
EFL learners' beliefs about language learning: a study on Thai EFL undergraduate students

ความเชื่อของผู้เรียนเกี่ยวกับการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ: กรณีศึกษา
นักศึกษาไทยที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate Thai EFL undergraduate students' beliefs about English language learning. Participants were twenty Thai EFL second-year undergraduate students who major in English at a public university in Thailand. The research tool of this study was the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) questionnaire. The findings showed that there were both supportive and not supportive beliefs of Thai EFL undergraduate students regarding English language learning. Although the students view English is medium-difficult for them to learn, they believe that everyone can learn English. Most of Thai EFL undergraduate students believe that it is important to learn English and they enjoy learning English. This study provides the pedagogical implications for teachers to consider their students' beliefs about English language learning in the process of course design and development and of English language instruction.

Keywords: beliefs about language learning, language learners' beliefs, Thai EFL students

บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยครั้งนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์ เพื่อสำรวจความเชื่อของผู้เรียนเกี่ยวกับการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ กลุ่มตัวอย่าง คือ นักศึกษาชาวไทยระดับบัณฑิตศึกษา ชั้นปีที่ 2 ที่เรียนเอกวิชาสาขาภาษาอังกฤษ ณ มหาวิทยาลัยในกำกับของรัฐแห่งหนึ่งในประเทศไทย เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการวิจัย คือ แบบสอบถามเกี่ยวกับความเชื่อในการเรียนภาษา (Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory: BALLI) ผลการวิจัย พบว่า ผู้เรียนมีความเชื่อทั้งในลักษณะที่ส่งเสริม และไม่ส่งเสริมต่อการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ แม้ว่าผู้เรียนมีความเห็นพ้องกันว่าภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาหนึ่งที่มีความยากในระดับปานกลางต่อการเรียน แต่ผู้เรียนมีความเชื่อว่าทุกคนสามารถเรียนภาษาอังกฤษได้ ผู้เรียนส่วนใหญ่มีความเชื่อว่าการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นสิ่งสำคัญ และผู้เรียนมีความสนุกในการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษ ผลการวิจัยครั้งนี้ช่วยให้ผู้สอนได้ตระหนักถึงความเชื่อในการเรียนภาษาของผู้เรียน เพื่อที่จะได้ออกแบบและพัฒนาบทเรียน รวมถึงจัดการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษได้อย่างเหมาะสมและส่งเสริมให้ผู้เรียนสัมฤทธิ์ผลในการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษ

คำสำคัญ: ความเชื่อเกี่ยวกับการเรียนภาษา, ความเชื่อของผู้เรียนภาษา, ผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ

Introduction

In recent years, learners' beliefs about language learning have considerably received increasing attention in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). Learners' beliefs of foreign language learning are considered as an important variable which affects language learners' perceptions, actions, and outcomes (Barcelos, 2003; Ellis, 2004; Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011). In the field of English as a foreign language (EFL) education, understanding of learners' beliefs about English language learning benefits to EFL instruction (Ariogul, Unal, & Onursal, 2009; Azar & Saeidi, 2013; Abdolazadeh & Rajaei Nia, 2014). Teachers could give guidance to learners if the learners have beliefs that hinder their language learning. Adjustment of language learning beliefs helps learners learn a language effectively.

In Thailand, Thai EFL undergraduate students still have problems in learning English and those problems affect their learning outcomes (Photitheeratot, 2014). The key factors that can account for the EFL students' lack of success in learning English and impact instructed classroom learning in EFL contexts relate to the cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of language learning. That is, the problems in learning English of EFL students reflected on student factors (e.g., beliefs, motivation, strategies), teacher factors (e.g., pedagogical knowledge, teaching quality), curricular factors (e.g., type of curricular, curricular contents), and situational factors (e.g., learning resources, class size) (Renandya, 2013; Shen & Chiu, 2019). Beliefs which is one of the student factors are considerably focused on this study in particular. Because it is believed that learners' beliefs determine their ultimate success in language learning (Dörnyei, 2005; Ellis, 2004; 2008; Zhong, 2014; Fujiwara, 2015). This study, therefore, purposed to investigate Thai EFL undergraduate students' beliefs about English learning in order to help develop learning English of Thai students.

Literature Review

Beliefs about language learning have been an area of interest in the field of second language acquisition since the mid-1980s. The notion was first introduced by (Horwitz, 1985; 1987; 1988). A large number of research on learners' beliefs are conducted by using a quantitative method, particularly with the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) questionnaire created by (Horwitz, 1985; 1987; 1988). The BALLI questionnaire is designed to investigate learners' beliefs about language learning in five major areas: (i) foreign language aptitude, (ii) difficulty of language learning, (iii) the nature of language learning, (iv) learning and communication strategies, and (v) motivations and expectations. BALLI has been widely used in English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, as well as other foreign language learning (Ariogul, Unal, & Onursal, 2009; Bernat, 2004; Peacock, 2001; Tercanlioglu, 2004; Yang, 1999).

For instance, (Yang, 1999) investigated the relationship between college EFL students' beliefs about language learning and their use of learning strategies. He found that students' beliefs about learning English were strongly related to their use of all types of learning strategies. His findings indicated the cyclical relationships between learners' beliefs and strategy use.

Bernat investigated beliefs about language learning of 20 adult Vietnamese ESL learners by using the BALLI questionnaire. She found that the learners' motivation remained high, despite the learners' responses reported a lack of language learning aptitude and the belief of a child's second language acquisition (Bernat, 2004). According to her findings, it was concluded that the external motivators, e.g., need for employment predominated.

Ariogul, Unal, and Onursal examined the differences and similarities of the learners' beliefs about language learning among three groups such as English language learners, German language learners, and French language learners by using the BALLI questionnaire and a demographic information questionnaire. They found that French language learners had more positive expectations in language learning than the other two groups of language learners, however, all three groups held certain beliefs, i.e., beliefs about the difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation and expectations (Ariogul, Unal, & Onursal, 2009).

Abdolahzadeh and Rajae Nia explored the Iranian learners' beliefs about English learning and found out the correlation between Iranian EFL learners' language learning beliefs and their language proficiency level by using BALLI and the Key English Test (KET). They found that Iranian EFL learners reported strong beliefs in the categories of "motivation and expectation" and "foreign language aptitude", and there was a positive correlation between Iranian EFL learners' language learning beliefs and their language proficiency level (Abdolahzadeh & Rajae Nia, 2014).

Fujiwara examined the changes in Thai students' beliefs about language learning after learning the Japanese language course. Students were asked to complete the BALLI questionnaire at two different times; before taking the Japanese language course and after having completed the course. He found that the students' experience of studying Japanese language was related to the changes in their beliefs about language learning (Fujiwara, 2015). Some categories of the beliefs about language learning were modifiable through learning, while some unchanged.

Reviewing the literature on the theme of learners' beliefs about language learning indicates that there is a need for additional work in various contexts although the learners' beliefs have been investigated over a period of time (Zhong, 2014). Because learners' beliefs including attitudes and motivation are related to their success in language learning. Likewise, (White, 2008) and (Eshghinejad, 2016) stated that a set of positive beliefs facilitate learners' language learning. This, therefore, sparked off the author's urge to investigate Thai EFL undergraduate students' beliefs about learning English in a Thai context.

Research Question

- What are the Thai EFL undergraduate students' beliefs about language learning?

Research Methodology

Participants

Twenty second-year Thai EFL undergraduate students major in English at a public university in Thailand. All of the participants enrolled in English for Tourism course with a minimum workload of sixteen hours of English language training. Participants were selected by purposive sampling technique because there were not many numbers of students in the English for Tourism course. However, all of the participants were recruited to participate in the survey research based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. That is, Thai EFL undergraduate students who were willing to participate throughout this survey research were only recruited in this study.

Instruments

The beliefs about language learning inventory (BALLI) questionnaire of (Horwitz, 1987) was administrated to investigate Thai EFL undergraduate students' beliefs about language learning. The BALLI is a self-report questionnaire consisting of thirty-four questions in Likert Scale format. The Likert Scale is ranked from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The BALLI questionnaire, which was used in this study, was translated into Thai language for the participants. The validity value of the research instrument was .97. Horwitz's BALLI questionnaire is considered to be a suitable and reliable tool for conducting research on learners' beliefs about language learning in different sociolinguistic settings (Kuntz, 1996; Nikitina & Furuoka, 2006).

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the BALLI questionnaire was analyzed by means of descriptive statistics.

Results

The results of the study were reported in five sections regarding the components of the BALLI questionnaire.

Foreign language aptitude

As shown in Table 1, BALLI items in the foreign language aptitude category show that most of Thai EFL undergraduate students neither agree nor disagree that it is easier for children than adults to learn English (50%). Interestingly, there is an equal number of students who agree (30%) and disagree (30%) with the statement that some people are born with a special ability which helps them learn English. Same to the statement that people who are good at Math and Science are not good at learning English which also has an equal number of students who neither agree nor disagree (40%) and disagree (40%) with. They neither agree nor disagree that it is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn English (35%) and they have English aptitude (55%). Students disagree that women are better than men at learning English (60%). Students agree that people who speak more than one language well are very intelligent (45%). They neither agree nor disagree that Thai-native

speakers are good at learning English (70%), however, most of the students strongly agree that everyone can learn to speak English (55%).

Table 1: Foreign language aptitude of Thai EFL undergraduate students ($n = 20$)

No.	Questions	Ranking				
		SD	D	N	A	SA
1	It is easier for children than adults to learn English.	0%	25%	50%	20%	5%
2	Some people are born with a special ability which helps them learn English.	0%	30%	25%	30%	15%
3	It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn English.	0%	15%	35%	25%	25%
4	I have English aptitude	0%	15%	55%	25%	5%
5	Women are better than men at learning English.	10%	60%	25%	5%	0%
6	People who are good at Math and Science are not good at learning English.	10%	40%	40%	5%	5%
7	People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent.	5%	15%	20%	45%	15%
8	Thai-native speakers are good at learning English.	0%	10%	70%	20%	0%
9	Everyone can learn to speak English.	0%	0%	10%	35%	55%

Note: SD = strongly disagree D = disagree N = neutral
A = agree SA = strongly agree

Difficulty of language learning

As shown in Table 2, BALLI items in the difficulty of language learning reveal that there is an equal number of Thai EFL undergraduate students who agree (45%) and neither agree nor disagree (45%) with the statement that some languages are easier to learn than others. Most of the students strongly agree that English is medium-difficult to learn (80%). They neither agree nor disagree that English is structured in the same way as Thai language (45%) and it is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it (45%). Most of them strongly agree that it would take 1-2 years to speak the language fluently if the learners spend one hour a day learning English (45%). Students agree that it is easier to speak than understand English (50%) and they believe that they will ultimately learn to speak English very well (65%).

Table 2: Difficulty of language learning of Thai EFL undergraduate students ($n = 20$)

No.	Questions	Ranking				
		SD	D	N	A	SA
10	Some languages are easier to learn than others.	0%	5%	45%	45%	5%
11	English that I am trying to learn is:					
	11.1 very difficult	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	11.2 difficult	0%	0%	0%	0%	20%
	11.3 medium difficult	0%	0%	0%	0%	80%
	11.4 easy	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	11.5 very easy	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
12	English is structured in the same way as Thai language.	0%	15%	45%	40%	0%
13	I believe that I will ultimately learn to speak English very well.	0%	0%	15%	65%	20%
14	If someone spent one hour a day learning English, how long would it take him/her to speak the language fluently?					
	14.1 Less than a year	0%	0%	0%	0%	15%
	14.2 1-2 years	0%	0%	0%	0%	45%
	14.3 3-5 years	0%	0%	0%	0%	25%
	14.4 5-10 years	0%	0%	0%	0%	5%
	14.5 You can't learn English in 1 hour a day	0%	0%	0%	0%	10%
15	It is easier to speak than understand English.	0%	5%	35%	50%	10%
16	It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.	0%	10%	45%	40%	5%

Note: SD = strongly disagree D = disagree N = neutral
 A = agree SA = strongly agree

The nature of language learning

As shown in Table 3, BALLI items in the nature of language learning show that most of Thai EFL undergraduate students agree that it is necessary to learn about English speaking cultures to speak English (45%), it is better to learn English in English speaking country (55%), learning English is mostly a matter of learning a many of grammar rules (60%), learning English is different from learning other school subjects (45%), and learning English is learning how to translate from my own language (50%). Whereas, they neither agree nor disagree with the statement that learning English mostly a matter of learning many new vocabulary words (40%).

Table 3: The nature of language learning of Thai EFL undergraduate students ($n = 20$)

No.	Questions	Ranking				
		SD	D	N	A	SA
17	It is necessary to learn about English speaking cultures to speak English.	0%	20%	35%	45%	0%
18	It is better to learn English in English speaking country.	0%	10%	25%	55%	10%
19	Learning English mostly a matter of learning many new vocabulary words.	0%	15%	40%	35%	10%
20	Learning English is mostly a matter of learning a many of grammar rules.	0%	15%	20%	60%	5%
21	Learning English is different from learning other school subjects.	0%	5%	35%	45%	15%
22	Learning English is learning how to translate from my own language.	0%	15%	30%	50%	5%

Note: SD = strongly disagree D = disagree N = neutral
 A = agree SA = strongly agree

Learning and communication strategies

As shown in Table 4, BALLI items in learning and communication strategies reveal that most of Thai EFL undergraduate students agree that it is important to speak English with an excellent accent (30%), they feel self-conscious speaking English in front of other people (40%), it will be hard to get rid of the mistakes later on if they are allowed to make those mistakes at the beginning (35%), and it is important to practice English in the language laboratory (45%). They neither agree nor disagree that if they heard someone speaking English, they would go up to him/her in order to practice speaking English (45%). Noticeably, there is an equal number of students who agree (30%), neither agree nor disagree (30%), and disagree (30%) that they should not say anything in English until they can say it correctly. Similar to the statement that it is okay to guess if they do not know a word in English which also has an equal number of students who agree (45%) and neither agree nor disagree (45%) with. Nonetheless, most of the students strongly agree that it is important to repeat and practice often (45%).

Table 4: Learning and communication strategies of Thai EFL undergraduate students ($n = 20$)

No.	Questions	Ranking				
		SD	D	N	A	SA
23	It is important to speak English with an excellent accent.	5%	15%	25%	30%	25%
24	You should not say anything in English until you can say it correctly.	5%	30%	30%	30%	5%
25	If I heard someone speaking English, I would go up to him/her so that I could practice speaking English.	5%	20%	45%	20%	10%
26	It is okay to guess if you do not know a word in English.	0%	5%	45%	45%	5%
27	It is important to repeat and practice often.	0%	0%	15%	40%	45%
28	I feel self-conscious speaking English in front of other people.	5%	0%	25%	40%	30%
29	If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning, it will be hard to get rid of them later on.	5%	20%	30%	35%	10%
30	It is important to practice English in the language laboratory.	0%	15%	25%	45%	15%

Note: SD = strongly disagree D = disagree N = neutral
A = agree SA = strongly agree

Motivations and expectations

As shown in Table 5, BALLI items in motivations and expectations show that most of Thai EFL undergraduate students agree that they will have many opportunities to use English if they speak it very well (40%) and it is important to speak English for Thai-native speakers (35%). It is interesting that there is an equal number of students who strongly agree (30%), agree (30%), and neither agree nor disagree (30%) that it will help them get a good job if they learn to speak English very well. Nevertheless, students strongly agree that they would like to learn English so that they can get to know the speakers better (55%).

Table 5: Motivations and expectations of Thai EFL undergraduate students ($n = 20$)

No.	Questions	Ranking				
		SD	D	N	A	SA
31	If I speak English very well, I will have many opportunities to use it.	0%	10%	20%	40%	30%
32	If I learn to speak English very well, it will help me get a good job.	0%	10%	30%	30%	30%
33	Thai-native speakers think that it is important to speak English.	0%	10%	25%	35%	30%
34	I would like to learn English so that I can get to know the speakers better.	0%	0%	20%	25%	55%

Note: SD = strongly disagree D = disagree N = neutral
A = agree SA = strongly agree

Discussion

Foreign language aptitude

The findings in this category indicate that Thai EFL undergraduate students have some beliefs about language aptitude that would be consistent with the universal language learning beliefs in accordance with (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2006) who point that language learners' beliefs about language aptitude are universal language learning beliefs. For example, Thai EFL undergraduate students believed that everyone can learn to speak English which conforms to the studies of (Bernat & Lloyd, 2007) and (Ariogul, Unal, & Onursal, 2009) also found that language learners believed that everyone can learn to speak foreign languages.

However, there were some beliefs of Thai EFL undergraduate students that are not consistent with the universal language learning beliefs. For example, Thai EFL undergraduate students neither agree nor disagree that they have English aptitude, it is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn English, and Thai-native speakers are good at learning English. Noticeably, Thai EFL undergraduate students chose to answer that they neither agree nor disagree with the statements that directly relate to themselves. These findings tally with (Phonlabutra, 2008) that also found the same results gathered from Thai Japanese language learners.

Difficulty of language learning

The findings in this category indicate that there was an equal number of Thai EFL undergraduate students who agree and neither agree nor disagree that some languages are easier to learn than others. This belief is rather universal language learning beliefs. Likewise, (Horwitz, 1987) study found that foreign language learners have the same beliefs that each language has different levels of difficulty and easiness to learn. Most of Thai EFL undergraduate students viewed that English language is medium difficulty. Likewise, (Bernat & Lloyd, 2007) found that most of their EFL learners also agreed that English is medium difficulty.

Parallel to the question asked about the duration of learning the target language until speak language fluently, Thai EFL undergraduate students believed that it would take 1-2 years to speak the language fluently if they spend one hour a day in learning English. It is consistent with the findings of (Ariogul, Unal, & Onursal, 2009) that language learners assumed that it would take a maximum of two years to speak the foreign language fluently. However, Thai EFL undergraduate students rather believed that they will ultimately learn to speak English very well.

The nature of language learning

The findings in this category indicate that beliefs about the nature of language learning of Thai EFL undergraduate students reflect on English learning experiences in the Thai context. Likewise, (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2006) state that beliefs about language aptitude are viewed as universal language learning beliefs, but the prominence of a particular theme, the nature of language learning, may be determined by the socio-linguistic environment where the language learning takes place.

A vast majority of Thai EFL undergraduate students agreed with the statements that it is necessary to know the culture of the countries that use English as the first language in order to speak English and that it is better to learn English in countries that use English as the first language. These findings tally with the studies of (Bernat & Lloyd, 2007) and (Ariogul, Unal, & Onursal, 2009) which found that the language learners believed that culture is important in foreign language learning and to learn a target language in a country speaking that language is a common belief. Also, Thai EFL undergraduate students rather believed that learning English is mostly a matter of learning a many of grammar rules, a matter of translating from English, and it is different from learning other school subjects.

Learning and communication strategies

The findings in this category indicate that Thai EFL undergraduate students rather believed that learning and communication strategies assist them in using the target language. Thai EFL undergraduate students agreed that it is important to speak English with an excellent accent which is consistent with the studies of (Bernat & Lloyd, 2007), (Ariogul, Unal, & Onursal, 2009), and (Phonlabutra, 2008) that a large majority of their respondents believed that it is important to speak target language with excellent pronunciation. This finding shows that most of the language learners believe that the native-speaker accent is excellent (Ferguson, 2005). It reflects that the language learners who learn foreign languages in their native context place importance on the speaking accent of the target language.

From the finding, Thai EFL undergraduate students believed that it is important to repeat and practice often. Likewise, (Bernat & Lloyd, 2007) found that their language learners strongly agreed that it is important to repeat and practice a lot in general. Although Thai EFL undergraduate students see the importance of speaking the target language with an excellent accent, they feel self-conscious when speaking English in front of other people. This finding tally with the study of (Ariogul, Unal, & Onursal, 2009) that the language learners also feel self-conscious speaking a foreign language in front of other people.

Motivations and expectations

The findings in this category indicate that Thai EFL undergraduate students believed in motivations and expectations in learning English. They believed that they will have good opportunities if they could speak English very well and it is important for them to speak English. These issues are consistent with many studies, for instance, (Horwitz, 1988), (Bernat & Lloyd, 2007), (Ariogul, Unal, & Onursal, 2009), and (Phonlabutra, 2008).

In addition, there was a group of Thai EFL undergraduate students who neither agree nor disagree that they will get a good job if they speak English very well. It is consistent with the study of (Ariogul, Unal, & Onursal, 2009) that some language learners might feel that learning other languages may not make much of differences in finding a better job. It is because of the business languages which are not limited just only for English, the other languages would be important also.

Conclusion

Many factors determine the ultimate success in English language learning of Thai EFL undergraduate students; among those factors are beliefs about language learning. Even it was a small number of participants, the finding provides the pedagogical implications for developing teaching and learning English for Thai students in various ways. First, it is a fundamental issue for teachers to consider students' beliefs about language learning in the process of course design and development. Course material should counteract students' negative beliefs, but compatible with students' positive beliefs about language learning. The pedagogical methods should be adopted to foster students to learn English. Second, teachers are advised to better understand the students and to encourage students' positive beliefs about English language learning by providing them appropriate guidance and constructive feedback. To sum up, students' beliefs about language learning play an important role throughout the whole process of language learning.

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