

# **Aiming for Autonomy: A Study of Learners' Beliefs and Expectations for their English Language Learning in University Settings**

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## **Abstract**

A two-part questionnaire was used to find out university students' beliefs about language learning and their feelings after experiencing self-study. Several interesting findings were made in this study. For example, many of the intermediate-level university EFL students had a strong motivation for learning English and making friends with native speakers, but they were wondering how to learn English more effectively. In addition, as they have a slight unwillingness to speak in public due to a lack of oral practice in the classroom, it could be suggested that they need more opportunities there. Three more implications are suggested for future classroom management: 1) the need to explain how students can make sure of the differences and the diversities of study in university, 2) the importance of not focusing on test taking and 3) the need for strategy instruction.

## **1. Introduction**

Recently it has been said that universities in Japan are entering a “Hard Time”, in that it is very difficult to teach a variety of students from many different educational backgrounds with regard to quality and quantity (Tsuda, 2007). We have the limitation of having to organize all the classes using the same

teaching styles at the same time. On the other hand, “Remedial Education”, which has been adopted in some universities, has been spotlighted from the beginning of the school year and is accompanied by mentoring and a follow-up system for freshmen students not only by teachers but also by senior students and so on (Yamamoto, 2008). Originally it has been assumed that university students could think, act, and reflect by themselves not only with regard to their study but also daily matters. Now it is urgent that institutions of higher education do not leave learners to themselves but give serious consideration to finding suitable ways for learners to reach autonomy.

This study is focused on the inspection of learners’ beliefs about self-study collected from learner themselves, followed by the former research purpose, and learner-centered factors, such as, motivation, learning strategy and learner beliefs.

## 2. Review of previous study

In order to investigate ways to make students more independent, successful and active, a lot of research has been done in the ESL/EFL countries, especially regarding motivation, from the pioneer studies of Rubin (1975), and Stern (1975), via the theory of “communicative approach” of Wenden (1987). Oxford (1990) composed a framework of learning strategies and extended her study to investigate the learning situation in East Asian countries from both qualitative and quantitative view points (Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995).

To examine students’ inner barriers over study, including the factor of anxiety, Horwitz (1987) developed a questionnaire sheet of beliefs for language learners. Concerning the independent attitude of learners, studies of beliefs have been done by some researchers such as Cotterall (1995), White (1999), Sakui and Gaies (1999) and so on. In Japan, several investigations have been undertaken in this field including Wakamoto(1995), Takeuchi (2003), Tanoue (2004).

Mental factors, such as motivation and beliefs, work both positively and negatively. As Dornyei (2001) has pointed out, “the term ‘motivation’ is a

convenient way of talking about a concept which is generally seen as a very important human characteristic but which is also immensely complex.” As has been illustrated by previous studies, learning strategies and the beliefs of teachers and learners are changeable, so they should be treated sensitively. There is a great deal of responsibility for teachers in the management of their language classes, so it is important to have an awareness of students' learning circumstances including inner factors such as motivation, beliefs and anxiety. This can lead to encouraging learners' independent attitudes and teachers can gain an understanding of them and make sure of their real goals.

Not so many researchers have investigated out-of-class learning both qualitatively and quantitatively; therefore this study will be focused on the inspection of learners' beliefs about self-study collected using an open-ended questionnaire.

### **3. The purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is 1) to report the beliefs of Japanese university students regarding English language learning using BALLI (*Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory* (Horwits , 1987)), 2) to examine some factors affecting out-of-class learning with the verification of their comments collected by open-ended questionnaire, and to give some implications for their self study and teachers' class management.

## **4. Methods**

### **4.1 Subjects**

Sixty-four university students from 4-year colleges participated in the study. Twenty students were attending a co-educational university, and forty four were from a women's university. Their mean scores in TOEIC ranged from almost 500 to 550. The survey was conducted by this author in her English classes in July 2007.

## 4.2 Instrumentation

In this study, the English Learning Questionnaire had two parts. The questionnaire was translated into Japanese. In the first part of the questionnaire, this author introduced 34 items from the BALLI. Subjects were asked to read a statement and decide if they: (1) strongly disagreed, (2) disagreed, (3) neither agreed nor disagreed, (4) agreed, or (5) strongly agreed with each statement (see Appendix 1). The second part of the questionnaire was an open-ended question, and subjects were asked to freely write about their own opinions, feelings and anxieties with regard to their self-study.

Based on the responses from the 64 subjects to the questionnaire, the author performed a statistical procedure with the first part, that is, descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means and standard deviations. Moreover, for an analysis of the second part of the questionnaire, the author examined some characteristics of the intermediate level (TOEIC 500-550) university students.

## 5. Results and Discussion

### 5.1 BALLI

Students' responses to all BALLI items are presented in Appendix 1. A summary of these responses is given in Table 1 and Table 2 below. ( In the second parentheses, mean score of the item and a classification of items are indicated)

**Table 1. Beliefs with Higher Mean Scores (i.e. greatest degree of agreement)**

- |   |
|---|
| 1. (Item 31.) I want to learn to speak English well. (4.83 —Motivation)   |
| 2. (Item 18.) It is important to repeat and practice a lot. (4.61 —Strategy)  |
| 3. (Item 32.) I would like to have American friends. (4.36 —Motivation)   |
| 4. (Item 21.) I feel timid speaking English with other people.<br>(4.16 —Learning and Communication Strategies)                     |
| 5. (Item 8.)It is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures in order to speak English. (4.06 —Nature of Language Learning ) |
| 6. (Item 12.)It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country.<br>(4.03 —Nature of Language Learning)                     |

Table 1 presents the six BALLI items with comparatively high scores. The result of the first three factors is almost the same as previous studies. These factors are closely related to the subject's strong interest or concern with native English speakers, which was pointed out in previous papers including Sakui and Gaies (1999), and Tanoue (2004). Subjects seem to have a communicative approach and positive attitude. They also have a preference for studying abroad, and moreover, they think that a more interactive approach for understanding cultures is needed to be a good English learner. Of particular interest to this author is the fourth highest item, which is students having a shy and nervous attitude towards speaking in front of others. When these subjects were high-school students, a listening entrance exam for the Japanese National Center Exam was introduced. In spite of a great deal of preparatory training time in their high school days, these subjects might not have a positive attitude toward speaking in public, and this anxiety resulted in the high mean score for Item 21. This implies that there should be more time for oral practice and it shows the need for output opportunities in classroom settings.

**Table 2. Beliefs with Lower Mean Scores (i.e. greatest degree of disagreement)**

1. (Item 16.) I have a special ability for learning foreign languages. (1.69 —Aptitude)
2. (Item 11.) People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages. (1.91 —Aptitude)
3. (Item 9.) You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly. (1.98 —Strategy)
4. (Item19.) Women are better than men at learning foreign languages. (2.13 —Aptitude)
5. (Item 28) The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from my native language. (2.3 —Nature of Language Learning)

Table 2 shows the five BALLI items with lower mean scores. There is not so much difference between this result compared with some previous studies. The subjects were all Japanese, and they do not especially want to show off their English ability in front of others, so it might be their ethnic uniqueness; however, such a shy attitude does not always work well when they try to express

themselves in foreign language settings. They assume the equality of learning opportunities and the possibility of learning under any circumstances. They also understand the importance of utilizing English more without anxiety, but this study demonstrated that they can not /do not speak so much.

## **5. 2 Open-ended questionnaire**

Students were requested to answer freely about their impressions, feelings and anxieties with regard to self study. The students' comments can be classified into three main groups: (1) reflections on high school education, (2) TOEIC in the university, and (3) the need for strategies.

### **5. 2. 1. Reflections on high school education**

Below are some of the university learners' comments about how their English abilities and study skills have been influenced or changed since high school. Please note that these comments have been translated into English by the researcher.

- “I’m afraid that I now have less general English proficiency compared with my high school score.”
- “I’ve forgotten many grammar rules, and my vocabulary has declined.”
- “I have little memory and a lack of concentration during English classes.”
- “I feel my lack of listening ability.”
- “I usually listen to English after translating English to Japanese.”

In Japan it has been said that language classes in high school education have a tendency to be teacher-dominated. Students are accustomed to doing everyday homework assigned by teachers, and seem not to have the experience of thinking about their own learning styles or strategies for their out-of-class study. However in university, students should have their own strong motivation to keep on studying at their own pace, and they need to have the notion of responsibility for managing their own learning by themselves. As university students, subjects might have felt a sort of anxiety or worry about the necessity to be actively involved in their own learning. Without the consistency of the studies they did in high school, they express the need for guidance in learning strategies

from teachers.

### 5. 2. 2. TOEIC in the university

Below are some of the university learners' comments about TOEIC study and scores.

- “It is a fact that having a high TOEIC score does not always mean having high English proficiency.”
- “To understand the contents of the TOEIC test, we have to understand at least *high school English*.”
- “Though I made an effort to get a high TOEIC score, I failed to achieve my target.”
- “In spite of the high classification of my TOEIC score, I am nervous about my real English ability.” (“Although I was classified at a high level, I am afraid I do not have enough English proficiency.”)
- “I am afraid that my TOEIC score is drastically changing every time I take it.”

In this author's classes, syllabi and class goals were set to the TOEIC test, and subjects sometimes feel uncomfortable because of their being unaccustomed to the test. However, through classes they really understand the need for a complete review of the English which they should have acquired in high school. This meta cognitive viewpoint by autonomous learners is a vital first step in the development and continuation of positive involvement in their own learning. On the other hand, we can understand students' sincere questions, “What is the purpose of the TOEIC test? Is the TOEIC test the ultimate goal of English?” It might be an alarm call for concentrating on test-taking class management. Teachers should listen to such sincere comments by students, and reflect on their methods.

### 5. 2. 3. Need for Strategies

Learners' comments and questions about self study strategies are quoted below.

- “I like English, but can't speak it.”

- “How can I acquire the ability to speak English?”
- “I’m afraid I have few chances to speak English.”
- “Is it better for me to go abroad in order to speak English?”
- “I wonder which is more important, reading or listening.”
- “It’s too difficult to pronounce English correctly.”
- “It’s difficult to compare British English with American.”
- “I can’t feel my improvement in listening.”
- “I can’t continue memorizing English words.”
- “When I read a book, there are too many unknown words.”
- “I would like to know how to learn vocabulary more effectively.”
- “I want to know how to succeed in out-of-class learning.”
- “I want to know how to study during long holidays.”
- “I want to know how to study everyday.”
- “I want to know the best learning style, or suitable learning materials.”
- “I’m always changing textbooks, and don’t have time for successive learning.”

These subjects seem to want to know how to learn English more effectively, and are concerned about all the four skills of learning respectively, speaking, reading, listening, and acquiring more vocabulary by themselves. Because of their anxiety about speaking and listening, they easily make the decision to go to an English language school instead of doing self study and moreover, they assume the best and most natural way for becoming a fluent English speaker is to go to a foreign country. As one year has passed since they entered university, in spite of having a reasonable English communication ability ( their mean score in TOEIC is more than 500) , they are too passive to learn English by themselves without having advice and some leading by an authoritative person. However, there might be the hint of a foundation for university students’ autonomy.

It is easy to criticize the students’ passive attitude in language learning, but they are eager to find their own way of learning and are searching for suitable learning strategies. University students might need to have opportunities to



learn strategies more systematically for the self-management of their learning. The data presented here indicated that they are in the middle of the path to becoming more autonomous. If we do not answer their urgent request for strategy education, they might not be able to achieve the goal of becoming autonomous learners by themselves. Not only in out-of-class situations but also in classroom settings, teachers have to be more conscious about the diversity of learners and learning, and it is necessary to make opportunities to explain strategies or have periods for orientation in self study skills.

## 6. Conclusion

As a result of the questionnaire for students, it was found that many of them had a strong motivation for learning English and making friends with native speakers, but they were wondering how to learn English more effectively. In fact, they would like to make efforts by themselves in self study, but they are at a loss, and seem to have a passive attitude, always waiting for a teacher's advice before acting. As they have a slight unwillingness to speak, that means there is a lack of oral practice in the classroom, and it could be suggested that they need more opportunities there. From the results of the open-ended questionnaire, subjects gave us useful information about the ways in which teachers could help them prepare for autonomous learning.

According to their comments, the author has come to a resolution to do the following for students:

- 1) give an orientation for university students to explain the differences and diversity of study in university circumstances, thus helping them to become more aware of the characteristics of self study, one-way study, which leads to learners being able to learn by themselves.
- 2) Students should not simply be "Test takers", nor high scorers in TOEIC. The test is not a goal of study; it is one of the checking points in the process of studying.
- 3) We need to have strategy instruction for students. It is proposed that there is a need for a systematic orientation in strategies to become an

independent learner.

The more teachers know about learners' beliefs and notions, the more they try to assist their learners to become autonomous learners. As noted by Dornyei (2001), the notion of 'expectancy of success' is vital for the increase of learners' motivation, and teachers could provide them with sufficient preparation by offering assistance, letting them help each other, and showing a model of success.

Making use of these implications we can encourage students more effectively to become autonomous self-study learners in the future.

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## Appendix 1

Item		Mean	SD
1	It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.	3.98	0.75
2	Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	3.28	1.09
3	Some languages are easier to learn than others.	3.73	0.9
4	English is: (1) a very difficult language, (2) a difficult language (3) a language of medium difficulty, (4) an easy language, (5) a very easy language	2.77	0.96
5	I believe that I will learn to speak English very well.	2.88	0.77
6	People from my country are good at learning foreign languages.	2.58	0.79
7	It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.	3.97	0.91
8	It is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures in order to speak English.	4.06	0.83
9	You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly.	1.98	0.63
10	It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.	2.67	0.96
11	People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages.	1.91	0.79
12	It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country.	4.03	0.91
13	I enjoy practicing English with the Americans I meet.	3.84	0.91
14	It's o.k. to guess if you don't know a word in English.	3.8	0.72
15	If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take them to speak the language very well: (1) less than a year, (2) 1-2 years , (3) 3-5 years (4) 5-10 years, (5) You can't learn a language in one hour a day.	2.94	1.17
16	I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	1.69	0.71
17	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary words.	3.13	0.83
18	It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	4.61	0.52
19	Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.	2.13	0.97
20	People in my country feel that it is important to speak English.	3.77	0.89
21	I feel timid speaking English with other people.	4.16	0.82
22	If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on	2.58	0.83
23	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar.	2.72	0.7
24	I would like to learn English so that I can get to know Americans better.	3.36	0.88
25	It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language.	2.73	0.8
26	It is important to practice with cassettes or tapes.	3.66	0.76
27	Learning a foreign language is different than learning other academic subjects.	3.38	0.88
28	The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from my native language	2.3	0.83
29	If I learn English very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job.	3.88	0.88
30	People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.	3.5	0.94
31	I want to learn to speak English well.	4.83	0.38
32	I would like to have American friends.	4.36	0.68
33	Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	4.0	0.8
34	It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.	3.34	0.84