



## BELIEFS TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: AN ANALYSIS OF YEMENI UNDERGRADUATES

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### ABSTRACT

*The present study reports on the beliefs held by Yemeni first-year university students about learning English as a foreign language (hereafter EFL). A total of 120 male and female students majoring in the English language in the Faculty of Education at Thamar University participated in this study. The instrument employed was a modified version of Horwitz's (1987) Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (henceforth BALLI) to suit the Yemeni context. The results of this study were analyzed statistically and revealed that the participants held more positive responses and less uncertain replies towards the five categories of BALLI namely; language aptitude, the difficulty of language learning, nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation and expectations. Based on the findings, it was found out that students bring their previous attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and strategies of learning, which are actions that students perform to learn, into the classroom. The overall results appeared to be consistent with some other studies carried out in some Arab and non-Arab countries. Finally, the present study offered a number of pedagogical implications and recommendations for further research to be carried out at university and school levels.*

**Key words:** language-learning beliefs, Yemeni learners' beliefs, aptitude, learning difficulties, motivation

### 1 INTRODUCTION



The present paper is principally carried out to investigate the beliefs held by Yemeni first-year university students about their learning of EFL. In this context, Victori and Lockhart (1995) define beliefs as "The general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing learning and about the nature of language learning". Beliefs are also defined as "Psychologically held understandings, premises or propositions about the world that are felt to be true" (Richardson 1996). English as an international common language is used not only in the English-speaking countries but in many other countries as well. According to McGregor (2015), English is one of around 7,000 living spoken languages in the world. Millward and Hayes (2012) mention that English is the official language of 53 countries and they estimate that it is the first language (L1) of 400 million people and 1.4 billion are speaking it as their second language (L2).

Students all around the Republic of Yemen begin their obligatory English courses from the seventh grade. Many educationists believe that this is causing the gap when it comes to English proficiency (Lin, 2004). At the school level, Yemeni students face difficulty in learning EFL which is taught mostly by Yemeni teachers and not native speakers of English. Teachers are often criticized for not offering students the needed skills for learning English.

With the advent of the communicative language approach, the role of the student in the classroom becomes more significant and approaches to either learning L2 or foreign language (FL) have shifted to be more student centred learning than teachers centred learning. This, in turn, takes into consideration students' need, background and goals (Richard and Rogers, 2001). Therefore, this study is carried out to investigate the beliefs about learning EFL as being judged by Yemeni students for which instructors and textbook designers can tailor their objectives and teaching methods based on learners' beliefs.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Learners' beliefs play an active role in students' experience and in their success or failure as language learners. The first researcher to conduct a systematic study on the nature of language learning beliefs was Elaine Horwitz after developing the BALLI in the late 1980s. The purpose of her study was to examine learners' beliefs about themselves in addition to the target language and how that language should be learned in ESL and EFL settings. Horwitz (1987) stated that "L2 learners often hold different beliefs or notions about language learning, some of which are influenced by learners' previous experiences, and others are affected by their own cultural backgrounds".

Elaine Horwitz, conducted a study on language learning beliefs after developing the BALLI to assess students' as well as teachers' belief regarding a variety of issues related to language



learning. She claims that knowledge to students beliefs about language learning may provide language teachers with a better understanding of their students' "expectations of, commitment to, success in and satisfaction with their language classes" (Horwitz, 1988:283). Therefore, teachers can make "a more sensitive approach to the organization of learning opportunities" (Cotterall, 1999) in their lessons.

Heidar and Bahareh (2015) carried out a comprehensive study that reviews teachers' and students' beliefs about language learning. They concluded that the researchers who have conducted various studies on this topic have indicated that the detrimental beliefs found among learners or even teachers should be removed because they negatively affect and hinder language teaching and learning process.

A good number of studies have been carried out to investigate students' beliefs toward learning English in the Arab World. One study was conducted by Al-Roomy (2015) to investigate the beliefs held by Saudi university medical students towards English and how English should be learnt. He pointed out that Saudi students reported more positive beliefs towards learning English when it comes to motivation and expectations statements. However, more negative beliefs were reported with reference to learning and communication strategies and more uncertain responses were reported with regard to foreign language aptitude. Another study was carried out by Al-Asmri (2013) to examine the attitudes of Saudi undergraduate students towards learning the English language. He found out that although students show positive attitudes and beliefs towards learning English, they still have negative beliefs about the role of instructors inside the classrooms because of teaching practices they employ

Daif-Allah (2012) conducted a research project among 250 male and female first-year English language students studying the Intensive English Language Program at Qassim University in Saudi Arabia. He used the same tool adopted in this present study (BALLI) to explore the overall beliefs of Saudi university students about learning EFL and to investigate the effect of gender on those beliefs. Overall, when it came to the difficulty and the nature of language learning, the study revealed that the males and females held similar beliefs about language learning. However, gender differences were found in the areas of English language aptitude, learning and communication, and motivation and expectations. The study also revealed that when compared to males, females enjoy learning practicing English in the language lab and with native speakers and prefer repetition and memorization.

Al-Mutawa (1986) conducted a study on Kuwaitis and reached a conclusion that Kuwaiti Arab learners seem to show that they are not in favour of the English language and learning it. However, a recent study conducted by Malallaha (2000) which examined the attitudes and



motivations towards learning EFL of Kuwaiti university undergraduates enrolled in English courses. He discovered that Kuwaitis learners hold positive attitudes towards learning English. Learners' proficiency in tests was reported to be positive due to their positive attitude towards English.

Rieger (2009) conducted a study among the first-year Hungarian university students to check their beliefs about language learning, English and German languages. After analyzing the five established components (language, aptitude, difficulty, approaches, the importance of practising with authentic material and motivation), he concluded that target language could determine how learners perceive the difficulty of FL they are studying and the importance learners attach to some approaches towards language learning.

Bacon and Finnemann (1990) were among the pioneering researchers who conducted studies on beliefs. They created their own tool, questionnaire, which consisted of 109 statements assessing learners' beliefs about the Spanish language. Based on their finding, they suggested that it is equally important for curriculum planners and textbook writer to have knowledge about learners' attitudes towards language learning and be aware of what students expect from the FL course curriculum.

As cited in Heidar and Bahareh (2015), Brindley (1984) points out that learners' beliefs coming particularly from Asian cultural background, are more likely to be as following:

- Learning consists of acquiring a body of knowledge.
- The teacher has this knowledge and the learner does not.
- It is the role of the teacher to impart this knowledge to the learner through such activities as explanation, writing, and example.
- The teacher will be given a programme in advance.
- Learning a language consists of learning the structural rules of the language and the vocabulary through such activities as memorization, reading, and writing.

Almost all the above-mentioned points are applicable on the Yemeni learners since they come to learn English as any other scientific knowledge such as Mathematics, Physics, etc. and the teacher plays the role in providing the information with very little participation from the part of the learners. Additionally, most of the teaching of English language in the Yemeni context is based on the structural approach in which the learner masters the pattern of a sentence. Therefore, one can find Yemeni learners, including those in the university levels, lack the skills of speaking, reading, listening, and writing English intelligibly. Learners may have a good store of vocabulary, but they fail to use them communicatively.



### **3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

English language is being taught at all Yemeni schools as an obligatory course but not as a medium of instruction. The performance of Yemeni students in the English language is not up to the level by the time they become at the university level. Even the first-year university students who are majoring in English face difficulty learning English courses. Although teachers have been criticized for not creating conducive and supportive, environment for learning, teachers complain that their students are less motivated and argue that students practice some learning strategies that are ineffective in their learning of a new language in addition to developing some learning habits from their previous experiences and insist on using them.

Several studies investigated learners' beliefs about FL learning in various countries and in different students' levels, however, very little is known about learners' beliefs about learning EFL in the Yemeni context. Therefore, the present study is sought to tackle the issue and answer the following two questions:

1. What are the first-year Yemeni university ELF learners' beliefs about FL learning?
2. Do first-year Yemeni university EFL learners hold similar beliefs towards learning EFL as those in Arab and non-Arab countries?

### **4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The present study would be of great help for curriculum designers and educators to understand learners' approaches to learning English and the type of goals they follow in their language learning. Teachers could be encouraged to accommodate their objectives and teaching methods to avoid the imbalance between classroom practices and learners' beliefs. This study also adds credit to the literature concerning Yemeni learners' beliefs about learning EFL.

### **5. METHODOLOGY**

#### **5.1 Participants**

The present study was conducted in the English Language Department, Faculty of Education, at Tamar University in Yemen. The sample of the study were first-year students out of four years. All the participants joined the English Department as a preparation to do their B. Edu Degree to teach English language at schools and universities in the future. There were 120



participants in this study, 37 males and 83 females and their average age was 21. The native language of the subjects is Arabic.

### 5.2 Study Method and Tool

The present study employed the quantitative research method. The instrument used is called (BALLI) that was developed initially by Horwitz (1987) to assess the beliefs about learning an FL. The BALLI consists of 34-statements and employs a 5 point Likert-scale ranging from answers indicating “strongly agree, agree, uncertain, disagree to strongly disagree”. The 34-statements covered five areas namely: 1) English language aptitude, 2) the difficulty of language learning, 3) the nature of language learning, 4) learning and communication strategies and 5) motivation and expectations. The inventory was changed slightly by the researcher so that it could be expressed in Yemen and be suitable for Yemeni context.

### 5.3 Data Collection

Data were collected from participants that included both male and female students. Students were directed to choose one response out of five Likert Scale and were requested not to consult their colleagues while working with the questionnaire in order to ensure that the answers reflect each student’s own beliefs and opinions towards learning EFL. The researcher has given the students an idea about the aims of his study and after completing the questionnaire, students returned the forms to the researcher. After summarizing and tabulating the responses obtained from the questionnaire, the statistical procedures utilized in this study were analyzed by means of MS Excel programme. Table (1) below summarizes the organization of the five categories of BALLI statements.

**Table 1. Organization of BALLI statements**

Area of learning beliefs	language aptitude	difficulty of language learning	nature of language learning	learning and communication strategies	motivation and expectations
Statement number	1, 2, 10, 15, 22, 29, 32, 33, 34	3, 4, 6, 14, 24, 28	5, 8, 11, 16, 20, 25, 26	7, 9, 12, 13, 17, 18, 19, 21	23, 27, 30, 31

### 6. Results and Discussion

Based on the results of descriptive statistics, the present study indicated that Yemeni undergraduate students held a diversity of beliefs towards learning EFL. The discussion

summarized in tables 2-6 below provides answers to the research questions of the study. In all tables, the researcher analyzed the frequencies and the results were given in percentages. The positively worded points (strongly agree and agree) and the two negatively worded points (strongly disagree and disagree) were grouped together to find out whether the participants held positive or negative beliefs on one statement.

**Table 2. Foreign Language Aptitude**

Statements	Total Agree		Total Uncertain		Total Disagree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
	1) It is easier for children than adults to learn a FL.	101	84.2%	10	8.33%	9
2) Some people are born with special ability which helps them learn a FL.	81	67.5%	19	15.8%	20	16.7%
10) It is easier for someone who speaks a FL to learn another one.	65	54.2%	36	30%	19	15.8%
15) I have FL aptitude.	100	83.3%	17	14.2%	3	2.5%
22) Women are better than men at learning Foreign languages.	75	62.5%	21	17.5%	24	20%
29) People who are good at math and science are not good at learning foreign languages.	31	25.8%	26	21.7%	63	52.5%
32) People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent.	79	65.8%	27	22.5%	14	11.7%
33) Yemenis are good at learning foreign languages.	78	65 %	23	19.2%	19	15.8%
34) Everyone can learn to speak a FL.	86	71.7%	15	12.5%	19	15.8%

The first category of BALLI shown in the above table, “*FL Aptitude*”, presents the special ability for language learning and beliefs about the characteristics of a successful and unsuccessful language learner in general. In statement 1, (84.2%) of the participants believed that children are better learners than adults. This supports Guiora’s view that adults manifest a number of inhibitions such as embarrassment, ego, etc. when acquiring a second language, whereas younger children do not (Brown, 2007). Therefore, when acquiring a new identity, new language, adults need to master the necessary ego strengths to overcome inhibition and bridge this affective gap. The results of this belief go in line with a number of studies carried out in Arab and non-Arab societies that showed the positive effect of young age on L2 or FL learning acquisition (Al-Roomy 2015; Daif-Allah 2012; Liu, 2004).



In reply to statement 2, (67.5%) of the respondents supported the notion that, “Some people are born with a special ability which helps them learn an FL”, while (14.2%) reported neutral responses and (2.5%) disagreed with the notion. In statement 29, which scored the lowest positive responses, (25.8%) either strongly agreed or agreed that people who are good at math and science are not good at learning foreign languages. This is a good indication that students are encouraged to learn foreign languages in which over half of the respondents (52.5%) disagreed that mathematical and science disciplines are easier than learning foreign languages. In relation to statement 34, “Everyone can learn to speak an FL”, the vast majority of students (71.7%) provided positive responses to this statement. Moreover, participants reported more positive than negative responses to statement 33 (65 %and 15.8%, respectively) that Yemenis have the ability to learn an FL.

**Table 3. Difficulty of Language Learning**

Statements	Total Agree		Total Uncertain		Total Disagree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
3) Some languages are easier to learn than others.	105	87.5%	10	8.33%	5	4.17%
4) The language I am trying to learn is a very difficult language.	65	54.2%	43	35.8%	12	10 %
6) I believe that I will ultimately learn to speak this language very well.	111	92.5%	8	6.67%	1	0.83%
14) If someone spends an hour a day learning a language, it could take him/her less than 2 years to become fluent.	67	55.8%	39	32.5%	14	11.7%
24) It is easier to speak than understand a FL.	27	22.5%	21	17.5%	72	60%
28) It is easier to read and write this language than to speak and understand it.	60	50%	23	19.2%	37	30.8%

The second category of the BALLI, “*Difficulty of Language Learning*”, represents a summary of the general difficulty that learners face when learning an FL. The results in statement 6 show that almost all students (92.5%) were optimistic about learning to speak English well in their near future, while only (0.83%) which represented one student was pessimistic towards this belief and (6.67%) reported to be uncertain.

Although almost all Yemeni students do not go through learning any FL except English, (87.5%) in statement 3, gave positive responses to the belief that, “Some languages are easier to learn than others”. With reference to the sufficient amount of time to learn a language,



students reported more ‘agree (55.8%) than disagree (11.7%) responses to their abilities to become fluent in learning that language, statement 14.

The last two statements, 24 and 28, evaluate the difficulty of the four skills of a language. In both cases, students emphasized facing difficulty in the productive skill namely, speaking due to the reason that they do not come into contact to make dialogues in that language to improve their listening and speaking skills. In statement 24, (22.5%) of the participants agreed that speaking is easier than understanding an FL, while (60%) of the responses disagreed with this belief and (17.5%) were neutral. Moreover, in statement 28, (50%) of the students reported positive responses about the easiness of reading and writing over listening and speaking. This is a clear indication that respondents were affected by the traditional method of teaching (i.e. grammar translation method (GTM)), however, (30.8%) disagreed and (19.2%) remained uncertain. In terms of the difficulty of English language, in statement 4, (54.2%) regarded English as a difficult language while (10%) of the students reported that English is an easy language, and (35.8%) were undecided.

**Table 4. The Nature of Language Learning**

Statements	Total Agree		Total Uncertain		Total Disagree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
	5) The structure of English is different from that of Arabic.	106	88.3%	8	6.67%	6
8) It is necessary to know the foreign culture in order to speak the FL.	57	47.5%	27	22.5%	36	30 %
11) It is better to learn a FL in the foreign country.	36	30 %	14	11.7%	70	58.3 %
16) Learning a FL is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words.	79	65.8%	18	15%	23	19.2%
20) Learning a FL is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammatical rules.	95	79.2%	19	15.8%	6	5%
25) Learning a FL is different from learning other school subjects.	102	85%	10	8.33%	8	6.67%
26) Learning a FL is mostly a matter of translating from English.	35	29.2%	26	21.7%	59	49.2%

The third category of the BALLI statements in the above table concerns about the issue of participants’ beliefs about the *nature of how a language should be learned*. Since Arabic and English languages do not belong to the same language family which means that they have different structures, so that it was expected that the great majority of students would agree



with the notion in statement 5 ‘The structure of English is different from that of Arabic’. That was reflected in their responses in which (88.3%) agreed with the statement, while only (5%) of the respondents disagreed and (6.67%) were uncertain. Another expected result was found in statements 16 and 20 (65.8% and 79.2%, respectively) of the participants agreed with these two beliefs which again stressed the influence of the traditional method over the other emerging methods of teachings such as the audio-lingual method, the communicative method, etc.

Recall that Yemeni students spend 6 years studying English before joining universities. Although the GTM is favoured over the Communicative Approach by a number of school teachers as a teaching method, (29.2%) reported positive responses to statement 26 ‘Learning an FL is mostly a matter of translating from English’. However, the great majority (49.2%) disagreed and (21.7% ) kept uncertain. The result was not expected since most Yemeni students at school level focus on the linguistic competence rather than communicative competence. (85%) of the participants reported that learning an FL is different from learning other school subjects, statement 25. This indicates students’ worry about learning a new language though it could be a simple task.

Statements 8 and 11 stressed the notion of cross-cultural awareness. In statement 11, (58.3%) reported negative responses to the belief, while (30%) gave positive responses which stress their concern on linguistic competence over the communicative one. However, in statement 8, more positive and less negative responses (47.5% and 30%, respectively) were given to the belief that states ‘It is necessary to know the foreign culture in order to speak the FL’.

**Table 5. Learning and communicating Strategies**

Statements	Total Agree		Total Uncertain		Total Disagree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
	7) It is important to speak a FL with an excellent pronunciation and accent.	112	93.3%	4	3.33%	4
9) You should not say anything in a FL until you can say it correctly.	25	20.8%	13	10.8%	82	68.3 %
12) If I heard some people speaking the language I am trying to learn, I would go up to them so that I could practice speaking the language.	112	93.3 %	6	5 %	2	1.67 %
13) It is o.k. to guess if you do not know a word in the FL.	109	90.8%	9	7.5%	2	1.67%
17) It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	116	96.7%	4	3.33%	0	0%



18) I feel self-conscious speaking the FL in front of other people.	84	70%	15	12.5%	21	17.5%
19) If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning it will be hard to get rid of them later on.	96	80%	13	10.8%	11	9.17%
21) It is important to practice in the language lab.	98	81.7%	11	9.17%	11	9.17%

The fourth category of the statements in the above table “*Learning and communicating strategies*” refers to two strategies; learning strategies represented in statements (17 and 21) and communicative strategies in statements (7, 9, 12, 13, 18, and 19).

Regarding the traditional strategies of learning presented in statement 17, nearly all participants (96.7%) either strongly agreed or agreed with the concept, “It is important to repeat and practice a lot”. Additionally, in statement 21, (81.7%) of the respondents reported more positive responses to the belief, “It is important to practice in the language laboratory”. Here again in statements 17 and 21, students apparently reflected the learning strategies they experienced at pre-university levels. These findings are compatible with some studies conducted in some Arab and non-Arab countries in which learning by practice and repetition are still superior although learning interactively and communicatively are far more productive at the present time (Al-Roomy, 2015; Daif-Allah, 2012; Yang, 1999; Liu, 2004).

In relation to the communicative strategies, in statement 7 for example, a large number of students (93.3%) gave supporting responses to the statement “It is important to speak an FL with an excellent pronunciation and accent” which indicates that students’ keen focus was on learning correct pronunciation though they overlook grammar. This attitude can be seen clearly in statement 9 in which (68.3%) disagreed with the belief that one should not say anything in English until one can say it in correct grammar as these particular mistakes can be corrected by intensive practice during the passing of time.

In statement 12, (93.3%) of the students favoured practising English with native speakers and with a native-like accent while in statement 18 (70%) agreed that they feel embarrassed when speaking directly with native speakers of that language. These two contradictory results depend on the educational level of the students and their familiarity with FL. Although most pre-university Yemeni students rely on getting the meaning of unfamiliar words from dictionaries, the majority of respondents (90.8%) supported the belief that it is better to guess the meaning of the new words, statement 13. This attitude would help students overcome ambiguous words, enable them to communicate successfully in addition to applying the strategy of getting the meaning of new words from context.

**Table 6. Motivation and Expectations**

Statements	Total Agree		Total Uncertain		Total Disagree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
23) If I get to speak this language very well, I will have many opportunities to use it.	104	86.7%	11	9.17%	5	4.17 %
27) If I learn to speak this language very well, it will help me get a good job.	107	89.2%	10	8.33%	3	2.5 %
30) Yemenis think that it is important to speak a foreign language.	37	30.8 %	38	31.7 %	45	37.5 %
31) I would like to learn this language so that I can get to know its speakers better.	82	68.3%	20	16.7%	18	15 %

The last category of BALLI statements in the above table deals with the *desire and expectations* for opportunities students want to meet when learning EFL. Interestingly, in statements (23 and 27), the great majority of participants (86.7% and 89.2%, respectively) agreed with the beliefs that if they come to have the chance to speak the English language properly that will open up new doors for them to use that language successfully in their daily life practices and for academic purposes. This will allow them to have a good opportunity for getting better jobs if they have a high level of proficiency in English. This is a positive indication as motivation plays an important role in language learning (Brown, 2007). However, (9.17% and 8.33%, respectively) of the participants in reply to the same statements indicated no opinion, and only (4.17% and 2.5%, respectively) agreed towards the desire of speaking that language in general or for getting good jobs. Additionally, in statement 31, (68.3%) of the students reported positive responses that they are interactively motivated to learn the English language as it grants them the opportunity to get to know and interact with the native speakers of the target language with better performance. Generally, these findings lend support to some previous studies indicated that students in the Arab and non-Arab communities were optimistic about language learning either to use it efficiently, to get a good job, or to get to know its speakers well. (Yang, 1999; Liu, 2004; Al-Roomy, 2015; Daif-Allah, 2012).

With reference to the status of English language in the Yemeni society in statement 30, (30.8%) of the respondents agreed with the belief “Yemenis think that it is important to speak an FL” while (31.7) remained neutral and the majority (37.5%) disagreed. This indicates that Yemenis tend to learn an FL for a purpose; to be used practically in their daily life (statement 23), to get a good job (statement 27), or to get to know the speakers of that language (statement 31).



## 7. CONCLUSION, PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The present study aimed at examining the overall beliefs held by Yemeni first-year university students majoring in EFL. The study used a modified version of Horwitz's BALLI (1987) and slightly modified to suit the Yemeni context. Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that Yemeni university students held positive and negative beliefs towards learning EFL. Taken together, the analysis of the five established categories (i.e. language aptitude, the difficulty of language learning, nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation and expectations) revealed that students reported more positive responses and less uncertain ones on these categories. Some beliefs were chosen based on students' previous experiences as language learners and others from teaching practices adopted by their teachers or were just a random guess. Compared to other studies carried out on students' beliefs about learning English as L2 or an FL in Arab and non-Arab societies, Yemeni students held similar beliefs like those in (Al-Roomy, 2015; Daif-Allah, 2012; Liu, 2004 and Yang, 1999).

The findings suggested various pedagogical implications and recommendations for further research, especially at the university level. Teachers and educators of English language, with a better understanding of learners' beliefs about language learning held by fresh university students, can help enhance learners' success in language learning by encouraging positive beliefs that facilitate language learning. By adopting this way, teachers can teach English more effectively. The sample size of this study (N=120) is quite small which entails further research into this topic, targeting a larger sample of Yemeni university students. This study also suggests further researches on students of different levels, age and gender at university and school levels.

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