

A Comparison of EFL Teachers and Students' Beliefs about Language Learning¹

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study that investigated language learning beliefs of 100 intermediate and upper intermediate EFL students (74 females and 26 males with an average age of 15) and 80 EFL teachers (36 females and 44 males with an average age of 29) in Iran. For this purpose, data were collected using a 34-item self-report questionnaire (Horwitz's Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory – BALLI, 1985). This inventory included items on aptitude, nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation. The overall difference between teachers and students in their beliefs was also investigated by running an independent *t*-test which showed a significant and meaningful difference between teachers' and students' beliefs. The findings of the current study suggest that a number of beliefs, such as "The most important part of learning a new language is learning new words" may be detrimental to language teaching and learning if focus on vocabulary prevents learners from paying attention to other language components, and that action should be taken to modify these beliefs to facilitate the language learning/teaching process.

Resumen

Este documento informa sobre un estudio que investigó las creencias sobre el aprendizaje de idiomas de 100 estudiantes de nivel intermedio y intermedio alto de inglés como lengua extranjera (74 mujeres y 26 varones con una edad promedio de 29 años) y 80 profesores de inglés (36 mujeres y 44 varones con una edad promedio de 29 años) en Irán. Con este fin, los datos fueron recolectados a través de un cuestionario de auto-informe de 34 preguntas (El inventario de creencias sobre el aprendizaje de idiomas de Horwitz - BALLI , 1985) . Este inventario incluye artículos sobre las aptitudes, la naturaleza del aprendizaje de idiomas, las estrategias de aprendizaje y comunicación y la motivación. La diferencia global entre los profesores y los estudiantes en sus creencias también fue investigada por la ejecución de un *t*-test independiente que mostró una diferencia significativa entre las creencias de los profesores y de los estudiantes. Los hallazgos del presente estudio sugieren que una serie de creencia, como "La parte más importante de aprender un nuevo idioma es aprender nuevas palabras" puede ser perjudicial para la enseñanza y aprendizaje de idiomas si el centrar el esfuerzo en el aprendizaje de vocabulario impide a los estudiantes de prestar atención a otras componentes del idioma, y que se deben de tomar medidas para modificar estas creencias y facilitar el proceso de enseñanza/aprendizaje de los idiomas.

Introduction

A belief is a variable which differs from other variables since it is "neither an ability nor a trait-like propensity for language learning" (Ellis, 2008, p. 698). The beliefs which learners have concerning second or foreign language learning have been the subject of numerous research studies. Language scholars have claimed that beliefs affect learners' language success and their learning outcome and behavior (Abraham & Vann, 1987; Dörnyei, 2005; Ryan, 1984; Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Schommer, 1990; Weinert & Kluwe, 1987; White, 1999). Researchers have found that learning experiences lead learners to develop beliefs about language learning (Horwitz, 1987; Mori, 1999, Robert, 1992). Horwitz (1985, 1987, 1999) found that understanding learners' beliefs is important since it helps teachers to become familiar with learners' approaches to language learning and

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learners' use of learning strategies based on which they can plan a more appropriate language instruction.

Teachers' beliefs exist on many levels from global to personal and serve as overarching frameworks for understanding and engaging with the world. A primary source of teachers' classroom practices is a belief system, that is, the information, attitudes, values, expectations, theories, and assumptions about teaching and learning that teachers build up over time and bring with them to the classroom (Richards, 1998). Shavelson and Stern (1981), Smith (1996), and Tillema (2000) found that teachers' instructional decisions and actions were highly influenced by their beliefs.

To add to the literature on whether learners and teachers in Iran have different belief systems, the present study focuses on the comparison of teachers and learners' beliefs about language learning. This study is concerned with the beliefs Iranian EFL students and teachers have about language learning using Horwitz's (1985) Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI).

Review of literature

According to Richards and Schmit (2002), learner beliefs include opinions learners have about various aspects of language, learning and teaching. All of these may affect their attitudes and motivation in learning and may have an influence on their learning strategies and learning outcomes. Hall (2011) states that learner beliefs and motivation are related to each other and learners' perceptions influence their motivation to a large degree. He also stated that learner beliefs are important since they guide learners' thinking and behavior.

At present, the instrument which is mostly used for collecting data in the area of learner beliefs about language learning is the 34-item Likert-scale BALLI. Horwitz (1985) developed this inventory for her foreign language teacher training course. She asked her trainees to question their beliefs about language learning. The BALLI has been widely used in different contexts and cultures to evaluate EFL/ESL students' beliefs. For example, the questionnaire has been used in countries such as China (Zhang & Cui, 2010), Hong Kong (Peacock, 2001), Hungary (Rieger, 2009), Korea (Park, 1995; Truitt, 1995), Malaysia (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2006), Thailand (Fujiwara, 2011) Turkey (Ariogul, Unal & Onursal, 2009), and Vietnam (Bernat, 2004). The BALLI has also been used in three fairly large-scale American studies (Horwitz, 1988; Kern, 1995; Mantle-Bromley, 1995). The findings of Horwitz, Kern, and Mantle-Bromely were similar in several aspects and they observed that some of the learner beliefs were different from teacher beliefs. Mantle-Bromely (1995) emphasizes that teachers should understand the learners' beliefs and proposed that if students' beliefs and performance did not match, it could lead to frustration.

In an attempt to discover the underlying beliefs of Iranian EFL learners, Ghobadi and Khodadady (2011) used the BALLI to investigate the beliefs of 423 university learners of English in Iran. Fifty three percent of the learners believed that learning English is mostly a matter of learning many new vocabulary words; more than 75% stated that it is important to speak English with an excellent accent. Also, 70.9% of them said that they have an English aptitude and 80% disagreed or strongly disagreed that learning English is difficult. Finally 91% of them believed it is easier for children to learn English

than adults. They concluded that teachers should be aware of their own and their learners' beliefs in order to help less successful students to become more successful.

In a similar vein, Price and Gascoigne (2006) used the essay portion of the English Placement and Proficiency Examination (EPPE) to capture 149 freshman and transfer students' perceptions and attitudes about foreign or second language study and foreign language requirements. More than half of the students (57%) were in favor of foreign language study; 22% were against learning a foreign language; and 21% were in a neutral position. The results of the study suggest insights into students' evolving beliefs and concerns which can be used to inform and improve teaching-learning process through the development of an appropriate environment.

Similarly, Bernat (2006) investigated the beliefs of 256 participants in the Australian and American contexts and found that their beliefs were similar in all categories and it was concluded that despite a small number of inter-group differences, it seems premature to conclude that beliefs about language learning vary by contextual setting. Rather, they are due to the effects of individuals' complex metacognitive structure, implying that learners' personal characteristics may also play a role in the shaping of belief system.

Zhang and Cui (2010) investigated learning beliefs held by distance English language learners in China. Beliefs about the nature of language learning, the role of the teacher, the role of feedback, language learning strategies, and self-efficacy were examined through surveys. It was found that the majority of the participants perceived insufficient communication with teachers and peer students as the dominant difficulty in distance learning, and that distance language learning was more difficult than traditional classroom language learning.

Research interests in beliefs about language learning are not limited to those of language learners. Several studies have researched beliefs about the language learning of both in-service and pre-service teachers. These studies were designed based on the hypothesis that teacher beliefs may influence student beliefs through instructional practices. Johnson (1994) mentioned that teachers' beliefs impact their perceptions and judgments, and also play a vital role in how teachers learn to teach; therefore, understanding teachers' beliefs is necessary for improving teaching practices and professional teacher preparation programs.

There are a few studies which have compared student beliefs with teacher beliefs. Peacock (1999), for example, compared the beliefs of 202 students and 45 university ESL teachers. Several broad differences were found, such as students focusing more on vocabulary and grammar. Peacock concluded that learners with this belief may focus on memorizing vocabulary items and grammar rules and may not pay attention to the tasks which are given by teachers and they may also be dissatisfied with teachers who do otherwise in the classroom. Samimy and Lee (1997) reported very similar findings, noting that the students tended to support the idea of accurate pronunciation, vocabulary learning, and using translation in Chinese learning: a belief which was different from their teachers, though with a much smaller number of subjects (34 students and 10 teachers).

Peacock (2001) carried out a longitudinal study that explored changes in beliefs about second language learning of 146 trainee ESL teachers. He was hopeful that the trainees would change their wrong ideas after studying TESL methodology. But after three years of studying, there were not any significant changes in their beliefs. First-year student trainee beliefs about language learning were collected using BALLI and were compared with teacher beliefs. The conclusions were that considerable efforts should be made to eliminate any unfavorable trainee beliefs before they start teaching.

Wong (2010) investigated pre-service teachers' beliefs about learning English. Participants were 25 pre-service teachers. She used the BALLI to collect data and the data analysis showed that generally pre-service teachers recognized the existence of foreign language aptitude and placed strong emphasis on excellent pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition, the benefits of practice, and an immersion approach to language learning.

To sum up, both teachers and students have different beliefs concerning language learning. Most studies have focused on either students' belief systems or teachers' belief systems. Few studies have compared the belief systems of these two major stakeholders in any educational enterprise. Although there are numerous independent studies on student or teacher beliefs about language learning, there has been relatively little work on comparative studies in this area in general, and in Iran in particular. Indeed teachers and students are interconnected components of an educational program; and in order to gauge the effectiveness of the system, their shared contributions should be taken into consideration rather than regarding them as detached. The mismatch between these two groups' beliefs and attitudes can lead to dissatisfaction and frustration among students. This gap in the current literature on learning beliefs was the motivation behind conducting this study in a context where the issue has not received due attention by researchers. However, the gap is not limited to an Iranian context and the findings will contribute to the better understanding of the interrelationship between teacher and student roles in language learning internationally.

Research questions

The questions that guided this research are the following:

1. What are the teachers and students' beliefs about language learning?
2. Is there any significant difference between the teachers and students' beliefs about language learning item-wise and in general?

Methodology

Participants

To investigate the beliefs about language learning, 100 students from three language institutes and 80 language teachers took part as participants. The students' levels of proficiency were intermediate and upper intermediate and their ages ranged from 13 to 18 with an average age of 15. In terms of gender, the students were not balanced (74 females and 26 males). Regarding the teacher participants, there were 36 female teachers and 44 male teachers. Of these teachers, 64 teachers had a BA in ELT, 13 teachers were MA students and 3 had an MA in TEFL. Their ages ranged from 25 to 39 with an average age of 29.

Instrument

For the purpose of this study, the BALLI questionnaire (Horwitz, 1985), which includes 34 different beliefs, was used. It has a Likert-scale format and learners are asked to choose among *strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree* options for items in five areas: foreign language aptitude (9 items), the difficulty of language learning (5 items), the nature of language learning (6 items), learning and communication strategies (8 items), and motivation and expectations (6 items). The items of the questionnaire appear in the results section. In this study the teachers were asked not to answer item 16 because this item is specifically related to the students. In the result section these items have been categorized based on the topic being discussed. The questionnaire was not translated into Persian, but the participants filled it in with the presence of the researchers. If they had any difficulty, the researchers could help the participants with any problems.

Data collection and analysis

The questionnaire was administered to the chosen students and teachers in English. For collecting data from the students, the researcher distributed the instrument during class time preceded by a brief explanation of the purpose and the nature of the study. If they had difficulty in understanding any item, the researchers clarified the misunderstanding. For collecting data from the teachers, the researchers distributed the instrument to 91 teachers and explained the purpose and nature of the study, but only 80 teachers responded to the questionnaire. The time needed for the participants to answer the questionnaire was not more than 20 minutes.

After the collection of the data, they were analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequencies were conducted to summarize the teachers and learners' beliefs concerning language learning item by item. Man Whitney U and independent samples *t*-test were used to investigate the differences between the teachers and the students in their beliefs about language learning. For analyzing data SPSS software, version 16, was used.

Results

All results will be given briefly in this section and discussed further in the next section. Tables 1 to 6 present overall frequency (%) of the questionnaire items in the five categories as well as in an overall format, as well as the means and the standard deviation. In this study the responses of the participants have been shown in percentage. Table 1 deals with foreign language aptitude.

Item description	Subjects	1* %	2 %	3 %	4 %	5 %	Mean	SD
1. It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.	Teachers	50	30	10	8.75	1.25	1.8	0.98
	Students	50	33	13	3	1	1.71	0.84
2. Some people have special ability for learning foreign languages.	Teachers	4.25	43.75	5	5	5	1.9	1.05
	Students	36	48	11	4	1	1.83	.77
6. People from my country are good at learning foreign languages.	Teachers	1.25	23.75	48.75	20	6.25	3.05	0.80
	Students	5	38	49	4	4	2.76	0.85
10. It is easier for someone who already speaks another language to learn another one.	Teachers	25	63.75	5	5	1.25	1.9	0.70
	Students	32	56	10	1	1	1.8	0.65
11. People who are good at math or science are not good at learning foreign languages.	Teachers	1.25	2.5	23.75	38.75	33.75	4.1	0.77
	Students	5	13	23	26	33	3.69	1.20
16. I have a special ability for learning languages.	Teachers							
	Students	34	35	18	11	2	2.07	1.98
19. Women are better than men at learning languages.	Teachers	10	40	22.5	25	2.5	2.65	0.96
	Students	21	16	47	13	3	2.61	1.05
30. People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.	Teachers	2.5	52.5	27.5	15	2.5	2.6	0.73
	Students	45	31	10	10	4	1.97	1.14
33. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	Teachers	33.75	45	6.25	13.75	1.25	2	1.01
	Students	25	35	15	9	16	2.51	1.36

*1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = disagree; 5 = strongly disagree

Table 1. Foreign Language Aptitude

Table 1 consists of nine items (1, 2, 6, 10, 11, 16, 19, 30, and 33) which dealt with foreign language aptitude. Both teachers and students had the same opinion that children can learn a foreign language easier. Concerning learning a language as a special ability, 48% of the teachers agree that that some people have this special ability, but 84% of the students agree with this item. For item number 6 ("People from my country are good at learning foreign languages"), 26.25% of teachers disagree with this item, but 8% of the students disagree with this item. More than 80% of both teachers and students agree that "It is easier for one to learn a language when one already speaks another foreign language". Regarding item 11 ("People who are good at math or science are not good at foreign language learning", 3.75% of teachers agree while just 17% of students agree with this item. When asked if the participants have a special ability for learning a foreign language, 69% of the students agree with this. Fifty percent of the teachers agree that "Women are better than men at learning languages" and 37% of the students agree with this statement. Regarding item 30 ("People who speak more than one language are very intelligent"), 55% of the teachers and 76% of the students agree or strongly agree. For the item "People who are good at math or science are not good at foreign language learning", 78.75% of the teachers and 60% of the students agree or strongly agree, but just 15% of the teachers and 25% of the students disagree or strongly disagree with this item.

Item description	Subjects	1* %	2 %	3 %	4 %	5 %	Mean	SD
3. Some languages are easier than others.	Teachers	20	50	5	15	10	2.45	1.25
	Students	43	35	16	2	3	1.87	1.03
4. The English language is**	Teachers	1.25	18.75	42.5	35	2.5	3.15	0.73
	Students	1	21	54	22	2	3.03	0.74
15. If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take him/her to speak the language very well?***	Teachers	6.25	28.75	40	50	20	3.05	1.16
	Students	5	44	33	17	1	2.65	0.85
25. It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language.	Teachers	8.75	20	16.25	40	15	3.3	1.23
	Students	19	38	12	14	17	2.72	1.37
34. It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.	Teachers	13.75	25	15	26.25	20	3.1	1.28
	Students	29	22	18	17	14	2.65	1.41

*1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = disagree; 5 = strongly disagree

**For item 4: 1 = very difficult; 2 = difficult; 3 = medium; 4 = easy; 5 = very easy

***For item 15: 1 = less than a year; 2 = between 1 and 2 years; 3 = between 2 and 5 years; 4 = between 5 and 10 years; 5 = you cannot learn a language with one hour a day

Table 2. The Difficulty of Language Learning

Table 2 consists of five items (3, 4, 15, 25, 34) which deal with the difficulty of language learning. Seventy percent of the teachers and 78% of the students agree that some languages are easier than others while 25% of the teachers and 5% of the students disagree with this statement. Twenty percent of the teachers and 22% of the students say that English is difficult or very difficult while 37.55% of the teachers and 24% of the students say that English is easy or very easy. The majority of the students and teachers agree that learning a language by spending one hour a day takes 1–2 years or 3–5 years. For item number 25 (“It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language”), 28.75% of the teachers and 57% of the students agree or strongly agree with this item. Concerning the skills, 46.25% of the teachers and 31% of the students disagree that reading and writing are easier than speaking and listening.

Item description	Subjects	1* %	2 %	3 %	4 %	5 %	Mean	SD
8. It is necessary to learn about English speaking culture to speak English.	Teachers	33.75	36.25	13.75	15	1.25	2.1	1.05
	Students	41	28	13	6	12	2.2	1.35
12. It is best to learn English in an English speaking country.	Teachers	62.5	28.75	2.5	1.25	5	1.5	0.92
	Students	75	16	5	3	1	1.35	0.71
17. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning new words.	Teachers	11.25	43.75	20	23.75	1.25	2.6	0.97
	Students	39	43	8	9	1	1.9	0.65
23. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning grammar.	Teachers	1.25	1.25	38.75	28.75	30	3.85	0.79
	Students	22	38	14	21	5	2.44	1.13
27. Learning a foreign language is different from learning other school subjects.	Teachers	20	50	6.25	18.75	5	2.4	1.16
	Students	14	55	13	10	8	2.43	1.1
28. The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from my own language.	Teachers	2.5	10	25	55	7.5	3.55	0.74
	Students	36	33	20	5	6	2.12	1.13

*1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = disagree; 5 = strongly disagree

Table 3. The Nature of Language Learning

Table 3 had six items (8, 12, 17, 23, 27, 28) which deal with the nature of language learning. Most of the teachers and students agree or strongly agree to learn about English speaking culture and to learn English in an English speaking country. Fifty five percent of the teachers and 82% of the students agree that vocabulary is the most

important part of learning a foreign language. Regarding item number 23 (“The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning grammar”), just 2.5% of the teachers agree or strongly agree and the rest are neutral or disagree. Sixty percent of the students agree or strongly agree with item number 23 and only 26% of them disagree with this item. Seventy percent of the teachers and 69% of the students agree or strongly agree that “learning a foreign language is different from other school subjects”. Just 12.5% of the teachers agree that translation is important for learning English and 62.55% disagree or strongly disagree with this statement while 69% of the students agree or strongly agree with this item.

Item description	Subjects	1* %	2 %	3 %	4 %	5 %	Mean	SD
7. It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.	Teachers	40	33.75	11.35	13.75	1.25	2.1	1.18
	Students	69	21	6	3	1	1.45	0.78
9. You should not say anything in English until you say it correctly.	Teachers	20	10	5	35	30	3.45	1.5
	Students	17	22	24	29	8	2.89	1.23
13. I enjoy practicing English with English speakers.	Teachers	18.75	41.25	33.75	1.25	5	2.3	0.95
	Students	29	32	36	1	2	2.2	0.94
14. It is OK to guess if you don't know a word in English.	Teachers	15	60	10	11.25	3.75	2.3	1.01
	Students	21	55	13	11	0	2.14	0.78
18. It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	Teachers	70	20	10	0	0	1.25	0.43
	Students	595	5	0	0	0	1.05	0.21
21. I feel shy speaking English with other people.	Teachers	3.75	16.25	10	31.25	38.75	3.85	1.24
	Students	34	35	18	11	2	2.07	1.98
22. If beginning students are allowed to make mistakes in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on.	Teachers	5	30	10	50	5	3.2	1.08
	Students	47	26	11	3	8	1.94	1.19
26. It is important to practice with cassettes/tapes or CDs.	Teachers	55	40	2.5	1.25	1.25	1.6	0.92
	Students	63	33	2	2	0	1.38	0.52

*1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = disagree; 5 = strongly disagree

Table 4. Learning and Communication Strategies

Table 4 is concerned with learning and communication strategies and there were eight items (7, 9, 13, 14, 18, 21, 22, 26). The majority of the teachers and students (73.75% and 90% respectively) agree or strongly agree that it is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation. Contrarily, 15% of the teachers and 4% of the students disagree with this item. Thirty percent of the teachers and 29% of the students agree or strongly agree that they should not say anything in English until they can say it correctly, indicating that accuracy is not very important to them. Only 6.25% of the teachers and 3% of the students disagree that they enjoy practicing with English speakers, indicating the importance of practicing with native speakers. Both teachers and students are in agreement (75% and 76% respectively) towards guessing unknown words in English. On the other hand, 14% of the teachers and 11% of the students disagree or strongly disagree with this item. None of the teachers, nor the students, disagreed with repeating and practicing a lot, showing their belief in “repeating and practicing a lot” as effective for language learning. Seventy percent of the teachers and 71% of the students disagree that they feel shy speaking with others. For item 22, 35% of the teachers and 73% of the students agree or strongly agree with this item, showing the importance of error correction for students. Fifty five percent of the teachers and

just 8% of the students disagree or strongly disagree with this item. The majority of the teachers and students agree that it is important to practice with a CD or cassette (95% and 96% respectively). Only 2.5% of the teachers and 2% of the students disagree with this item.

Item description	Subjects	1* %	2 %	3 %	4 %	5 %	Mean	SD
5. I believe I will learn to speak English very well.	Teachers	58.75	23.75	13.75	2.5	1.25	1.55	0.74
	Students	48	38	6	5	3	1.77	0.98
20. Iranian people feel it is important to speak English.	Teachers	25	35	15	21.25	3.75	2.4	1.12
	Students	37	31	22	7	3	2.08	1.07
24. I would like to learn English so that I can get to know its speakers better.	Teachers	10	20	40	25	5	2.95	1.02
	Students	36	28	18	8	10	2.28	1.30
29. If I learn to speak English very well, I will have better job opportunities.	Teachers	21.25	48.75	15	10	5	2.3	1.06
	Students	69	26	3	1	1	1.39	0.69
31. I want to learn to speak English very well.	Teachers	75	16.25	8.75	0	0	1.2	0.40
	Students	88	12	0	0	0	1.12	0.32
32. I would like to have English speaker friends.	Teachers	20	35	23.75	20	1.25	2.45	1.09
	Students	34	35	18	11	2	2.07	1.98

*1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = disagree; 5 = strongly disagree

Table 5. Motivations and Expectations

Concerning motivation and expectations, Table 5 provides the results for six items (5, 20, 24, 29, 31, 32). The majority of the teachers and students believe they would learn to speak English and just 3.75% of the teachers and 8% of the students disagree with this item. When asked whether “Iranians think it is important to speak English”, 60% of the teachers and 68% of the students agreed. Thirty percent of the teachers and a large number of students (64%) agree or strongly agree that they would like to learn English so that they could get to know its speakers better. Regarding having better job opportunities with English, 70% of the teachers and 95% of the students believe this to be true. None of the teachers and students disagree or strongly disagree that they want to speak English very well. Concerning the idea of having English speaking friends, 55% of the teachers and 78% of the students agree or strongly agree with this item.

The researchers also carried out an independent-samples *t*-test to compare the overall beliefs scores of teachers and students. There was a significant difference in scores for the teachers (M: 2.52, SD: 0.24) and the students (M: 2.17, SD: 0.27), *t*(176.64): 9.32, *p*<.05, and the magnitude of the difference in the means was large (eta squared: 0.32). The difference between the teachers and the students’ beliefs was statistically significant. This can be seen in Table 6.

	M	SD	d	t	p	Effect size
Beliefs			176.64	9.32	.05	0.32
Teachers	2.52	0.24				
Students	2.1	0.27				

* *p*<0.05

Table 6. Independent Samples T-test for the Teachers and Students’ Beliefs

Discussion

In the present study, the beliefs of English teachers and students concerning language learning were explored using the BALLI (Horwitz, 1985). Based on the analysis, it was found that that teachers and students hold a variety of beliefs about language learning. Sixty nine percent of the students agree that they have a special ability for learning foreign languages. This means that Iranian students have a relatively high level of confidence for learning foreign languages and this certainly helps their learning. Concerning item 30 ("People who speak more than one language are very intelligent"), 55% of the teachers and 76% of the students agree with this item. This shows that both the teachers and students may blame a lack of intelligence for a lack of progress in language leaning.

Also, 35% of the teachers and 49% of the students agree that they could speak the language very well in less than a year or in 1–2 years. This represents that almost half of the students underestimate the difficulty of speaking a foreign language and according to Peacock (1999) the learners who underestimate the difficulty of language learning are significantly less proficient than those who thought otherwise and it is possible that their lower proficiency is a result of such a belief. Another possibility is that they become disappointed if they fail to be proficiency enough during a certain period of time.

Regarding the role of necessity to learn about English speaking cultures, 70% of the teachers and almost the same percentage of the students agree with this item. This indicates that learning about the cultures of the target language is very important and that culture is an integral part of learning a foreign language. As well, 55% of the teachers and 82% of the students agree that the most important part of learning a foreign language is learning new words. Concerning grammar, 60% of the students agree that the most important part of learning a foreign language is learning grammar, but only 2.5% of the teachers agree with this item. Such a sharp contrast of opinions can be partially due to the learning environment and teaching methods in Iranian governmental schools which focus on memorizing new words and grammar points.

Nearly 74% of the teachers and 90% of the students agree with item 7 ("It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation"). This finding may be indicative of the observation that Iranian teachers and students pay a lot of attention to language proficiency and in order to show their proficiency in English, they feel they should speak English with an excellent pronunciation. Concerning guessing, 75% of the teachers and 76% of the students agree that it is OK to guess if they do not know a word in English. According to Ghobadi and Khodadady (2011), such a finding may indicate that "Iranians are risk takers and ready to guess" (p. 300). Regarding repeating and practicing the language a lot, 90% of the teachers and all the students agree with this. Perhaps this is due to the teaching methods and structure of Iranian English books which follow behaviorism.

For item 29 ("If I learn to speak English very well, I will have better job opportunities"), 70% of the teachers and 90% of the students agree with this item. This indicates that Iranian teachers and students have strong instrumental motivation for learning English and they feel that learning English will help their promotion in the future.

In this study, the teachers agreed more with some beliefs, such as items 7, 17, and 30, than the teachers in Peacock's (1999) study. This is shown in Table 7.

Items	Study	strongly agree or disagree
7. It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.	Peacock (1999)	13%
	This study	73.75%
17. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning new words.	Peacock (1999)	18%
	This study	55%
30. People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.	Peacock (1999)	18%
	This study	55%

Table 7. Comparison of Teachers' Beliefs in this Study Compared to Peacock's (1999) Study

It is surprising that while teachers have studied courses on methodology and language teaching theories, they still have undesirable beliefs about language learning. These beliefs must be changed because they affect their teaching behavior in the classroom. Teachers should be told that these beliefs do not help language learning. It can be done through extra in-service training and they can be referred to readings which discuss the benefit of more communicative approaches to teaching EFL.

Having such beliefs may have other reasons. Cummings (1989, cited in Richards, 1998) points out:

The kind of practical knowledge which teachers use in teaching, appear to exist largely in very personalized terms, based on unique experiences, individual conceptions, and their interaction with local contexts. It tends to have a personal significance which differs from prescribed models of educational theory. (pp. 46-47)

Some of the beliefs held by students could possibly be harmful in case they prevented them from paying attention to other language skills and sub-skills. For example, a majority of students agree with the following items: 76 % with item 30 ("People who speak more than one language are very intelligent"); 81% with item 17 ("The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning new words"); 60% with item 23 ("The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning grammar"); 68% with item 28 ("The most important part of learning English is to learn how to translate from my own language"); 90% with item 7 ("It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation"); and 73% with item 22 ("If beginning students are allowed to make mistakes in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on"). According to some scholars, these beliefs can be undesirable for language learning. Mantle-Bromley (1985) mentions that there are learners who believe that people who speak more than one language are very intelligent. Those language learners, who believe this may blame a lack of intelligence for their lack of progress and success, an unjustifiable assumption which leads to frustration and dissatisfaction. When a learner pays a lot of attention to learning grammar, vocabulary, and translation, he or she may spend a lot of time memorizing vocabulary lists and grammatical points and he or she may ignore the communicative aspects of language. Also these kinds of students are maybe dissatisfied with a teacher who does not emphasize grammar, vocabulary, and

translation in classroom tasks. The language learners who think that it is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation try to have native-like accents and since most of learners cannot have a perfect accent, this may lead them to further dissatisfaction and disillusionment. The learners who think that they should not make mistakes at the beginning, based on Peacock's (1999) research, would find it difficult to get rid of their errors, leading to a lower level of proficiency. These potentially detrimental beliefs affect their language learning and teachers should try to reduce the possibility of these beliefs being unfavorable, by focusing more on communicative approaches in language learning and teaching. Curtin (1979) and Kern (1995) report that learner beliefs change little over time, but some scholars like Horwitz (1987) and Peacock (1999) propose that they are influenced by teacher interventions.

The results of the study also show that there was a significant and meaningful difference between teachers and students' beliefs. This significant difference may be related to the teachers' experiences and knowledge of language learning and teaching. All the teachers who participated in this study had a BA in English and they had passed courses on language teaching methodology and second or foreign language acquisition. Also these teachers had attended in-service teacher training programs to update themselves in language teaching and the processes of language learning.

Horwitz (1988) proposes that these gaps between teacher and learner beliefs are detrimental to learners and they lead to the learners' dissatisfaction with the class and as a result they do not participate in communicative activities. For example, when they expect teachers to spend more class time on vocabulary, grammar, and translation and the teachers pay little attention to these areas; this may lead to frustration and dissatisfaction. The findings of this study are in line with studies, such as Peacock (2001) and Wong (2010).

Conclusion

The present study has identified important language-learning-related beliefs of Iranian teachers and students. This study investigated teachers' and students' beliefs on different items and it was shown that teachers and students had a variety of beliefs about language learning. It was also shown that there was a significant and meaningful difference between teachers and students in their beliefs about language learning.

This study has two implications for other language teaching programs. First, teachers should be informed about those unfavorable beliefs they have about language learning and they should try to improve these beliefs at the start of any program. Second, it is important for teachers to change the beliefs of the students which negatively affect their language learning.

It is suggested that a qualitative research study be conducted on teachers' and students' beliefs to back up the quantitative findings. Further research can be carried out to explore the sources of teachers and students' beliefs. Also the relationship between these beliefs, motivation, and classroom practice is an area that could be researched more, especially in order to find out whether the beliefs regarded as detrimental are really detrimental as far as teachers and students are themselves concerned.

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