

BALLI is Not a Place in Thailand but Perhaps it Should Be

"If you believe you can or believe you can't,
you're right" -- Henry Ford

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้ศึกษาความเชื่อในการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาตั้งแต่
ชั้นปีที่ 1 ถึงชั้นปีที่ 3 จากนักศึกษาเอกภาษาอังกฤษและภาษาอังกฤษธุรกิจ จำนวน 96 คน
ในมหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏสุราษฎร์ธานี โดยใช้แบบสอบถาม Language Learning
Inventory (BALLI) ของฮอรวีทซ์ซึ่งถูกปรับแก้ไขโดย อาจารย์จุฑารัตน์ วิบูลผล ร่วมกับ
การสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งโครงสร้าง งานวิจัยนี้มีเป้าหมายเพื่อหาว่าความเชื่อใดบ้างที่มี
ส่วนช่วยในการสนับสนุนการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษและความเชื่อใดบ้างที่เป็นอุปสรรค
ขัดขวางในการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษา การศึกษาเริ่มต้นโดยการศึกษาความเป็นมา
ของแบบทดสอบ BALLI รวมทั้งการปรับเปลี่ยนกระบวนการที่ค้นเกี่ยวกับการถกเถียงกันมา
ยาวนานในเรื่องกระบวนการวิธีการสอนมาสู่การให้ผู้เรียนเป็นศูนย์กลาง และยังได้แสดง
วิธีการนำ BALLI มาใช้เป็นเครื่องมือในการวิจัยอย่างมีประสิทธิภาพในหลายประเทศ
ทั่วโลก มีการนำผลการศึกษาวิจัยที่ผ่านมาเข้ามาใช้ในการวิเคราะห์ตรวจสอบความเชื่อ
ของนักศึกษามหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏสุราษฎร์ธานี ผลการศึกษาพบว่านักศึกษาเอกภาษา
อังกฤษและภาษาอังกฤษธุรกิจ มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏสุราษฎร์ธานี มีความเชื่อทั้งส่วน
ที่สนับสนุนส่งเสริม และส่วนที่เป็นอุปสรรคในการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษ ผลการศึกษาครั้งนี้
สรุปผลโดยการเสนอคำแนะนำเกี่ยวกับการนำผลงานวิจัยไปใช้เป็นข้อมูลในการ
เปลี่ยนแปลงสภาพแวดล้อมในการเรียนรู้ของนักศึกษาทั้งส่วนรายบุคคลและส่วนระบบ

คำสำคัญ : การสอนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ ความเชื่อในการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษ
กลยุทธ์ในการเรียนรู้

Abstract

This study considers the language learning beliefs held by 96 first, second, third and fourth year English and Business English majors at Surat Thani Rajabhat University (SRU). Using a modified version of Horwitz's Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) questionnaire, as developed by Vibulphol (2004), and several semi - structured follow - up interviews, the study sought to determine what beliefs held by students support and assist language learning and what beliefs hinder and retard progress. The study begins by placing the BALLI within a historical context and traces its genesis within a paradigm shift that saw age old debates about teaching methodologies replaced by learner-centeredness, and then goes on to show the ways in which the BALLI as a research tool has been used effectively in countries around the world. The beliefs of SRU English and Business English majors are then examined in relation to the insights derived from previous research. It was found that SRU students do in fact embrace a mixture of both supportive and debilitating beliefs. The study concludes by offering a few suggestions on how the results can be used to inform both personal and systemic changes within the students' learning environment.

Keywords : TEFL, language learner beliefs, learning strategies

1.0 Introduction -- It's Been a Long Journey Indeed

1.1 A Century of Methods Dominate

Throughout most of the twentieth century much of the language teaching profession's creative focus was devoted to the design and elucidation of teaching methodologies. For nearly a century from the 1880s onwards, a period initially known as the Reform Movement (Danesi, 2003) educators in the community addressed the perplexing issue of why so many learners failed

so dismally to master a second language, particularly daunting in light of the ease at which children mastered their first language. Recognizing the inherent limitations posed by the grammar translation method, a method that had dominated the field for the teaching of classical languages such as Greek and Latin throughout the entire 19th century, educators began to promote a host of alternative methods, each with its proponents and detractors. Of these, two came to dominate the field : first, the audio - lingual method and then the communicative language approach.

The first of these, the audio - lingual method (ALM), arose from the U.S. military's need for fluent language speakers during WWII, and was based on the tenets of structural linguistics and behaviourism. Critics of the ALM took exception with the method's over - reliance on patterned practice and repetition and its strict sequencing of grammatical structures at the expense of both novel and socially appropriate utterances, all of which were premised on the belief that learning only takes place through automaticity and habit formation. Scant attention was directed at the functional uses of language within varying social contexts, and as a result learners schooled within the ALM's purview often became what Hymes (1972) referred to as 'social monsters': grammatically knowledgeable but socially inept.

The second of these methods and the one that still to this day, in its varying forms, guises and incarnations, informs methodology as the 'dominant paradigm' (Farrell & Jacobs, 2010) within the TEFL/TESOL community, the communicative language approach, arose from 'the ashes' of ALM's failed attempts to assist learners in their quest to become competent speakers. As the British Council (2006) defines it, 'the communicative language approach is based on the idea that learning language successfully comes through having to communicate real meaning' and as such 'classroom activities guided by the communicative approach are characterised by trying to produce meaningful and real communication, at all levels.' Developed in the U.S. and Europe, where small class sizes and necessary support structures were readily in

place, critics of communicative language teaching (CLT) have often found CLT to be too unwieldy when applied to a global context that is all too often characterized by large classes, limited or inadequate teacher training and a paucity of available resources. Among the litany of complaints cited by numerous studies, one (Koosha & Yakhabi, 2012) that has particular relevance within the context of this study is a belief by both some teachers and students alike that activities such as paired practice, small group tasks and information gap exchanges, techniques that are among the mainstay of CLT, do not actually constitute valid language teaching and learning activities. As one teacher (Barker, 2011) expressed it in a blog entitled *Why I am not a fan of the communicative approach* :

A dangerous consequence of the CLT revolution has been the idea that if the students are communicating, then they must be learning. This has led many teachers to assume that all they need to do is set up communicative activities and the learning will take care of itself.

1.2 Learners First -- Putting the Horse Before the Cart

It was not until the mid 1970s that a new generation of researchers began questioning the very nature of the century - old debate on teaching methods, suggesting that searching for the best teaching method is fundamentally flawed and misguided for having put the cart, in this case the teacher advocating and implementing a particular method, before the horse; that is, the end - user or in this case the learner. Given that today's EFL students consist of nearly two billion language learners, representing practically every country on the planet, it seems ludicrous, at least in hindsight, to suppose that a 'one size fits all' approach to instruction can accommodate the huge diversity represented by this growing community in terms of individual differences, motivational factors, learning styles, uses for which the

target language is intended and cultural differences to name but a few of the significant contributing variables that come into play throughout classrooms all around the world.

As such, a number of experts in the field flipped the teaching / learning paradigm on its head and brought the learner and the learning process to the forefront of consideration. Starting with Rubin and Stern's research (1975) on *the Good Language Learner*, issues related to motivation, attitudes and learner beliefs, styles and strategies have all been explored in detail over the years and helped to push the research agenda increasingly towards an exploration of learners and what they bring with them and do within the learning process. More recent advances, arising out of the *Decade of the Brain* in the 1990s and the *Decade of the Mind* during the latter part of the new millennium's first decade, have permitted an even more exacting, detailed understanding of learning, as neuroscience and the use of non - invasive brain imaging techniques push the frontiers even further.

Such advancements in our understanding of how students learn do not mean that methodology no longer has a place in discussions pertaining to second language teaching. What teachers do in the classroom remains of crucial importance to learner success and 'the methods teachers employ not only affect student achievement but also condition the quality of human relationships in the classroom - and beyond' (Daniels & Bizar, 1998). The difference today, in what has been referred to as 'the profession's growing maturity' (Hawes, 2013) is that our understanding of how languages are both acquired and learned has led us away from the acceptance and endorsement of 'monolithic' and prescriptive (Bell, 2003) methods, and the 'pendulum effect' (Nunan, 1991) in language teaching that occurs as a result, towards 'class room practices derived from empirical evidence on the nature of language learning' (*ibid.*), what many are calling Best Practices language instruction. To put it simply, our understanding of how learners learn is now more than ever informing and directing the way teachers can and should be teaching.

1.3 The BALLI -- Beliefs Matter

One area of interest that has for nearly 30 years continued to further our understanding of how learners approach the challenge of foreign language learning stems from the research on language learning beliefs that Elaine Horwitz (1985) originally pioneered in the mid 1980s. Using a 34 - item Likert scaled questionnaire entitled the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), the Horwitz study was premised on the idea that a person's beliefs constrain and guide the choices made when teaching and learning a foreign language. Anyone who has met the challenge of learning another language, whether successfully or not, has at some point addressed such questions as

- What is the value of learning this language?
- How proficient do I want to become?
- What do I need to focus on?
- When do I need to study; how much time will be needed?
- What's the best way to learn this language?

Horwitz and a great number of others after her have maintained that the answers to such questions are entwined with our beliefs about language learning. We all harbour ideas about the right and the wrong way to learn a language, and the composite of such ideas forms the basis of our personal system of beliefs, which are, of course, not occurring in a vacuum but rather are contextually influenced by experience, family, peer and other significant social relations, education and related socio - economic factors. By teasing out a learner's beliefs in terms of the five major categories (i.e., difficulty of language learning; foreign language aptitude; nature of language learning; learning and communication strategies; and motivations and expectations) that Horwitz contends comprise a person's system of beliefs, a teacher can support those beliefs deemed to facilitate effective language learning and attempt to identify and ameliorate those that hinder and retard.

Owing perhaps to its ease of replication and the practical value of the information obtained, the BALLI has always struck a chord with both

researchers and teachers. As seen in Table 1.0, the BALLI has been used, in its original, modified and translated forms, in research originating from more than 20 countries, including Thailand.

Table 1.0 A Noninclusive Sample of Research RE: Belief About Language Learning

Country	Researcher (s)	Year	Research Focus
Australia	Bernat & Lloyd	2007	beliefs & gender differences
Australia	Bernat & Carter	2009	beliefs & personality traits
Brazil	de Lima	2014	changing beliefs through intervention
Canada	Cui & Paulhus	2012	Chinese language learner beliefs vs teacher beliefs
China	Wen & Johnson	1997	beliefs & proficiency (high vs. low)
Europe	Ozdemir	2013	Turkish language learners beliefs in the EU
Hong Kong	Peacock	1999	beliefs & language proficiency
India	Shinde & Karekatti	2012	Pre - service primary English teachers' beliefs
Indonesia	Erlenawati	2002	beliefs among Indonesia students studying in Australia

Country	Researcher (s)	Year	Research Focus
Iran	Akbari & Youran	2013	beliefs & cultural differences between Kurdish & Persian speakers
Iran	Mohammadi et al	2015	the impact of strategies training on beliefs*
Japan	Sakui & Gaies	1999	ways of improving instrument validation when ascertaining learner beliefs
Japan	Tanaka & Ellis	2003	Japanese university student language beliefs in relation to proficiency & overseas study
Lebanon	Diab	2009	Lebanese English teachers' beliefs
Malaysia	Nikitina & Furuoka	2006	Malaysian language learners' beliefs when learning Russian
Mexico	Gaona	2014	the impact of strategies training on beliefs
Oman	Borg	2007	English language teacher beliefs re : learner autonomy*
Saudi Arabia	Daif - Allah	2012	beliefs & gender among Saudi English learners
South Africa	Boakye	2007	beliefs negatively impacting strategy use

Country	Researcher (s)	Year	Research Focus
Taiwan	Yang	1993/ 1999	beliefs, strategies & motivation
Taiwan	Chang & Shen	2010	beliefs & strategy use among rural Taiwanese English learners
Thailand	Fujiwara	2011	beliefs & cultural differences (Thai vs Taiwanese English learners)
Thailand	Anugkakul	2011	strategies, beliefs & cultural differences (Thai vs Chinese English learners)
Thailand	Suwanarak	2012	MA student language learning beliefs
Turkey	Altan	2006	comparing beliefs among students learning different languages
Turkey	Tercanlioglu	2005	beliefs & gender
Vietnam	Bernhat	2004	beliefs & motivation ; using beliefs to inform curriculum
Yemen	Kuntz	1997	comparing teacher & student beliefs

*Instruments other than Horwitz's Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory were used.

Research on learner beliefs has tended to focus on three groups: students studying English as a second or foreign language at varying degree of proficiency ; students studying other languages (e.g., Chinese) ; and pre - service English language teachers. Another and related body of research has dealt with the validity of research instruments like the BALLI for determining learner beliefs. While the results of such a vast array of research projects has produced a plethora of data, some of which has yielded conflicting and contradictory results, a number of tentative conclusions can be drawn:

- There are significant differences between highly proficient and less proficient language learners in terms of their language learning beliefs. Highly proficient learners tend to embrace enabling and supportive beliefs while less proficient learners adhere to dysfunctional beliefs.
- Language learning beliefs influence a student's use of learning strategies with high achievers using a wider range of strategies more flexibly than less able learners.
- When incongruity exists between a teacher and student language learning beliefs, student progress and ultimate achievement can suffer.
- At least three of the categories within the BALLI (i.e., difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude and the nature of language learning) are strongly correlated with measures of student anxiety.
- Although language learning beliefs tend to be resistant to change, they are malleable enough to change in the face of well-designed teacher led intervention strategies and experience.
- Although language learning beliefs are multi-dimensional and exhibit a bi-directional relationship with other factors affecting achievement, culture and gender are not among them.

1.4 Closer to Home - BALLI in Thailand

As mentioned before, Thailand is no stranger to research involving language learning beliefs. Most of the research has targeted Thai university

students learning English as a foreign language. Among the studies conducted, undeniably the most exhaustive research into language learning beliefs to date was conducted by Vibulphol (2004). Using a translated version of Horwitz's BALLI along with focused interviews and class observations, Vibulphol investigated the learning beliefs of pre - service English teachers in Bangkok and Chiangmai prior to and following student teachers' teaching practicums. For the most part, Vibulphol's results confirmed the findings found in studies conducted elsewhere in the region. Most pre - service teachers within her study harboured a mixture of both supportive and detrimental beliefs that tended to reflect their previous experiences as language learners in Thai schools. Moreover, their beliefs were to some extent demonstrably translated into the behaviours exhibited while teaching, and some of their previously held beliefs changed somewhat as a result of the experience.

While Vibulphol's results may have shed considerable light on language learning beliefs within her focus group, caution must be exercised when extrapolating the results to other contexts within Thailand. The university students used within her study all came from two of Thailand's largest urban centres, Bangkok and Chiangmai, both of which are cosmopolitan cities, well - frequented by English speakers from around the world and well - serviced in terms of accessibility to English. Moreover, the two universities used in the study are generally regarded to be among the best and most prestigious in the country. Such is not the case at Suratthani Rajabhat University (SRU). Many students here come from rural or village backgrounds and enrol at the university out of economic necessity and/or because they do not meet the standards demanded by Thailand's top tier universities. While the province of Surat Thani does rely extensively on tourism, the majority of visitors by-pass the city and the university's main campus service area so interaction with English speakers is limited. In fact, for some students their first encounter with native English speakers may occur here at SRU during their undergraduate years.

The focus of the present study is to ascertain the language learning beliefs of Humanities' English majors at SRU. Most of the students who enter the four-year English program do so at pre - A1 levels, as determined by standardized tests based on the Common European framework (CEFR). Although students are expected to achieve a B2 level of proficiency by the time they graduate, the vast majority seldom progress beyond A2, as witnessed by the results from annual standardized testing over the past five years. While there are a variety of factors that contribute to the students' elementary level plateauing, I suspect that their system of beliefs may play a significant role in hindering their breakthrough to an intermediate level of proficiency. The purpose of this study is, therefore, to ascertain what debilitating beliefs limit student progress and then to offer a few tentative suggestions on what teacher can do to address this problem.

2.0 Methodology

For the purposes of this study, Horwitz's original questionnaire was first translated into Thai and then piloted with one of the bilingual Thai English instructors, who found a number of the questionnaire items to be ambiguous and subject to various conflicting interpretations. Instead of revising the questionnaire, a modified version of Vibulphol's 2004 extended questionnaire was piloted with the same instructor and found to be acceptably clear throughout all 39 items. This version was then administered to 96 first, second, third and fourth year Humanities' English and Business English majors towards the end of the first semester during the 2014/2015 academic year and the results were tabulated for each group and then averaged across the five groups who participated in the study. As most of the questionnaire items within Vibulphol's version, like Horwitz's, uses a five - point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly agrees' to 'strongly disagrees', the five response categories were collapsed into just three categories for ease of interpretation. A semi - structured interview was also conducted individually with eight students from

the second and third year cohorts using a combination of English and Thai to help determine instrument reliability. Although most questionnaires were completed anonymously, eight of the questionnaires were coded for identification purposes and distributed to four high - achievers (B1 & B2) and four under - achievers (False Beginner & A1).

3.0 Results & Discussion

As many previous studies have found, student responses ran the full gamut for most questionnaire items from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". There were also significant differences from one class to another and from one year level to another. Given that this study was cross - sectional rather than longitudinal, however, the results must remain limited to a composite of all five groups across the four years within the two Humanities' English programs, as shown in Table 2.0 below.

As expected, the English and Business English majors at SRU harbour a mix of both supportive and debilitating beliefs in terms of language learning. As Altan (2006) found from a more extensive study of 248 foreign language learners at five universities, some student beliefs are better characterized as "myths" than informed beliefs, and the students at SRU certainly mirror his findings in this regard, particularly in terms of foreign language aptitude, the difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning and learning strategies. The first questionnaire item, *It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language*, is a case in point. Research has long proved the fallacy of this popular misconception yet half of the students subscribe to this view. While children under the age of 12 do have a decided advantage in terms of mastering native like pronunciation, adults command a lifetime of experience developing a host of cognitive and metalinguistic skills that can be effectively applied to learning other languages. Endorsing the notion that children are better at learning languages is, therefore, considered a debilitating belief in that it provides a demotivating excuse for not investing the time and effort needed to learn English.

Other debilitating beliefs are considered in the sections to follow.

Table 2.0 SRU English & Business English Majors Beliefs About Language Learning

Belief Category	BALLI Item No. + Statement	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %
Foreign Language Aptitude	1. It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.	12.5	37.5	50.0
	2. Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	3.1	25.0	71.9
	3. Thai people are good at learning foreign languages.	7.3	59.4	33.3
	4. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.	12.5	28.1	59.4
	5. People who are good at math or science are not good at learning foreign languages.	31.3	31.3	37.5
	6. I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	11.5	64.6	24.0
	7. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.	40.6	32.3	27.1
	8. People who speak foreign languages are intelligent.	13.5	31.3	55.2
The Difficulty of Language Learning	9. Everyone can learn to speak English well.	3.1	25.0	71.9
	10. Some languages are easier to learn than others.	5.2	38.5	56.3
	11. I believe I will learn to speak English well.	1.0	40.6	58.3

Belief Category	BALLI Item No. + Statement	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %
The Difficulty of Language Learning	12. In learning English, it is easier to speak than to understand what people say.	7.3	52.1	40.6
	13. In learning English, reading is easier than speaking and listening.	9.4	42.7	47.9
	14. In learning English, writing is easier than speaking and listening.	49.0	29.2	21.9
	15. It is difficult for Thai people to learn English because of the differences in the alphabet system.	16.7	29.2	39.6
The Nature of Language Learning	16. It is necessary to know about English - speaking cultures in order to speak English.	14.6	29.2	56.3
	17. It is best to learn English in an English - speaking country such as England, the U.S. or Australia.	12.5	26.0	61.5
	18. Among the most important parts of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary.	4.2	7.3	88.5
	19. Among the most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar.	2.1	22.9	75.0
	20. Learning how to translate from Thai is an important part of learning English.	16.7	33.3	50.0
	21. Learning English is different from learning other academic subjects.	8.3	37.5	54.2
	22. Learning English involves a lot of memorization.	8.3	26.0	65.6

Belief Category	BALLI Item No. + Statement	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %
Learning & Communication Strategies	23. It is important to speak English with good pronunciation.	5.2	13.5	81.3
	24. We shouldn't say anything in English until we can say it correctly.	65.6	16.7	17.7
	25. I enjoy practising English with the foreigners I meet.	6.3	38.5	55.2
	26. It's OK to guess if we don't know a word in English.	18.8	37.5	43.8
	27. In learning English, it is important to practise a lot.	2.1	9.4	88.5
	28. I feel timid speaking English with other people.	32.3	42.7	25.0
	29. If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later.	16.7	38.5	44.8
	30. In learning English, it is important to practice with audio files (e.g., cassettes, CDs)	5.2	35.4	59.4
	31. In learning English, it is important to practice by listening to TV or radio programs in English frequently.	2.1	17.7	80.2

Belief Category	BALLI Item No. + Statement	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %
Motivations	32. Thai people feel it is very important to learn English.	11.5	41.7	46.9
	33. I would like to learn English so that I can get to know people who speak English better.	0.0	15.6	84.4
	34. If I can use English well, I will have better opportunities for a good job.	2.1	19.8	78.1
	35. I want to be able to speak English well.	2.1	6.3	91.7
	36. I would like to have friends from other countries.	3.1	15.6	81.3
	37. I want to learn English well because it can help me access information from around the world.	1.0	8.3	90.6
	38. English is important in higher education, especially graduate programs.	2.1	11.5	86.5
	39. Learning English will help me communicate with people from other countries because English is an international language.	2.1	6.3	91.7

3.1 Foreign Language Learning Aptitude

In their seminal book, *How Languages are Learned*, Lighthouse and Spada (2006) cite a number of studies that call into question the very notions of both aptitude and intelligence as predictive measures of success in language learning. While intelligence and aptitude may have value in terms of language analysis and rule learning, particularly useful for the learning of grammar, both have dubious value when it comes to using language for functional and communicative purposes. Citing a 1981 Canadian study on

apptitude conducted by Wesche, the authors reported higher levels of student and teacher satisfaction and some evidence in support of higher levels of student achievement in those cases where learning environments were carefully matched to a student's aptitude profile. In other words, congruency in terms of matching learners with their appropriate learning environments trumps innate factors like aptitude and intelligence.

In Vibulphol's 2004 study, mentioned above, she found that the students in her study endorsed the belief that some people have a special ability to learn languages but the debilitating impact of this position was offset by the students' belief that they were among those with such ability. Such is not the case with SRU students. While nearly 72% of the respondents believe that some people have a special ability to learn languages, less than a quarter of the students surveyed believe that they themselves have such ability. This debilitating belief was further mirrored by student responses to questionnaire items 3, *Thais are good at learning languages*, and 7, *Women are better than men at learning languages*. Only a third of the students believe that Thais are good at learning languages. Likewise, given that over 90% of the students in the two English programs are female, one would expect a higher proportion than 27.3% to have agreed with the position that women are better than men at learning languages. Despite the fact that the majority were indeed correct to have either disagreed with or remained neutral concerning the statement, given that research itself is well divided concerning the acquisitional superiority of one gender over the other (Pavlenko, 2001), it does suggest that the young women in our respective programs lack confidence in their own abilities.

3.2 The Difficulty of Language Learning

As McDorman (2012) explains, 'Relative difficulty in language learnability is closely tied to the learner's L1': the closer two languages are in terms of their grammars, cognates, pronunciation systems and prosodic features like intonation, tone, stress and rhythm, the easier it will be for

It's pretty obvious that, in order to talk like the native speakers, **you have to listen to the things they say and read the things they write.** When you do so, you learn new words and grammar structures that you can use to express your thoughts. As a result, it becomes easier and easier for you to build your own sentences in the foreign language. By contrast, if you follow the popular advice and concentrate on speaking rather than listening and reading, **you will learn few new words and structures** and, like so many learners, will be stuck with your limited vocabulary and grammar. It will always be hard for you to express your thoughts in the foreign language. (*his emphasis*)

speakers of one language to learn another. Yet, care should be exercised when interpreting the word "difficult". Value-laden synonyms like "arduous, laborious, onerous, gruelling, exhaustive" and "conceptually challenging" all connote demotivating associations that may serve to inhibit and dissuade people from embracing a challenge. The Defence Language Institute of the U.S. Department of State (Thompson, 2014), on the other hand, defines "language learning difficulty" simply in terms of the time needed to achieve general professional proficiency in different languages. Viewed in temporal terms, language learning difficulty becomes more an issue of time on task, motivation and resolve than it does to the inherent complexities of a given language. As the Social Media Coordinator (Meaghan, 2014) for Transparent Language Inc. succinctly expressed it when discussing the issue of language learning difficulty, 'It's not about the language, it's about the learner.'

Issues regarding the relative difficulty of the four skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing, should also be viewed with care. In the bygone era when the audio-lingual method held sway over the field, proponents insisted that listening and speaking must precede reading and writing (Wikipedia, 2014), as the two aural skills were viewed as providing the foundation necessary for mastering the more conceptually difficult print - based

skills. In later years such a view, of course, was adamantly contested and rejected by the communicative language teaching community, and an integrated approach featuring the simultaneous introduction of all four skills was, and is still being, advocated instead. As Szynalski (2002) explains in his popular website *Language Learning: Myths and Facts* when highlighting the importance of the receptive skills, listening and reading :

It is interesting to note, however, that many learners intuitively cling to a belief that certain skills are more difficult to learn than others. Such a view is particularly prevalent with regards to writing, which many learners and perhaps some teachers unwittingly equate with literature and academic writing. Given that the vast majority of writing done today involves genres such as texting, e - mail and social media writing, functional proficiency in this skill may not present itself as the bugaboo that many still consider it to be.

In terms of the SRU English and Business English majors' responses to the questionnaire items in this section, the most daunting are with regards to item 9, *Everyone can learn to speak English well*, and item 11, *I believe I will learn to speak English well*. While the vast majority (71.9%) believe that anyone can learn to speak well, the same students are not nearly as confident when it comes to their own potential. Although constituting a minority, it is surprisingly quite a large minority (40.6%) that exhibit uncertainty in terms of their ability to become proficient speakers. Whether this reflects a lack of self - confidence, based on the experience of up to 12 years within the public school system, or uncertainty regarding the university's ability to provide the quality of assistance required to help them develop, cannot be ascertained but in either event this lack of faith in their own potential does not bode well for instilling the confidence needed to succeed.

3.3 The Nature of Language Learning

From student responses to items within this section it would appear that most of the Humanities English and Business English majors hold

onto a number of antiquated, debilitating beliefs that may only serve to rationalize a learner's lack of progress. Responses to items 16 (*It is important to know about English - speaking cultures*) and 17 (*It is best to learn English in an English - speaking country*) are a case in point. Given that the vast majority of English language users in the world are not native English speakers but second and third language learners (Graddol, 2000), who particularly in the case of our students will use English as a *lingua - franca* with other ASEAN community members, a knowledge of *Judaeo-Christian* traditions will be of dubious value when interacting with other Asians within the region. The same can be said of item 17. While immersement in an English - speaking environment can be helpful, and has been for many, it is not in of itself a guarantee that a person will attain a high level of competency unless it is coupled with the necessary motivation and learning strategies needed to effectively exploit the learning environment. Besides, given the advances in information technology over the last twenty years coupled with the numerous opportunities available for self-access learning through websites, social media and commercially available, affordable computer assisted language learning programs, maintaining a steadfast belief in the superiority of being physically present in a native - speaking English country is both outdated and misguided. Simply, learners can bring, if so motivated, the English - speaking world to their desktops with a click of a mouse.

Student beliefs concerning the importance of grammar, vocabulary, translation and memorization within the language learning process may also be based on ideas that have long been dismissed as either inaccurate or too narrow in scope. Yet, as Vibulphol points out, when considering her subject's responses concerning the importance of vocabulary and grammar, caution must be exercised when interpreting the results. While few language teachers would contest the idea that there is certainly a lot more to learning a language than just acquiring numerous words and a set of rules governing their combination, the two questionnaire items (18 & 19) are presented in isolation

without reference to other facets of language learning. Since Horwitz first designed and used the BALLI as a research instrument, scholars have rediscovered and recontextualized both vocabulary and grammar as essential, pivotal aspects of language learning. [See, for example, Lewis (1997) and Willis and Willis' (1993 & 1996) work concerning the Lexical Approach and Doughty and Williams' (1998) work concerning a focus on form as distinct from form - focused instruction.] In other words, we cannot fault our students for valorizing the importance of vocabulary and grammar, especially when there is nothing else in the questionnaire to compare these two domains to. It remains doubtful, however, that students are ascribing the same meaning and approach to the learning of vocabulary and grammar that contemporary scholars have in mind when they stress the importance of lexical chunking and a focus on form.

While we cannot read too much into the students' beliefs about the importance of vocabulary and grammar, such is not the case when it comes to item 20, *Learning how to translate from Thai is an important part of learning English*. Half of the students canvassed agreed with this statement. While the TEFL community has long since softened its position on the use of L1 within the classroom, there is a world of difference between 'the judicious and principled use of L1' (Vaezi & Mirzaei, 2007) when teaching and students who use word by word translation as their main or exclusive learning strategy for dealing with print and/or feel the need to have everything encountered in English translated into Thai. As Nunan and Lamb (1996) pointed out, it is nearly impossible to avoid using the mother tongue when teaching monolingual students at lower levels of proficiency, but there is a point when the students' use of translation becomes more of a crutch than an effective learning strategy. The fact that 50% of our students still believe that learning how to translate from Thai is an important part of learning English should be a cause for concern, especially for those students in their final years.

Similar concerns can be raised about the students' endorsement of memorization's role in the learning process. While slightly more than half of the students fortunately accept the premise that learning English is fundamentally different from other academic subjects, the majority (65%) view language learning in terms of memorization. Orlin (2013) defines memorization as 'learning an isolated fact through deliberate effort', either through what he calls raw rehearsal or via mnemonics. As he goes on to explain in a polemic entitled *When Memorization Gets in the Way of Learning* :

Memorization is a frontage road : It runs parallel to the best parts of learning, never intersecting. It's a detour around all the action, a way of knowing without learning, of answering without understanding.

According to Orlin, real learning takes place through either repeated use or building upon already-established facts, both of which rely on and support the formation of connections and associations. Within the context of language learning, this would involve a concerted effort to apply new information to meaningful practice opportunities and through situations that encourage genuine communication. As Rubin and Stern (1975) found, good language learners do in fact 'pay constant attention to expanding their language knowledge' and they do this by flexibly employing a variety of learning strategies.

3.4 Learning & Communication Strategies

While the students canvassed in this study do endorse a number of supportive beliefs concerning learning and communication strategies, particularly in terms of the importance of practice (item 27) in general, the use of audio visual resources for practice outside of class time (items 30 & 31) and in their overwhelming disagreement (65.6%) with the statement *We shouldn't say anything in English until we can say it correctly*, there is a preponderance of neutral responses to a number of items (25, 26, 28 & 29) within this section

that indicate that students are either uncertain about the efficacy of certain strategies or unwilling to commit to an opinion one way or another. Some of their neutral responses could be the result of a social acceptability bias, whereby respondents 'hedge their bets' by providing responses they think the interviewer wants to hear. Item 28, *I feel timid speaking English with other people*, may be a case in point. While more students responded neutrally (42.7%) than for either of the other two categories, both personal observations and those reported by others (e.g., Noom - ura, 2013) indicate that many students, particularly low achievers, are indeed extremely timid when it comes to using English within and outside class. As Kaewmala (2012) explained in the fourth of a series of articles for the Asian Correspondent on Thailand's failing education system, Thai students are indoctrinated to be passive learners, and as such they seldom ask questions. This reluctance to speak up is further reinforced by a fear of 'losing face' in front of others when making mistakes in grammar or pronunciation.

Fear of making mistakes may play into the respondents' overwhelming endorsement of the importance of 'good pronunciation' as noted in item 23 (81.3%). While accurate pronunciation in English is undeniably important, and debates concerning it are far from resolved, the TEFL community has long since endorsed mutual intelligibility over Received Pronunciation (RP) and American English as the gold standard by which the learning of reasonable pronunciation should be measured. Unfortunately, as worded, item 23 does not permit an understanding of what students mean when they refer to the term 'good pronunciation'. Suffice it to say that the vast majority of students in this survey attach considerable importance to pronunciation and concerns over it may affect their willingness to speak both within and outside of class.

3.5 Motivations

As reported by Abrar - ur - Hassan (2009), Dornyei and Otto, two preeminent scholars within the field, define motivation in language learning as

'the dynamically changing cumulative arousal in a person that initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates, and evaluates the cognitive and motor processes whereby initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritised, operationalised and (successfully or unsuccessfully) acted out'. Consisting of both endogenous and exogenous factors, motivation is well recognized as the 'driving force' by which an interplay of both internal aspirations and external circumstances operate conjointly to either stimulate or inhibit a learner's bid to master a language. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that numerous studies over the last thirty years 'have established a consistently strong relationship between motivation and L2 success' (*ibid.*).

In terms of the students canvassed in this study, a high percentage of students agreed with nearly all of the statements within this section. To their credit the vast majority want to be able to communicate well in English (91.7%), want to have English - speaking friends (81.3%) and get to know English - speaking people better (84.4%), and see the importance of the language in terms of international communication (91.7%), access to information (90.6%), and improved career options (i.e., 86.5% for grad studies; 78.1% for getting a good job). In other words, most of the SRU majors at SRU are motivated to learn English for both endogenous (personal/intrinsic) and exogenous (instrumental) reasons.

While such a high percentage of agreements generally bode well for both programs, instructors may have cause to reflect on why there is not a higher or more unanimous agreement across several of the survey items. Afterall, these students are English majors, who have all committed to four years of study and will conceivably use the language in their future careers. Item 32, Thai people feel it is very important to learn English, is the most striking case in point. Only 46.9% of the respondents canvassed agreed with this statement, which indicates a discernible degree of scepticism among students, despite all the media attention that has been garnered about the elevated importance of English as the lingua - franca within the ASEAN

community and what this means for Thailand's future within the region. The same is true, albeit to a much lower percent, with item 34, *If I can use English well, I will have better opportunities for a good job*. Although constituting a minority, more than one in five students either remained neutral on or disagreed with the premise that proficiency in English improves a person's job prospects in Thailand. Again, this indicates skepticism on the part of some students and belies the question as to why they feel this way.

3.6 Interview Results

The purpose in conducting semi - structured interviews with eight low and high achievers was three - fold : 1) to provide a reliability check on the questionnaire used; 2) to determine whether any significant differences exist in the beliefs held by low and high achievers; and 3) to provide clarification on some of the more ambiguous questionnaire items. Given the small sample size, there is, of course, only so much that can be read into the few comments provided by the interviewees. They did, however, provide a number of insights that would have otherwise been overlooked had only the questionnaire been used.

With regards to questionnaire reliability, there was a striking consistency between the responses on the questionnaire and student comments during the interviews. This is not surprising given that the questionnaires were written in Thai, thereby reducing the chances of misunderstanding items, and the interviews were conducted, using a mixture of Thai and English, soon after the questionnaires were completed; in some cases (3 out of 8) on the same day.

Generally, the four low achievers were more hesitant and less forthcoming in expressing their beliefs and tended to adopt more neutral positions than the high achievers. This was particularly true for items within the two sections, The Nature of Language Learning and Learning and Communication Strategies. For most statements within these sections, the

false beginner and A1 level students replied with "I don't know" or "I'm not sure" far more often than the B1 and B2 level students. There were, however, four notable exceptions. For items 18, 19, 20 and 22, dealing with the importance of vocabulary, grammar, translation and memorization, the low achievers whole - heartedly agreed with those statements, whereas the higher level students expressed more reluctance in endorsing those positions. As one B2 level male student put it, loosely paraphrased, "Vocab and grammar are important but they aren't the most important. The main thing is to say what you want to say and get your ideas across, and understand what other people are saying to you." According to this student at least, the ability to communicate effectively is more important than a knowledge of vocabulary and grammar.

When queried about pronunciation, both groups attached considerable importance on the importance of "speaking clearly" but variance between the two groups arose when questioned about what they do to achieve "good pronunciation". The low achievers responded with comments like "I listen to the teacher", "I ask my friend" and "I sometimes listen to music," whereas the high achievers cited practice in the forms of reading aloud, rehearsal, using computer - assisted pronunciation resources (i.e., SPEEXX), watching and mimicking lines from movies and asking others (teachers and classmates) for help when determining the correct way to say both words and phrases. In other words, the high achievers employ a variety of strategies whereas the low achievers use a limited number.

4.0 Conclusion

As numerous other studies have found with learners from around the world, English majors at SRU do indeed harbour a mixture of both supportive and debilitating beliefs concerning language learning. While factors contributing to motivation are generally well - grounded and supportive among the students in this study, numerous beliefs within each of the four categories originally posited by Horwitz and adapted by Vibulphol for a Thai audience clearly show that our

English majors do in fact embrace a wide variety of misconceptions about language learning. Among the most troubling is the belief, held by a majority of students, that learning a foreign language requires a special ability that they themselves do not possess. When coupled with other faulty beliefs about the nature and relative difficulty of learning English and the most effective strategies to use for learning, this debilitating lack of confidence on the part of many students may help to explain, at least in part, why so many of the students tend to plateau at such low levels of proficiency.

While a search for the root causes or genesis of our students' faulty beliefs remains well beyond the scope of this study, it is nonetheless an area of enquiry that instructors at SFU are well advised to consider. Do our individual and collective behaviours inside and outside of the classroom, based in large measure on our own system of beliefs, unwittingly reinforce those nonsupportive beliefs that conspire to limit student progress? What can we do to address and counter such beliefs? The answers to such questions are most assuredly to be found within the context of reflective teaching and best practices methodology, conducted at both personal and systemic levels. The fact that we now have the resources and tools to do just that stems in large part to the pioneering work of Horwitz and others like her, whose work continues to illuminate by placing the learner at the forefront of the teaching / learning paradigm.

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