprehensive proficiency test, an interview, and a self-rated proficiency sheet. Results indicated that four of the mismatched learner beliefs negatively affected EFL proficiency: additionally, learner answers on seven other BALLI items were considered to have implications for the learning and teaching of EFL. It was concluded that a number of different learner beliefs were detrimental to language learning, and also that they resulted in many dissatisfied and frustrated students who could not understand the rationale behind the tasks they carried out in class.

Introduction

Foreign language learning is almost certainly the subject of many firm beliefs and convictions among EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners in Hong Kong, as it is around the world, and these beliefs almost certainly affect language learning. The genesis of this project¹ was Horwitz's 1988 suggestion that if learners have preconceived ideas and negative or unrealistic expectations about how foreign languages are learned – particularly if they differ significantly from teachers' ideas – learner satisfaction with the course, confidence in the teacher,

and achievement may be affected. The aim of my research was to carry out a preliminary investigation of these ideas in Hong Kong: to consider how far learner beliefs differ from those held by EFL teachers, whether those differences affect language learning (and in particular, whether mismatched beliefs are associated with lower proficiency levels), and how they might be eliminated.

I shall first briefly review three empirical studies (by Horwitz, Kern, and Mantle-Bromley) that used the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) to investigate learner beliefs (previous theoretical, as opposed to empirical, work on learner beliefs will be discussed in the 'Discussion and conclusions' section at the end of the article). I shall then describe the methodology and results of this research. Implications for teaching EFL will also be discussed at the end of the article.

Background to the study

At present, the prime data-collection instrument used for researching learner beliefs about language learning is the 34-item Likert-scale BALLI, prepared by Horwitz in 1985 to use on her foreign language teacher training course – she asked her trainees to question their beliefs about language learning. The BALLI has also been used in three fairly large-scale American studies (Horwitz 1988; Kern 1995; Mantle-Bromley 1995). In 1988, Horwitz researched the beliefs of a number of first-semester foreign language learners at the University of Texas: 80 were studying German, 63 French, and 98 Spanish. Answers on some items seemed to differ from commonly held teacher perceptions. Her learners appeared to somewhat underestimate the difficulty of language learning: 43% of them said that if you spent one hour a day learning a foreign language, you would become fluent within two years, and a further 35% that it would take three to five years. Thirty-four percent agreed or strongly agreed that learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words, and 29% that it is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules. Fifty percent believed in the existence of foreign language aptitude, and 35% said that they had that aptitude. Finally, 71% stated that it is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent accent, while 50% said it is important to practice in the language laboratory.

Horwitz (1988: 292) proposes that these gaps between teacher and learner beliefs probably result in "negative [language-learning] outcomes" for learners. (Others have also given theoretical support to this idea – see Green & Oxford 1995: 265; Oxford & Nyikos 1989: 292; Mantle-Bromley 1995: 380-1; Cotterall 1995: 202-3; Politzer & McGroarty 1985: 118-9; Cortazzi 1990: 54; Littlewood, Liu, & Yu 1996: 71. Little effort has been made, however, to test the idea empirically.) Horwitz also suggests that a gap between teacher and learner beliefs can lead to reduced learner confidence in and satisfaction with the class and to an unwillingness to participate in 'communicative' activities (p. 290). In her final conclusions, she asserts that:

Teachers will likely encounter...many unanticipated beliefs, some enabling and some truly detrimental to successful language learning...foreign language teachers can ill afford to ignore those beliefs if they expect their students to be open to particular teaching methods and to receive the maximum benefit from them. (p. 293)

She suggests as an example that if students believe language learning means learning vocabulary and grammar rules, they will spend most of their time memorising vocabulary lists and grammar rules rather than doing the tasks their teacher plans for them (p. 289).

Kern conducted a similar study with the BALLI in 1995 with 180 students of French as a second language at the University of Berkeley (see Table 1 for results). Kern's conclusions are in the main similar to those put forward by Horwitz in 1988. However, Kern does comment (1995: 76) that compared to Horwitz's students, his students' beliefs seem to be somewhat more in line with "current thinking in foreign language pedagogy". He also checked learner beliefs twice, at the beginning and the end of one semester, to see if his learners' beliefs changed over time. He found very little change over the whole semester (p. 78), and concluded that learner beliefs do not automatically change when learners are merely exposed to new methods, and that learner beliefs were "quite well entrenched" (p. 76).

Mantle-Bromley (1995) used the BALLI (with five items omitted) to investigate the beliefs of 208 seventh grade middle school students taking first-year French and Spanish in Kansas. While these students were much younger than the university students used in previous studies and in this study, the results are still of interest and importance, both for comparison and as a measure of the beliefs of younger learners beginning to learn a foreign language. Mantle-Bromley's results (see Table 1) indicate, as did Horwitz's and Kern's, that some of her students' beliefs about language learning differed from commonly held teachers' beliefs. It is interesting that her learners underestimated the difficulty of language learning to a greater extent than Horwitz's and Kern's

Mantle-Bromley's conclusions are similar to those of Horwitz and of Kern. She stresses that teachers need to have a clear understanding of foreign language students' beliefs, because learners with realistic and informed beliefs are more likely to behave productively in class, work harder outside class, and (crucially) persist longer with language study (Mantle-Bromley 1995: 373-5). Finally, she proposes that when student beliefs and performance do not match, they "become frustrated with the class and with themselves" (p. 381) and that certain misinformed "beliefs and expectations may actually prove harmful to their success in the [foreign language] classroom" (p. 383).

Three empirical studies have therefore found similar results (see Table 1) and reached similar conclusions. Although the BALLI has 34 items, learner beliefs in all three studies appeared to differ from commonly held teacher beliefs on only a few items, though the differences that were found are meaningful. Learners seemed to underestimate the difficulty of language learning, and also to hold misconceptions about how to learn foreign languages. They also, per-

Table 1. Comparison of students attitudes (%) in previous studies

Belief	Horwitz	Kern	Mantle-Bromley
fluency after studying one hour a day within:			
2 years	43	40	69
3-5 years	35	37	18
language learning mainly a matter of learning a lot of:			
vocabulary	34	18	44
grammar	29	22	28
foreign language aptitude:			
exists	50	53	41
I have it	35	58	(-)*
importance of:			
excellent accent	71	50	31
language lab	50	69	(-)*

* students not asked this question

haps, gave more value to 'an excellent accent' than do foreign language teachers. Horwitz's learners believed in the existence of foreign language aptitude, but did not believe that they themselves possessed that aptitude.

I suggest that Kern's finding that beliefs did not change over time is important, as many EFL teachers probably believe that learner beliefs naturally change when learners are exposed to new methods and techniques. However, if beliefs do not change, and if learner misconceptions negatively affect language learning, it may be advisable for EFL teachers to take a more active role in finding out precisely what beliefs their learners hold, and to work towards correcting some of those beliefs.

The stimulus for the current study was Horwitz's final conclusions to her 1988 project (quoted above). The main aim of my project was to consider the veracity of Horwitz's conclusions as they apply in the Hong Kong tertiary EFL context. However, this study aimed to expand on the work of Horwitz, Kern, and Mantle-Bromley in two ways: first, by testing the association between learner beliefs and linguistic progress, an association that has to date received only theoretical support; and second, by directly investigating the beliefs of a large number of EFL teachers in order to precisely calibrate the gap (if any) between learners' and teachers' beliefs, and thus give empirical backing to the three previous researchers' theories. Other aims were to investigate the origins of Hong Kong learners' beliefs about language learning, and to check the correlation between learner self-rated proficiency and tested proficiency.

It was noted that the three researchers reviewed above relied solely on the BALLI – a self-report questionnaire – as the source for their empirical data, and based their conclusions and recommendations on those results alone.

However, in this study, data from these self-report questionnaires is supported by qualitative data collected by way of interviews and a test. The aim of collecting these further data was to back up and help explain the results obtained from questionnaires.

Methodology

SUBJECTS

Ten EFL classes took part in the study (all taught by me) – a total of 202 learners. Their average age was 20, ranging from 18 to 26. All the students were Hong Kong Chinese, and all were first-year City University students from the Science, Maths, and Engineering Departments taking the compulsory EFL course ‘English Communication Skills’.

The 45 EFL teachers who took part were all Department of English staff.

DATA-COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS AND PROCEDURE

Five data-collection instruments (in English) were used:

- 1) a self-report questionnaire for learners on beliefs about language learning
- 2) a teacher version of the same questionnaire
- 3) a comprehensive proficiency test
- 4) a sheet on which learners were asked to self-rate their proficiency
- 5) a semi-structured interview sheet for learners.

Instruments 1, 2, 3, and 4 collected quantitative data, while instrument 5 collected qualitative data.

Learner self-report questionnaire – the BALLI

The BALLI is a self-report questionnaire written by Horwitz in 1985 that investigates 34 different learner beliefs about language learning, as outlined above (see also the Appendix). As the aim of my research was to replicate and expand on Horwitz’s 1988 study in the Hong Kong context, the BALLI was used almost unchanged (a couple of items were slightly modified for use in Hong Kong). It has a Likert-scale format: learners are asked to choose from “strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree” for questions (randomly ordered) which fall into five areas: the nature of language learning, the difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, pronunciation, and language learning strategies.

I administered the BALLI to 202 students during 1997/98. They completed the questionnaire in class, one form for each learner, so the response rate was 100%. The forms were not completed anonymously (students wrote their student numbers on the form), to permit me to check the associations between beliefs and proficiency test scores.

Teacher questionnaire – the teacher version of the BALLI

The teacher version of the BALLI is almost identical to the student version, except that six items that only apply to students were omitted (for example, Item 6 – “I believe that I will ultimately learn to speak English very well”). Also, two items were slightly changed; for example, the student version of Item 27 says “If I learn to speak English very well, it will help me get a good job”, while the teacher version says “If my students learn to speak English very well, it will help them get a good job”.

Copies of the teacher version of the BALLI were distributed to all 51 teachers in the Department of English late in 1997. Forty-five were completed and returned, a response rate of 88%.

Proficiency test

The test had four parts: listening comprehension (dictation, 20% of total marks); grammar (30 multiple choice questions on a variety of structures, 30%); reading comprehension (a passage followed by ten multiple choice questions, 20%); and essay writing (a 120-word essay – students were asked to agree or disagree with the statement “I learn more when I study with classmates than when I study alone” – 30%). The test did not contain an oral communicative skills section.

One hundred and fifty-five students (80 male, 75 female) took the 90-minute test during 1997/98. It was not possible to test all 202 students, due to lack of time in some classes.

Self-rated proficiency sheet

Learners were instructed on this sheet to “estimate your ability in English compared with the ability of the other students on this course” in four areas: listening, grammar, reading, and writing. The format was Likert-scale: learners circled a number from one to ten for each section. A key was printed on the sheet – a score of one or two meant ‘poor’, three to five meant ‘fair’, six to eight meant ‘good’, and nine or ten meant ‘excellent’.

One hundred and thirty-eight students (79 male, 59 female) completed the self-rated proficiency sheet during class. It was not possible to have all 202 students complete the sheet, because of a lack of time.

Learner interview sheet (selected learners)

The aim of these 5-minute semi-structured interviews was to collect qualitative data to back up and assist interpretation of the data obtained from the BALLI. Learners were asked: “From where did you get your beliefs about language learning?” The interviews were held after the questionnaires had been completed. A few learners were interviewed individually after each class as time allowed, and a total of 121 learners were interviewed. It was not possible to interview all the students, because many students had no time after class.

Because of a lack of time during and between classes, then, it was not possible to test and interview all 202 learners or have them all self-rate their profi-

ciency. However, I believe that the learners tested and interviewed were adequately representative of the whole group of students.

ANALYSING THE DATA

In analysing results, descriptive statistics (mean scores, frequencies and standard deviations) were computed for all BALLI items, and for all tested and self-rated proficiency scores. Associations between learner beliefs and proficiency were checked using one-way analysis of variance. Significance levels were set at $p < .05$, non-directional. Correlations between tested proficiency and self-rated proficiency were calculated through Pearson r . All the interview data were tabulated and categorised.

Results

The results will be given briefly in this section, and then discussed further in the final section.

LEARNER AND TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRES – THE BALLI

I proposed in the introduction to this article that foreign language learning may well be the subject of many firm beliefs and convictions among EFL learners in Hong Kong. Results from the BALLI tend to support this idea, at least for these learners; 27 out of the 34 items generated high levels of either agreement or disagreement (“neither agree nor disagree” was chosen by a majority of the 202 learners for only seven items).

Many of the results are not controversial. For example, 90% of learners and 80% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language”. However, on eleven of the items (2, 7, 9, 14, 15, 16, 19, 20, 21, 32, and 33), answers have implications for the learning and teaching of EFL. Table 2 shows learner and teacher ratings for these items. All the results are expressed as percentages (full results are given in the Appendix).

PROFICIENCY TEST

Table 3 (next page) gives proficiency test results. There was a significant ($p < .0001$) difference in scores by gender; males ($N=80$) averaged 67%, and females ($N=75$) 73%.

ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN LEARNER BELIEFS AND PROFICIENCY

A statistically significant association was found between four student beliefs about language learning and EFL proficiency. Tables 4, 5, 6 and 7 give details of these associations.

Table 2. Learner (N=202) & teacher (N=45) beliefs about language learning

#	Item	Subjects	Agree / strongly agree	Neither agree / disagree	Disagree/ strongly disagree
2	Some people are born with a special ability which helps them learn a foreign language.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	71 80	23 16	6 4
7	It is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent accent.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	52 13	36 31	12 56
9	You shouldn't say anything in the foreign language until you can say it correctly.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	9 6	17 7	74 87
14	If someone spent one hour a day learning a foreign language, how long would it take him/her to become fluent? 1) less than a year 2) 1-2 years 3) 3-5 years 4) 5-10 years 5) you can't learn a language in 1 hour a day	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>			
15	I have foreign language aptitude (a special ability for learning foreign languages).	<i>students</i>	14	47	39
16	Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	62 18	28 22	10 60
19	If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning it will be hard to get rid of them later.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	36 22	30 22	34 56
20	Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	64 7	23 30	13 63
21	It is important to practice in the language laboratory.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	45 18	37 40	18 42
32	People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	57 18	30 53	13 29
33	Hong Kong Chinese are good at learning foreign languages.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	24 7	55 78	21 15

Table 4 shows that the students who agreed that "Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules" were less proficient than those who disagreed.

Table 3. Proficiency test results (N=155)

Section	Mean Score	s.d.	min.	max.
Listening comprehension (20 pts.)	13.04	1.95	8	19
Grammar (30 pts.)	20.79	3.30	11	28
Reading comprehension (20 pts.)	14.01	2.85	4	20
Writing (30 pts.)	20.32	2.38	13	25
TOTAL (100 pts.)	69.65	7.93	42	91

Table 4. BALLI Item 20 and proficiency (N=155)

“Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules.”	Agree or strongly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree or strongly disagree
% Students	64	23	13
<i>Proficiency (mean test score)</i>	<i>68</i>	<i>71</i>	<i>75</i>

$f = 5.29, sig = .006$

Table 5 shows that the students who underestimated the difficulty of learning a foreign language were less proficient than those with a more realistic view.

Table 5. BALLI Item 14 and proficiency (N=155)

“If someone spent one hour a day learning a foreign language, how long would it take him/her to become fluent?”	Up to 2 years	3 to 5 years	More than 5 years
% Students	39	30	31
<i>Proficiency (mean test score)</i>	<i>68</i>	<i>69</i>	<i>73</i>

$f = 4.61, sig = .011$

Table 6 shows that the students who disagreed with the statement “If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning it will be hard to get rid of them later on” were more proficient than those who agreed.

Table 6. BALLI Item 19 and proficiency (N=155)

“If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning it will be hard to get rid of them later on.”	Agree or strongly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree or strongly disagree
% Students	36	30	34
<i>Proficiency (mean test score)</i>	<i>68</i>	<i>69</i>	<i>72</i>

$f = 3.84, sig = .024$

Table 7 shows that the students who disagreed with the statement "You shouldn't say anything in the foreign language until you can say it correctly" were more proficient than those who agreed.

Table 7. BALLI Item 9 and proficiency (N=155)

"You shouldn't say anything in the foreign language until you can say it correctly."	Agree or strongly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree or strongly disagree
% Students	9	17	74
Proficiency (mean test score)	66	66	71

$f = 5.83, sig = .004$

SELF-RATED PROFICIENCY

Table 8 gives self-rated proficiency results. There was no significant difference in scores by gender ($p = .511$): males ($N = 79$) averaged 43%, and females ($N = 59$) 44%.

Table 8. Self-rated proficiency (N=138)

Section	Mean Score	s.d.	min.	max.
Listening comprehension (25 pts.)	10.36	3.41	3	18
Grammar (25 pts.)	10.72	2.95	3	20
Reading comprehension (25 pts.)	11.41	2.85	5	20
Writing (25 pts.)	10.58	3.13	3	20
TOTAL (100 pts.)	43.08	9.32	8	68

Results (given as percentages) for individual sections were as follows:

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN TESTED AND SELF-RATED PROFICIENCY

Data from the 138 students who completed both the proficiency test and the self-rated proficiency sheet were used for these analyses (Table 10). The overall correlation (for all students) between total scores for tested and self-rated proficiency was low, indicating virtually no relationship between the variables. However, there was a large difference by gender: the correlation was very low for males, but modest for females.

The overall correlations between tested and self-rated scores for individual sections were as follows:

- 1) modest for listening, but low for males and fairly high for females
- 2) low for grammar, and low for both males and females.
- 3) very low for reading; very low for males and low for females.
- 4) very low for writing, and very low for both males and females.

Table 9. Self-rated proficiency (%) by category (N=138)

Section	poor	fair	good	excellent
Listening	9	76	15	0
Grammar	5	83	12	0
Reading	1	79	20	0
Writing	7	81	12	0
OVERALL	5	87	8	0

Table 10. Correlations between tested and self-rated proficiency

Section	Overall	(N=138)	Males	(N=79)	Females	(N=59)
	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Total Score	.1929	.024	-.0311	.787	.4666	<.001
Listening	.4196	<.001	.2107	.064	.6124	<.001
Grammar	.2961	<.001	.2508	.027	.3422	.009
Reading	.1348	.118	.0681	.554	.2612	.048
Writing	.0898	.298	-.0383	.739	.1398	.295

LEARNER INTERVIEWS

The interviews, in which 121 learners were asked "From where did you get your beliefs about language learning?", were not very successful. This was because many learners did not seem to know the origin of their beliefs, and others were unsure. Fifty percent gave no answer, 32% said secondary school, 8% said family or friends, 5% said other EFL lessons, 5% said the mass media, 4% said living abroad, and 4% said their university teachers.

Discussion and conclusions

Results from the BALLI are similar to those found by Horwitz, Kern, and Mantle-Bromley in that student responses differed from common teacher perceptions on the same items. In this survey, answers on eleven items appear to have implications for language learning and teaching. And on four of those eleven items (20, 14, 19, and 9), a statistically significant association was found between learner beliefs and proficiency.² These latter four findings are important because, while previous researchers have theorised that certain learner beliefs negatively affect language learning, little empirical research has so far been done to test the notion. The present findings provide evidence of a link.

Results from Item 20 indicate that 64% of learners believed that "Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules" (only 7%

of teachers agreed – a very large difference). Those learners were significantly less proficient than learners who had a different view of the nature of language learning (see Table 4), and it is possible that their lower proficiency is a result of this belief. Perhaps (as Horwitz suggests) students who hold this belief focus on memorising grammar rules, to the exclusion of teacher-directed tasks. Another possible effect of this belief is that students could become very dissatisfied with a teacher who does not emphasise grammar in, for example, classroom tasks and marking essays.

Results for Item 14 indicate that students underestimated the difficulty of learning a foreign language – 39% believed you can become fluent in one or two years if you spend one hour a day studying it (only 12% of teachers believed this), and a further 30% said three to five years. Learners who underestimated the difficulty of language learning were significantly less proficient than learners who thought otherwise (see Table 5); and as with Item 20, it is possible that their lower proficiency is a result of this belief. Another significance of this finding is (as Mantle-Bromley 1995: 381 points out) that students who fail to become fluent within the expected time may become frustrated with themselves or with their teacher, disheartened, or disappointed.

Two findings in the present study provide some indication of a causal link between language learning strategy use and proficiency. Cohen (1998: 4) defines strategies as student actions that “enhance the learning or use of a second language...through storage, retention, recall, and application”. Results for Item 19 indicate that the learners who thought that being allowed to make mistakes in the beginning meant they would find it hard to get rid of them later on were significantly less proficient than learners who thought otherwise (see Table 6). Also, for Item 9, learners who believed that they should not say anything in the foreign language until they could say it correctly were significantly less proficient than learners who did not (see Table 7). Links between language learning strategies and learner beliefs are important because of the probably strong links between strategy use and proficiency (Wenden 1986b: 194, Horwitz 1987: 126). There is plenty of evidence of these links (see Oxford & Burry-Stock 1995: 4 for an extensive review). Such links would have implications for learner training – any strategy that directly promotes language learning should perhaps be taught to students.

Another benefit of promoting the use of appropriate strategies is increased learner autonomy. Learners who can use a broad range of strategies have a greater degree of self-sufficiency and are thus developing as more autonomous learners, better equipped to pursue independent study outside the classroom. This is particularly important among the university learners in the present study, whose time in the EFL classroom is strictly limited, and must also be true of many other tertiary-level EFL learners around the world.

I suggest that the findings on these four items (20, 14, 19, and 9) are important for two reasons. First, they provide some evidence – previously lacking – to support Horwitz’s, Kern’s, and Mantle-Bromley’s suggestions that some beliefs are detrimental to language learning. Second, they suggest the existence of a need for teacher intervention in the EFL classroom – that is, if misplaced learn-

er beliefs negatively affect achievement, perhaps steps should be taken to correct those beliefs.

It is very difficult to settle the question of causality. Did the different beliefs held by my students lower their proficiency, or did lower proficiency engender these beliefs? It should be noted that even Mantle-Bromley's very young learners held some beliefs that differ markedly from teacher beliefs. Young learners, apparently, already have some misconceptions about foreign language learning before their proficiency improves to the level of the university learners in this study; and some clues to help decide the direction of causality may be hidden here.

No significant association was found between any other mismatched learner beliefs and proficiency. However, seven of these other beliefs – even if they are not associated with proficiency – might deserve teacher intervention for other reasons.

Results from Item 16 indicate that 62% of learners believed that “Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words”; only 18% of teachers agreed – a very large difference. The significance of this finding is (as Horwitz states) that students who hold this belief may focus on memorising vocabulary lists, to the exclusion of teacher-directed tasks. They may also become very dissatisfied with a teacher who does not emphasise the learning of vocabulary in, for example, classroom tasks, the selection of materials, and setting homework.

Responding to Items 7 and 21, 52% of students stated that it is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent accent, while only 13% of teachers did so. These students put much more value on accent than did their teachers; and I propose that many EFL teachers around the world assign less importance to good pronunciation than do their students, and that this mismatch between teacher and student priorities leads to student frustration. Furthermore, 45% of my students believed that the place to acquire a good accent is the language laboratory, while only 18% of teachers agreed. If teachers neglect visits to the language laboratory, the result may be further misunderstanding and mistrust in the classroom.

Results from Item 32 indicate that 57% of learners, a very large proportion, believed that “People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent” (only 18% of teachers agreed). The significance of this (as Mantle-Bromley 1995: 381 states) is that students who feel their progress is slow may mistakenly ascribe any difficulty, slow progress, and lack of success they encounter to lack of intelligence. This may well lead to further frustration, dissatisfaction, and disillusionment.

Results from Items 2 and 15 indicate that while 71% of students believed in the existence of foreign language aptitude, only 14% believed that they themselves possessed that aptitude. This clearly suggests a lack of student confidence. One result of this belief might be students ascribing their lack of success (or slower than expected progress) to a lack of aptitude; and this, again, may well lead to students becoming disheartened, and/or quitting the EFL course.

Underestimation of aptitude, however, may be a factor that is amenable to teacher intervention.

Answers on Item 33 indicate that only 24% of students believed that Hong Kong learners are good at learning foreign languages. This is a further indication of a lack of student confidence. It is also noteworthy that only 7% – an even lower number – of teachers agreed with this item; apparently these teachers lack confidence in their students to some extent.

I suggest that in my classes – and no doubt in other classes – the result of all these misunderstandings revealed by responses to the BALLI is probably a significant number of frustrated and dissatisfied students.

Learner beliefs that differ markedly from teacher beliefs may also affect learner attitudes and motivation. Learner motivation was defined by Crookes & Schmidt in their influential article (1991: 498-502) as interest plus enthusiasm, persistence, attention, concentration and enjoyment; this definition has gained wide acceptance among researchers and teachers. The long hours that learners spend in EFL classrooms almost certainly make motivation an important factor in language-learning success (Ushioda 1993: 1-3 adds that enhanced learner participation and enthusiasm are significant outcomes in themselves). Kern (1995: 81) proposes that students are frustrated when classroom methods do not match their expectations, and McCargar suggests (1993: 200-1) that frustrated and disappointed learners may quit a course and look for one that better meets their perceived needs and wishes. Attitudes and motivation are important, and I believe that more teachers should be seeking their learners' opinions on how they learn and on what they wish to do in class, perhaps incorporating the results in classroom activities and materials (for suggestions in this area, see Yorio 1986: 671). It is likely that learners whose beliefs about language learning differ from the teacher's beliefs become demotivated as they lose faith in the teacher's methods.

To sum up on my findings from the BALLI, I shall return to Horwitz. I conclude that the gaps I found between teacher and learner beliefs did result in negative learning outcomes for the participating learners; did lead to reduced learner confidence in and satisfaction with the class; and did lead to a reluctance to participate in communicative activities. Some of the students' beliefs were "truly detrimental to successful language learning", and probably did lead to them spending too much time memorising vocabulary lists and grammar rules rather than doing the tasks planned for them. The fact that all 202 learners were taught by me is a limitation of this study, though the large number of students involved make it probable that similar results will be found elsewhere.

Eliminating erroneous learner beliefs is problematical – Curtin (1979: 282) calls the problem "intractable". As noted above, Kern reports (1995: 78-81) that learner beliefs changed very little over one semester and were "well entrenched", though Horwitz (1987: 126) proposes that they are amenable to teacher intervention, an idea with which I agree. Horwitz (1988: 290, 292), Wenden (1986a: 4), Kern (1995: 81), and McCargar (1993: 201) all propose that teachers try to correct learner misunderstandings about how languages are

learned and also explain the reasoning behind classroom methods, in order to reduce any gap between learner and teacher beliefs. Wenden suggests specific activities for training. Cortazzi (1990: 63) advises teachers to develop knowledge of and sensitivity to learners' cultural background because of the role it plays in their beliefs, and to produce cross-cultural materials.

The interviews I conducted to discover the origins of my learners' beliefs were not a success, as noted above. However, several writers have theorised on this topic. Roberts (1992: 275), Curtin (1979: 282), Wenden (1986a: 9), Balet (1985: 180), Kern (1995: 77), and Horwitz (1985: 336) all propose that students acquire their beliefs from their previous experiences, particularly in grammar translation and audio-lingual classrooms. The Chinese learners in this study may have acquired the idea in secondary school that rote learning and an emphasis on grammar were correct strategies for learning (see also Richards & Lockhart 1994: 55-6; Cortazzi 1990: 60; Ho & Crookall 1995: 237), and this was certainly my impression. However, these beliefs are not confined to China. Teachers, on the other hand, probably acquire their beliefs on methodology courses and in EFL classrooms (see Kern 1995: 78 and Horwitz 1985: 337).

It has become apparent through examining scores for self-rated proficiency that almost all the students in this study had a rather low opinion of their abilities. Most rated themselves 'fair' in all areas, and only 8% rated themselves 'good'. Certainly these students' actual ability is better than they estimate, and this (as did certain results from the BALLI) also indicates a degree of lack of confidence.

Another interesting finding that emerged from the correlations between tested and self-rated proficiency is that for these learners, there was a significant difference by gender in skill at estimating their overall ability, and also their ability in listening and in reading (though not in grammar or in writing). Females were considerably more skilled, or more honest, at this than males. This finding was not investigated further, but is well worth researching in other classrooms.

Regarding the interview data collected, it is almost impossible to draw any firm conclusions for TEFL because the number of learners was too small for me to make any attempt at generalising results to other classrooms and contexts. These data remain for interested readers to compare with student ideas and suggestions within their own classrooms.

Consideration of results from this study and other studies leads me to suggest that EFL teachers explain course objectives to learners in order to reduce learner misunderstanding, dissatisfaction, and opposition to teachers and teaching.

This study and the three empirical studies reviewed above have obtained similar results with the BALLI, and the same differences between learner and teacher views may certainly be found in many other classrooms. I therefore suggest that teachers examine their learners' beliefs and do what they can to reduce learner misunderstanding and dissatisfaction. The questions of how far learner and teacher beliefs diverge, why they diverge, and how these differences can be

removed deserve further investigation. I suggest that further studies check the association between oral communicative skills and the skills tested in this study. They should also collect qualitative data to back up questionnaire results, as too much reliance is often put on data from just one self-report questionnaire.

Notes

1. This project was supported by Research Grant number 9030640 from the City University of Hong Kong.
2. Proficiency in listening, grammar, reading, and essay writing – the items on the test given to these students.

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Appendix

Full results: beliefs about language learning inventory (as percentages)

Item	Subjects	Agree / strongly agree	Neither agree / disagree	Disagree/ strongly disagree
1. It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	90 80	7 16	3 4
2. Some people are born with a special ability which helps them learn a foreign language.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	71 80	23 16	6 4
3. Some languages are easier to learn than others.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	69 73	21 18	10 9
4. English is	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>			
1) a very difficult language	3 2			
2) a difficult language	28 18			
3) a language of medium difficulty	65 68			
4) an easy language	4 9			
5) a very easy language.	0 3			
5. English is structured in the same way as Chinese.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	6 13	12 7	82 80
6. I believe that I will ultimately learn to speak English very well.	<i>students</i>	41	46	13
7. It is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent accent.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	52 13	36 31	12 56
8. It is necessary to know the foreign culture in order to speak the foreign language.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	45 42	37 29	18 29
9. You shouldn't say anything in the foreign language until you can say it correctly.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	9 6	17 7	74 87
10. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	34 51	47 33	19 16
11. It is better to learn a foreign language in the foreign country.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	91 71	7 18	2 11
12. If I heard someone speaking English, I would go up to them so that I could practice speaking the language.	<i>students</i>	41	43	16
13. It's O.K. to guess if you don't know a word in the foreign language.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	74 85	21 11	6 4
14. If someone spent one hour a day learning a foreign language, how long would it take him/her to become fluent?	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>			
1) less than a year	10 2			
2) 1-2 years	29 10			
3) 3-5 years	30 44			
4) 5-10 years	15 17			
5) You can't learn a language in 1 hour a day	16 27			

Item	Subjects	Agree / strongly agree	Neither agree / disagree	Disagree/ strongly disagree
15. I have foreign language aptitude (a special ability for learning foreign languages).	<i>students</i>	14	47	39
16. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	62 18	28 22	10 60
17. It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	96 82	3 16	1 2
18. I feel self-conscious speaking a foreign language in front of other people.	<i>students</i>	35	46	19
19. If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning it will be hard to get rid of them later on.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	36 22	30 22	34 56
20. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	64 7	23 30	13 63
21. It is important to practice in the language laboratory.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	45 18	37 40	18 42
22. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	26 22	36 49	38 29
23. If I get to speak English very well, I will have many opportunities to use it.	<i>students</i>	80	14	6
24. It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	34 22	36 27	30 51
25. Learning a foreign language is different from learning other school subjects.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	69 82	23 16	8 2
26. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of translating from Chinese (students)/your first language (teachers).	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	23 7	29 7	48 86
27. If I/my students learn to speak English very well, it will help me/them get a good job.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	93 85	6 15	1 0
28. It is easier to read and write a foreign language than to speak and understand it.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	32 26	33 51	35 23
29. People who are good at maths and science are not good at learning foreign languages.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	17 0	34 42	49 58
30. Hong Kong Chinese think that it is important to speak a foreign language.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	86 62	11 27	3 11
31. I would like to learn English so that I can get to know its speakers better.	<i>students</i>	71	26	3
32. People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	57 18	30 53	13 29
33. Hong Kong Chinese are good at learning foreign languages.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	24 7	55 78	21 15
34. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	<i>students</i> <i>teachers</i>	84 73	13 20	3 7