

The Language Learning Beliefs of Arab ESL Students

Khairi Obaid Al-Zubaidi

Language Academy

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, International Campus

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Nurhasmiza Abu Hasan Sazalli

Language Academy

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

International Campus, K.L

Abstract

Learning a second / foreign language is more than memorizing the grammatical rules and vocabularies. Language learning is a very complex activity, and culture plays a crucial role in this very dynamic, amorphous and debatable process. Learners of foreign /second languages also use different learning strategies which are influenced very much by their cultural and educational backgrounds. Belief is one of the most significant and important components of culture that encompasses language, religion, race and the personal history of any individual. During the last two decades many researchers have focused on learners' beliefs. This study investigates the beliefs of Arab undergraduate students who are studying at three Malaysian Universities, are assessed on an adapted version of the Belief about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), which was developed by Horwitz (1985). The paper assesses the students' beliefs in relation to the following areas of language learning: difficulty of language learning; foreign language aptitude; the nature of language learning; learning and communication strategies; and motivations and expectations.

Keywords: ESL/EFL, Second Language Learning, Beliefs about Language Learning, Arab Students

Introduction

The concept of belief remains a key factor in foreign/second language learning. The Belief about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) was introduced and developed by Horwitz (1985, 1987, 1988) in relation to the language learning beliefs of American students studying French, German and Spanish. The topic of beliefs about language learning has attracted many educators and linguists in various international contexts in the last two decades (e.g. Altan, 2006; Rieger, 2009; Bernat, 2003; Heinzmann, 2009; Bernat & Lloyd, 2007; Truitt, 1995). These studies which conducted on learners from different nationalities: Turkey, Hungary, Vietnam, Australia, Switzerland, and Korea. Such studies emphasize what Horwitz (1988) refers to as the beliefs of learners in role in language learning process.

The purpose of this study was to add to the body of knowledge of beliefs with a focus on Arab learners. The study looks at the beliefs of Arab students from seven different Arab nationalities who are studying outside their home countries. While these students share the Arabic language as their mother native tongue, they belong to different background in terms of their social, cultural, and educational system. In addition, it is hoped that this study can contribute to the official efforts exerted by Arab authorities to assist the Arab students in their study the English language since the number of international Arab students number has grown tremendously in the last few years.

The Belief about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)

The Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) of Horwitz (1987) was originally compiled from learner and teacher interviews and revealed that many students believe that language learning is merely learning vocabulary and grammar rules. Generally, they share a many stereotypical views about language learning. The study also gives information about learners', but it doesn't give us a clear vision about the process of learning.

When Elaine K. Horwitz (Ortega, 2007) was asked about The Belief about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) developed by her in 1988, she suggested that teachers use it as a discussion starter in language classroom. This was besides using it as a research instrument. As the BALLI deals with pedagogical issues, teachers could use it as a platform of discussion to get their students communicate and share their opinion.

Based on her experience of learning French and Spanish, Horwitz (Ortega, 2007) admitted that she has been aware since she was young that some people do have trouble when it comes to language learning. For some students, the source of anxiety is definitely there when seeing other students who understand what was going on in the classroom, while they are not. Therefore, Horwitz really believes that language classes must be communicative in the sense that students should be given opportunity to speak in the foreign language and "not use the native language to discuss grammar in the class" (Ortega, p. 6-7). Besides having suitable activities that stimulate communication in a good atmosphere classroom. Horwitz, further stressed that students should have enough liberty to be themselves when learning second language. Although there could be some level of anxiety in both teachers and students, teachers could help to reduce the anxiety in the classroom by first minimizing their own anxiety. Horwitz also emphasized that at low level of anxiety, achievement does increase but anxiety continues to increase, there will be a point where achievement starts to decrease. In other words, she indicates that teachers should not do much correction when students speak, as it will impede learning.

Furthermore, she expected to prove the value of perfectionistic beliefs about language learning – the view that one should never make mistakes and should continue to practices. She hoped to be able to use beliefs to explain anxiety. However, it did not happen because the belief that “you have to have foreign language aptitude to learn language” is very pervasive. Other than that, another issue that could be debated in learning a second language is the challenge of overcoming the interference from first language. However, Horwitz (2007) stressed that changes are evolving as there are other important factors as well that could affect language learning.

Literature review

The literature review is divided to five areas that BALLI covers. It contains the following:

The difficulty of language learning

A survey conducted by Lassiter (2001) used BALLI for the purpose of gaining insight into the students of color at Southern University-Baton Rouge of why they were interested to continue the study of French even though the enrollments in the subject have suffered a dramatic drop. The items to assess students' view on the difficulty of language learning aspect showed that 66% of the students considered French to be language of medium difficulty. However, majority of them (60%) also believed that they could become fluent in 1 to 2 years. According to Lassiter (2001), many would become frustrated when their progress was not rapid.

In the study by Oz (2007), he investigated the beliefs of Turkish EFL students in secondary education. The participants believed that some languages are easier to learn than others and in learning English; it is easier to read and write than to speak and understand it. 55% of the respondents also rejected the belief that they would feel embarrassed to use English in public.

As with other affective variables, beliefs are complex and influential. Burden (2002), for example, maintains that students' judgments about the difficulty of a language are critical “to the development of expectations for and commitment to language learning” (p.3). The majority of Burden's study participants believed that “they will not ultimately speak English well ... and rated their own aptitude for English very poorly” (p.6) and were therefore reluctant to communicate with native English speakers. These students felt that an excellent accent was important and that they needed to persevere in spite of their errors, as practice was very important.

Foreign Language aptitude

In the area of foreign language aptitude, all respondents in Wu's (2009) study shared the belief that Thai people are not good at learning foreign languages and a person who speaks a foreign language would have less difficulty in learning other foreign language. They also felt that children are better than adults when it comes to language learning and people who are born with a special ability could acquire the language faster than the rest. Nevertheless, only the teachers seemed to have positive perception about people who are able to speak more than one language and unlike the students, they also agreed that they do have foreign language aptitude. When judging the ability of women in learning language, all respondents were on the same side as they believed women are better language learners than men. Both groups also agreed that people who are good at Maths and Science are not good at language learning.

In Lassiter's (2001) questions dealing with beliefs concerning the characteristics of good language learners, the study showed only 25% of the respondents believed that Americans are good at learning foreign languages and 33% of them felt that some people have the special ability to learn foreign language. There was a small percentage too, for those who believed that women are better language learners than men and people who are good at Science and Math are not good at learning language. However, 50% of the students surveyed felt that people who speak more than one language are intelligent. The overwhelming majority of them indicated that they possessed the aptitude to learn foreign language.

Only 20% of the respondents in the study conducted by Oz (2007) believed that Turkish people are good at learning foreign language. They also felt that it is easier for children to learn foreign language compared to adults and some people have special ability to learn foreign language. However, when inquired about their abilities, only half of them (56%) agreed that they have a special ability for learning foreign language. Other than that, only 20% of the Turkish believed that people who are good in Math and Science are good at language learning. The majority of them also agreed that some languages are easier to learn than others. They were neutral when responding to the statement whether girls or boys are good at language learning.

The nature of language learning

From the aspect of the nature of language learning, all participants in Wu's (2009) study believed that learning a foreign language is a matter of learning grammar rules and vocabularies. Unlike the opinion of both groups of students, the teachers did not agree that learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of translation. In contrast, the teachers also felt strongly on the importance of knowing the culture of the foreign language in order to speak the language.

Questions related to the nature of language learning in Lassiter's study indicated only 30% of the participants believed the importance of knowing the foreign language culture in order to speak the language. Lassiter (2001) emphasizes that this indicates minimum attention was given to expose the students to the culture of foreign language and how it is pertinent in the teaching and learning of foreign language. This could explain why almost 50% of the participants disagreed that it is better to learn a foreign language in the foreign country. Moreover, the majority of them felt that learning a foreign language is a matter of mastering grammar and vocabularies and also is mostly a matter of translating from English.

Almost half of the Turkish (42%) agreed that to say something in English, they would think of how the words are said in Turkish and then translate them in English. Only 28% of them believed that "The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from Turkish" and 51% of the respondents rejected the statement "To understand English, students must first translate it into Turkish"(Oz, 2007).

Learning and communication strategies

In terms of learning and communication strategies aspects, all the participants in Wu's study agreed about the importance to repetition and practice. They also felt that a person should try to speak the foreign language although he/she might not be able to say it correctly. They believed in the importance of speaking in an excellent accent but the teachers also felt conscious when speaking in public. Interestingly, only the teachers and the 2 year program students disagreed that if people are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning, it will be hard for them to correct themselves in the future while the 4 years program students were not sure about this. All

respondents agreed to go to someone to practice speaking English when they heard he/she speaking the language.

Whereas, in Lassiter's (2001) study, the students strongly supported repetition and practicing in the language laboratory. Only a minority of them believed the importance of having accent when speaking foreign language and they should not speak the language until they master it. About 45% of them believed that if a person is allowed to make mistakes in the beginning, it will be hard to get rid of them later. Lassiter (2001) believes that the students' responses demonstrate ambivalence towards taking risks in practicing the language as majority of them agreed that if they heard anybody speaking the language they are learning, they would go up to him/her to practice it (Lassiter,2001) This further explains the importance of having communication activities which are non-threatening and reduce their affective filter or fear of using the language. 45% of the participants said that they would feel self-conscious when speaking the foreign language in public.

On the other hand, majority of the Turkish believed (Oz, 2007)in the importance of repetition and practice and learning grammar as a way to master English. With regard to the use of L1 in the L2 classroom, half of them agree with their teachers providing explanations in Turkish; 67% of them also felt that if their teachers are native speakers, they should be able to provide explanation in Turkish when necessary.

Benson and Lor (1999) think that one's beliefs about how to learn a language can determine one's choices of learning strategies. For instance, the belief "that the best way to learn a foreign language is to memorize its component parts" will contribute positively toward leaning possess especially grammar and vocabulary. Whereas, the belief "that the best way to learn a foreign language is to absorb it in natural contexts of use"will support better understanding towards communicating with native speakers.(p.459).

According to Cotterall, (1999), students who dealt with a new strategy show many different leaning behaviors such as: how to ask for assistance, how to arrange their practices system, and how to identify their strengths and weaknesses(p.508). Cotterall adds that when students given strategy are always associated with their knowledge of that strategy, and most of the time adopt and accept it.

Motivation and expectation

In the area of motivation and expectation all participants in Wu's study(2009) study demonstrated the importance of using English in their daily lives and of having hopes of a brighter future of their lives if they could master the language well. They agreed that they would get a better job and get to know the native speaker better if they could acquire the language. Lassiter (2001) found the a majority of respondents were be able to speak the language well and the students hoped that there could be more time for them to learn the language in classroom. There was also a small percentage of students who found working in group useful. But a high percentage (%80) of students indicated that they preferred speaking French with their professors over speaking with their friends alone (58%). Lastly, with reference to questions related to motivation and expectation, Lassiter found that the students have moderate levels of instrumental and integrative motivation of learning the language. Many expected to be better language learners and that were optimistic about their language ability and the importance of learning the foreign language. Only 41% of them foresaw many opportunities to use the language. Just over 40% agreed that "Americans think that it is important to speak a foreign language, and 55% of them feel they should learn the language so that they could know French speakers better.

According to Oz (2007), a great majority of the Turkish strongly expressed their desire to learn English and the instrumental benefits of English in the future. They also hoped to one day be able to speak the language well. However, the “participants differed in their beliefs regarding the necessity of knowing about English speaking countries, the enjoyment of studying English in relation to time, and the wish to learn English in order to get to know English-speaking people better” (p. 64).

Method

The researchers have adapted and modified a version of Horowitz’s BALLI (The Belief about Language Learning Inventory) for use in this study. (BALLI) was administered to 101 undergraduate Arab students are studying at three Malaysian universities. BALLI contains thirty-four items on a Likert type scale, and assesses student beliefs in five major areas: (1) difficulty of language learning; (2) foreign language aptitude; (3) the nature of language learning; (4) learning and communication strategies; and, (5) motivations and expectations. The survey instrument asked respondents to rate their agreement to 34 statements on a Likert-type scale. These statements concern beliefs, agreement to which needs to be indicated from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

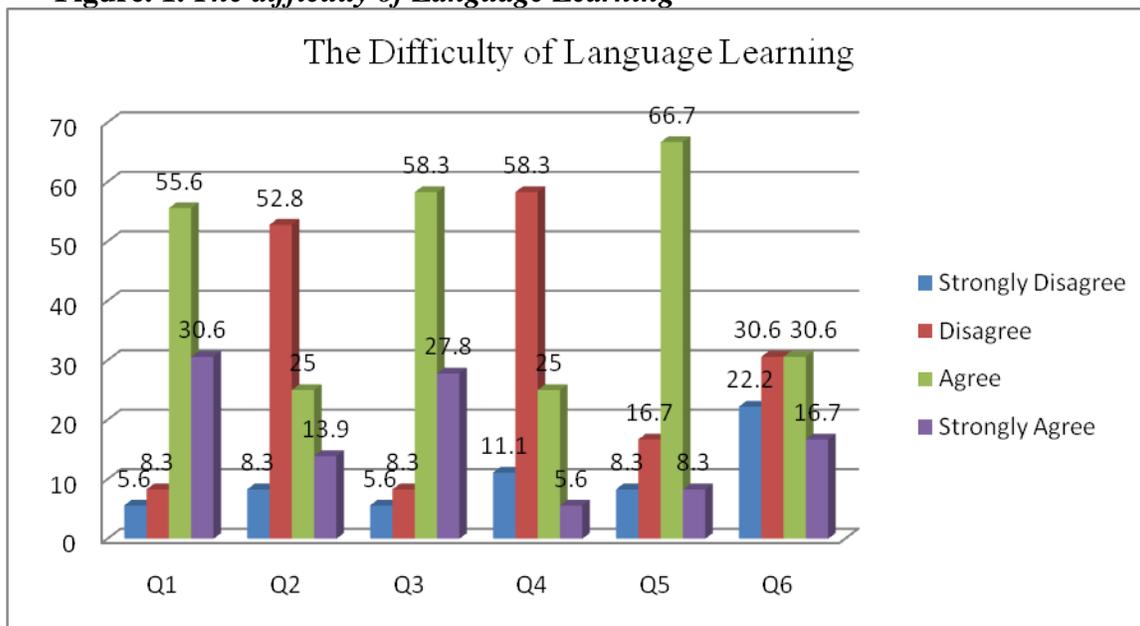
Findings and Results

The researcher also divided this part of this study to five sections with accordance of BALLI’s categories

Difficulty of Language Learning

The data shows that a high percentages (66%.7) of the students agreed that “it is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand” while only 5.6%) of the respondent strongly disagreed about the same item. A large percentage of the students(58.3%) also agreed that “I believe I will ultimately learn to speak English language very well.” Likewise, (55.6%) agreed that “Some languages are easier to learn than others”. Perhaps this result is due to the students’ awareness of their own language –Arabic- because it is very difficult to learn if it is compared with some other languages. Furthermore, the data show that 52.8% of the students disagreed that “Learning English language is difficult’ which seems to reflect awareness of the difficulty of their own mother tongue. This indicates the difficulty of language learning for some students is a case of comparison with the participants’ own language.

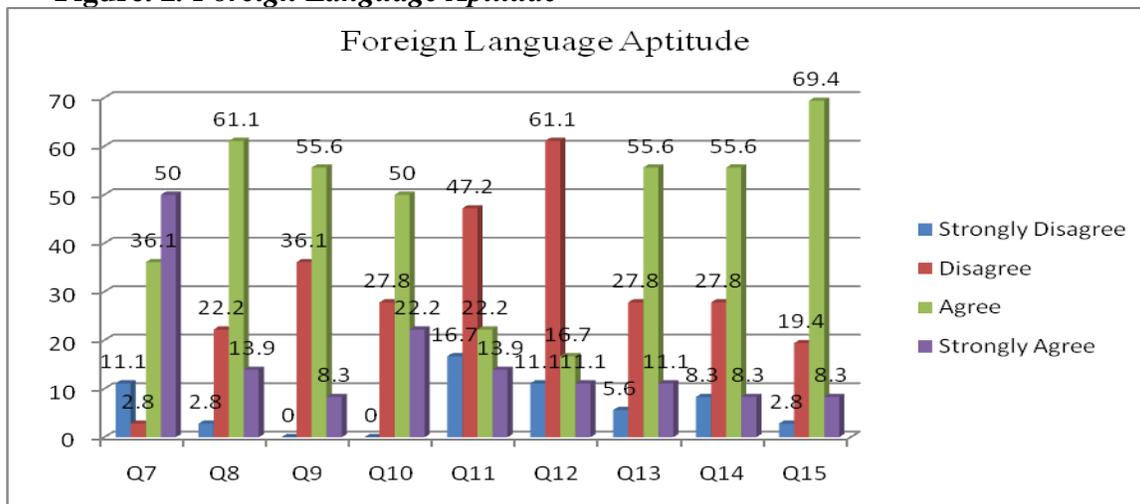
Figure. 1. The difficulty of Language Learning



Foreign Language Aptitude

Ninety six (69.4%) of the participants agreed that “Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language” while almost half of that percentage (36.1%) agreed that “It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.” On the other hand, 61.1% disagreed that “People who are good at Mathematics and Science are not good at learning foreign languages” while 61.1% agreed that “Some people are born with a special ability that helps them to learn a foreign language”. Figure 2 shows that 56.6% of all students agreed that “People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent”, “It is easy for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one” and “My people (people from my own country) are good at learning foreign languages” respectively. Furthermore, the data show almost half of the participants (47.2%) disagreed that “Females are better than males at learning foreign language”

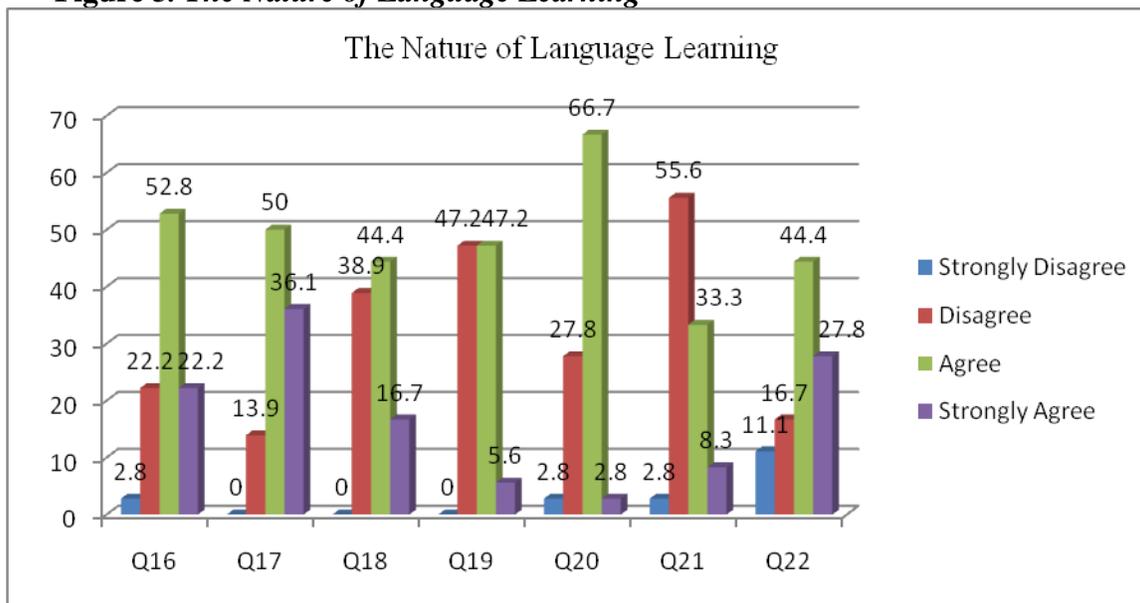
Figure. 2. Foreign Language Aptitude



The Nature of Language Learning

Most (66.7%) of the students agreed that “Learning a foreign language is different from learning other school subjects”, whereas only (33.3%) agreed that “Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of translation”. In addition, more than half (52.8%) agreed that “It is necessary to know a foreign languages culture in order to speak the language” and half of the students (50%) agreed that “It is better to learn a foreign language in the foreign country”. In this section the data show that the students have good knowledge of the nature of language learning and foreign language acquisition.

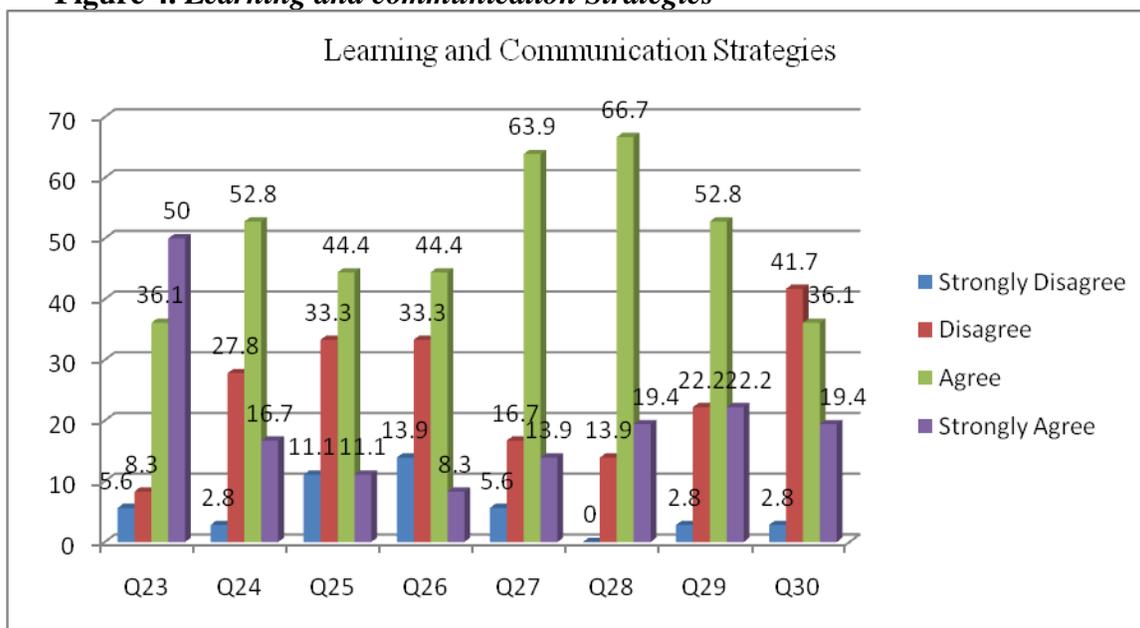
Figure 3. The Nature of Language Learning



Learning and Communication Strategies

In this section the data shows that half of the participants (50%) strongly agreed that “In order to master foreign languages, it is important to repeat and practice a lot” and 66.7% agreed that “It is OK to guess if you do not know a word in the foreign language.” Besides that 63.9% of the responses agreed that “If I heard someone speaks English, I would go up to them so that I could practice speaking the language”. On the other hand, 41.7 % disagreed that “If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning it will be hard to get rid of them later”. Whereas, more than half of the students (52.8%) agreed that “In order to master foreign languages, it is important to practice in the language laboratory”. This demonstrates that there is no consensus about clear strategies, but there is a need for practice and use of modern language labs. Figure 4

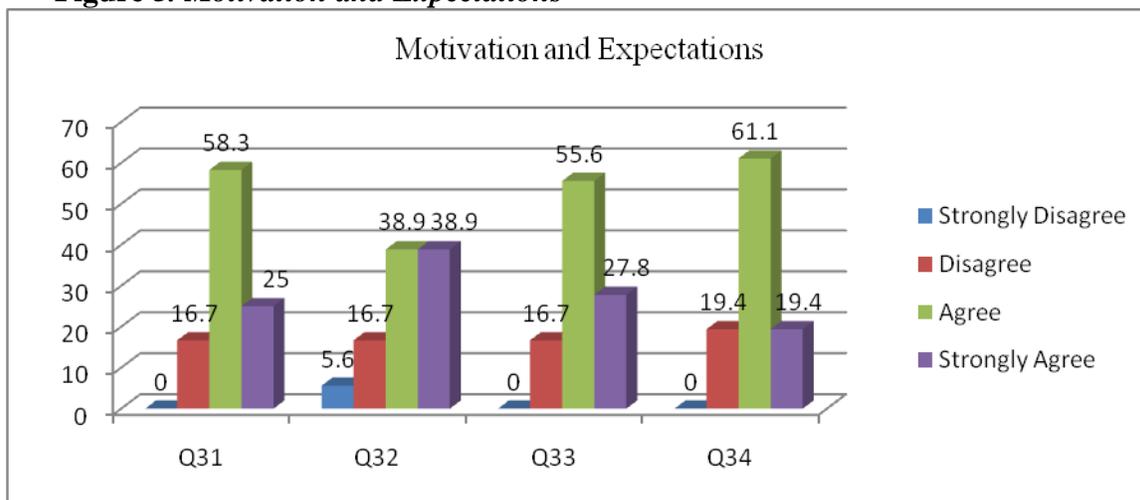
Figure 4. Learning and communication Strategies



Motivations and Expectations

In this last section concerning the motivation and expectation of beliefs about the language learning, the data showed that (61.1%) of the students agreed that “I would like to learn English so that I can get to know native speakers of English better.” And (58.3%) agreed that “If I get to speak English very well, I will have many opportunities to use it”. In addition (55.6%) of the students agreed that “The people from my country think that it is important to speak a foreign language”, whereas, (38.9%) agreed and the same percentage strongly agreed about the statement “If I learn to speak English very well, it will help me to get a good job. The data in this section show that student’s are generally optimistic and have high expectations about mastering the English language.

Figure 5. Motivation and Expectations



Conclusion

This study found that Arab undergraduate students who are studying in Malaysia have expressed their beliefs about language learning in accordance with the five areas of the BALLI's questionnaire. The results showed that the Arab students disagree that learning English language is difficult, a response that might be the result of their awareness of the difficulty of their own mother tongue. This indicates that the difficulty of language learning for some students is a case of comparison with the participant's own language. The study also demonstrated that high percentages of the participants agree that everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.

Regarding the nature of the language learning section of the questionnaire, the results show that the Arab students have a good knowledge about the nature of language learning and foreign language acquisition. This might be due to the fact that these Arabic speaking students have a native language that is itself complex in three main respects as compared to other languages. First, the alphabet is totally different. Second, the writing in Arabic is done from right to left. Finally, the structure in terms of syntax is more complex than English. In terms of learning and communication strategies the study confirmed there is no consensus about clear strategies, but there is a need for practice and the use of modern language labs. Finally, the study showed that Arab students are optimistic and had high expectations about acquiring the English language. This maybe because they feel that English will help them to become better acquainted with native English speakers as well getting better jobs.

About the author:

Prof. Dr. Khairi Obaid. Al-Zubaidi, (Applied Linguistics) University of Northern Colorado, U.S.A. **M.A:** University of La Verne, California, U.S.A. Worked at University of Baghdad, Amman University, Sultan Qaboos University and currently at Language Academy, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) International Campus, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. His research interest is in applied linguistics, Cultural studies, Academic Writing, Media Literacy and Translation.

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