

Exploring the Gender Effect on EFL Learners' Beliefs about Language Learning.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between beliefs about language learning and gender. The Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), consisting of 34 items was administered to 155 female and 107 male English as a Foreign Language students enrolled in an Academic English Program. The Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test was employed to investigate gender difference. Results indicate that overall males and females held similar beliefs about language learning, with only one item being statistically significant and another one being marginally significant. These results deviate from those reported in a previous study conducted in the U.S. Possible reasons for this are explored in the discussion.

INTRODUCTION

Research on learner beliefs has evolved out of a growing interest in individual learner characteristics with a particular focus on learners' affective and cognitive contributions to the language learning process. While affective contributions are central to second language learning (Schumann, 1998), learners' metacognitive knowledge and beliefs have been found to have a pervasive influence on their academic learning, thinking, reasoning and problem solving (Kardash & Scholes, 1996). Furthermore, it has been shown that one's belief systems, social cognitions and metacognitions are a driving force for intellectual performance (Schoenfeld, 1983), including acquisition of foreign languages.

In the language acquisition context, beliefs have been defined as 'implicit theories' (Clark, 1988), 'self-constructed representational systems' (Rust, 1994), and "general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing learning, and about the nature of learning and teaching" (Victori & Lockheart, 1995, p. 224). Understanding learner beliefs in this context is essential, since it has been noted that successful learners develop insightful beliefs about language learning processes, their own abilities, and the use of effective learning strategies, which have a facilitative effect on learning. On the other hand, students can have 'mistaken', uninformed or negative beliefs, which may lead to a reliance on less effective strategies, resulting in a negative attitude towards learning and autonomy (Victori & Lockhart, 1995), classroom anxiety (Hortwitz, et al., 1986), and poor cognitive performance (Reid &

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Hresko, 1981). For example, a student who believes that learning a new language is mostly a matter of memorizing vocabulary, will spend most of their time and effort on this strategy in hope of eventually achieving a communicative competence. Conversely, a student who believes that a special language aptitude is necessary for the acquisition of a foreign language, but that he or she does not possess such aptitude, may begin language learning with a fairly negative expectation of their own ultimate success.

So far, studies in second and/or foreign language acquisition research have shown that beliefs are quite stable within the learner, strongly held, and resistant to change (Kern, 1995; Weinstein, 1994; Peacock, 2001). Moreover, interdisciplinary research suggests that beliefs are intertwined with factors such as self-concept and identity, self-efficacy, personality traits, and other individual differences (Epstein, 1990; Furnham, Johnson & Rawles, 1985; Langston & Sykes, 1997; Siebert, 2003; Bernat, 2006). Consequently, it has been suggested researchers study how these beliefs differ across language learners, particularly in terms of individual differences such as gender, age, nationality, learning style, and personality type (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005; Wenden, 1999; Horwitz, 1999; Rifkin, 2000).

There is still paucity in literature on the relationship between language learner beliefs and stable individual differences, such as gender. In psychology, researchers who have long been interested in the relationship of gender to behavior and cognition, have found significant sex-related differences in social behavior, cognitive activity, and general verbal ability (Bacon & Finnemann, 1992). Yet, in the field of second and foreign language acquisition, a comparatively small number of studies report findings in relation to these variables.

For example, using the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) (Horwitz, 1987), Siebert (2003) conducted a study of 64 female and 91 male language learners ($N=156$) of mixed ethnic backgrounds (22 nationalities were represented), studying English at a higher education institution in the U.S. Siebert found a number of significant differences in beliefs among males and females in relation to language learning and strategy use, using descriptive statistics in the form of percentages. Findings revealed that male students were more likely than female students to rate their abilities highly. For example, male students were twice as likely to agree that people from their country were good at learning foreign languages. Similarly, male students were more likely to respond that they have a special ability for learning languages (25%), but only 10% of females agreed and no females strongly agreed. Male and female students also significantly differed in their assessments of how long it takes to learn a foreign language. Thus, if someone spent 1 hour a day learning a language, females estimated that it would take 5-10 years or that a language cannot be learned in 1 hour a day. Male students, on the other hand, were much more optimistic and indicated that it would take 1-2 or 3-5 years. These findings suggest that male and female students differ in their assessments of beliefs related to ability. Siebert also reported that, 23% of females, as opposed to 47% of males either strongly agreed or agreed that the most important part of learning a foreign language is learning grammar. In addition, only 7% of females, but 24% of males, agreed that it is important to practice with audio-visual equipment.

In another U.S. study, Bacon and Finnemann (1992) investigated gender differences in self-reported beliefs about foreign language learning and authentic oral and written input. They surveyed 938 students of Spanish across two large state universities. The ratio of male to female respondents was approximately even. Unlike Siebert, who used the BALLI to obtain data, the researchers had developed their own 109-item questionnaire, though like the BALLI, it used a 5-point Likert format in which students responded to a series of statements regarding their experience, beliefs, attitudes, motivation and strategies with the Spanish language, both in and outside the class. Using multivariate discriminant analysis, Bacon and Finnemann found that female compared to male students reported a higher level of motivation and strategy use in language learning, greater use of global strategies in dealing with authentic input, and a higher level of social interaction with the target language (Spanish). Tercanlioglu (2005), on the other hand, performed an ANOVA and found no significant differences in beliefs about language learning of 45 male and 73 female full-time undergraduate EFL teacher trainees at a large Turkish university. She concluded that it is possible that age, stage of life and contextual differences in the language-learning situation may also be important sources of group variation in learner beliefs.

It is likely that the differences in findings between these studies may be due to, in part, the different analytical methods employed by the researchers.

Research regarding gender differences in students' beliefs about language learning is sparse and shows contradictory findings as noted above. Thus, further studies are necessary to get a better understanding. The aim of this study is to investigate whether previous research findings of gender differences (e.g. Siebert, 2003) in tertiary students' language beliefs can be replicated in the Australian context. Thus, this study fills an important gap in current research on the language beliefs of learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the local context, which has - to date - remained unexplored. Based on the above-cited research in which two out of three studies showed gender differences (in particular the one by Siebert who also used the BALLI instrument employed here), the hypothesis put forward is: *male and female students differ in their language learning beliefs*.

METHOD

Participants

EFL students at an Australian university were invited to participate in this study. Interested students were given a brief, informative oral overview of the nature and purpose of the study during a language lesson. A total of 262 EFL students volunteered to participate in this study. Of these, 155 were female (59.2%) and 107 were male (40.8%). The mean age of the participants was 24.1 years, ranging from 17 to 39 years. The difference in mean age between males (24.6 years) and females (23.7 years) was significant ($t=-2.064$, $p=.041$). Participants represented 19 different countries, with China (58.6%) representing the largest group, followed by Korea (9.6%), then Japan, Taiwan and Thailand (4.2% each). There was a significant gender difference in nationality of the respondents (Mann-Whitney $U=6806.00$, $p=.007$) with a larger proportion of females than males coming from China (62.3% compared to 53.3%), Korea (11.0% versus 7.5%), Japan and Thailand (5.2% against 2.8%) and Taiwan (6.5% compared to 0.9%). At the time of data collection, participants were enrolled in various academic English courses for both undergraduate and postgraduate university entry. The participants' overall TOEFL score was 570 or higher (equivalent to an overall IELTS score of 6.0 or higher).

Instrument

The survey instrument consisted of 34 items from the "Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory" (BALLI) designed by Horwitz (1987). The BALLI is a widely used instrument (e.g. Horwitz, 1989; Tumposky, 1991; Park, 1995; Kern, 1995; Oh, 1996; Yang, 1999; Kunt, 1997; Carter, 1999; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003; Siebert, 2003) used to assess learner beliefs in relation to second or foreign language learning. Using the same instrument, our study aims to replicate Siebert's (2003) study with a similar sample of young adult EFL learners of post-intermediate to pre-advanced English language proficiency level, and with similar contextual variants such as the nature of the course and tertiary institution.

The BALLI measures beliefs about five language learning areas: (1) Foreign language aptitude, (2) the difficulty of language learning, (3) the nature of language learning, (4) learning and communication strategies and (5) motivations and expectations. All items were rated on a 5-point rating scale, with 32 items ranging from *strongly agree* (1), to *strongly disagree* (5). The response options asking for the difficulty of the English language ranged from *very difficult* (1) to *very easy* (5), and the one for the item asking about how long it takes to speak English ranged from *less than one year* (1) to *you can't learn a language in one hour per day* (5).

Data Analysis

All data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 14.0). Frequencies and means were used to analyze single items. For ease of viewing, the BALLI item ratings were collapsed into three categories, representing agree, neutral and disagree as well as

difficult, neutral and easy. Bivariate analyses included cross tabulations. These are displayed in the form of bar charts with the grouping variable being gender. Since we wanted to assess whether there are significant gender differences in respondents' perceptions and the data for the BALLI consisted of ordinal variables, the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test was used. The Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test (also called the Wilcoxon rank sum test or the Mann-Whitney U test) is one of the best-known non-parametric test and is analogous to the parametric two sample t-test. The Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test is used to test the null hypothesis that two samples are drawn from the same population, i.e. it determines whether the difference between the medians of the two groups is significant. This test is used when the normality assumption is questionable and/or when data is ordinal, i.e. when the data can be ranked. One of the disadvantages of non-parametric tests is their lower power compared to their parametric equivalents when the assumptions underlying the test are met. Power can be increased with an increase in sample size. One advantage is that the test is not affected by outliers, i.e. extreme scores which can make a parametric test less reliable (for a detailed discussion, see Howell, 1996). Thus, the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test is most suitable for an analysis in this study.

RESULTS

Results of the items are presented in groups according to the five language areas of the BALLI outlined in the method section.

Foreign Language Aptitude

Responses to the items of Foreign Language Aptitude show that participants agreed with the statements of most items (see Figure 1). An overwhelming majority (92%) believed that it is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language, that some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages (88%) and that everyone can learn to speak a foreign language (84%). However, a majority (60%) disagreed with the statement that people who are good at maths or science are not good at learning foreign languages. Also, a majority (56%) neither agreed nor disagreed that people from their own country are good at learning languages, and 46% neither agreed nor disagreed that they have a special ability for learning languages. Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney tests showed that there are no significant differences in responses between males and females except for item eight (Mann-Whitney $U=6495.00$, $p=.004$) which showed a lower mean ranking of women (119.45) compared to men (145.23). This means that women are more likely than men to believe that people who speak more than one language are very intelligent.

Difficulty of Language Learning

The graphs in Figure 2 below show that most respondents (69%) agree with the statement of some languages being easier than others, and most (56%) find the English language of medium difficulty. Only a very few students believe that spending less than one hour per week learning a foreign language will take them less than one year to speak the language very well. Most believe it takes longer, and a sizeable proportion (19%) even believe one cannot learn English by studying it for 1 hour per day. Item 12 also shows that a larger percentage of males than females believe it would take three to five years to learn a language, however, there were no statistically significant gender differences on either this item nor the other items. A significant portion of respondents (47%) disagree with the statement that "It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language", indicating that they either believe the reverse, namely that it is easier to understand than speak a foreign language or that they may be both difficult.

Nature of Language Learning

The graphs for the statements about the nature of language learning (see Figure 3) show that a vast majority of respondents agreed with the statements that it is necessary to learn about English speaking cultures in order to speak English (79%), that it is best to learn English in an English speaking country (89%), that learning a foreign language is different than learning other academic subjects (57%), but disagreed with the statement that "The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from own language" (70%). Many believed that the most important

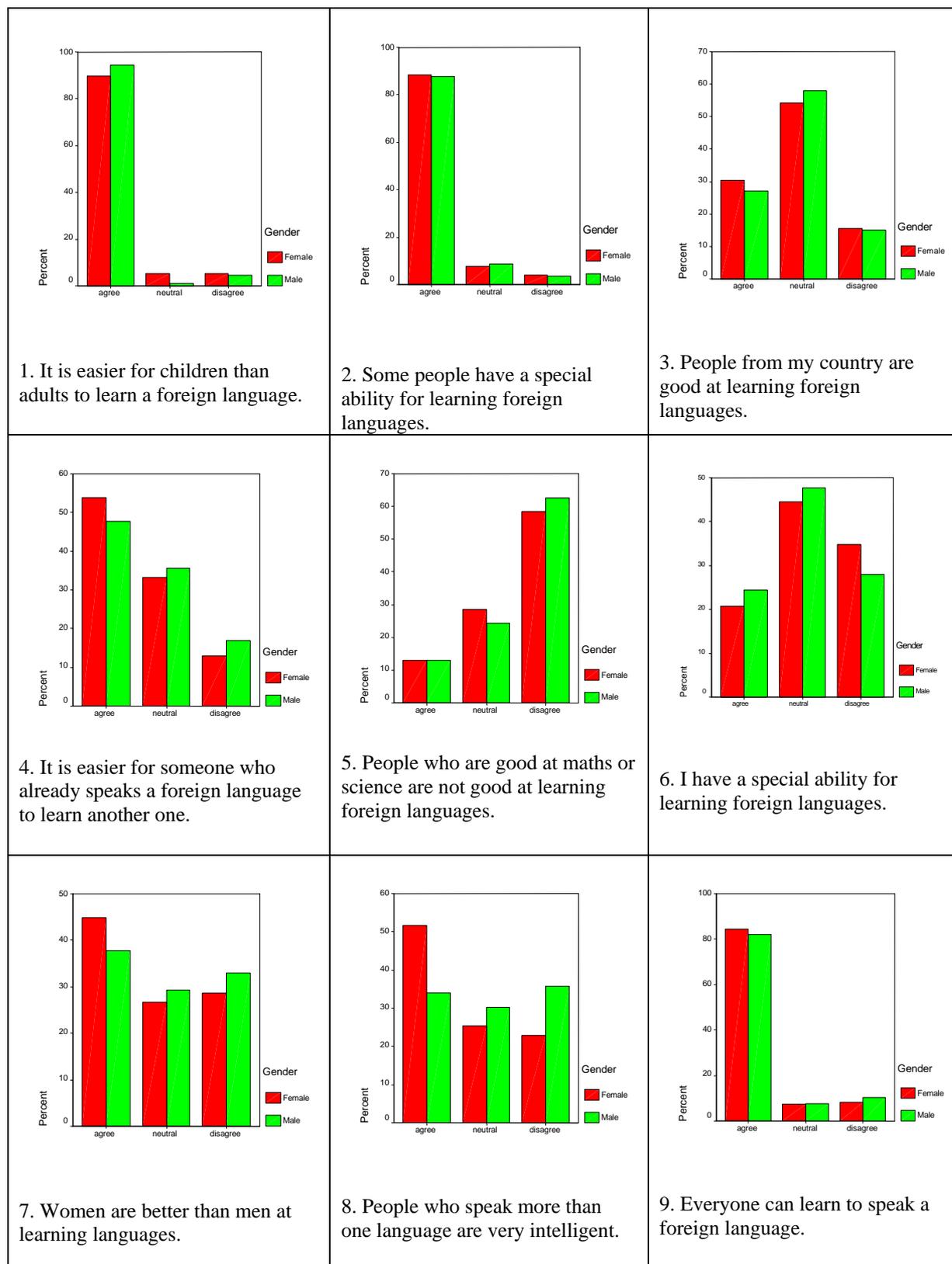


Figure 1: Foreign language aptitude

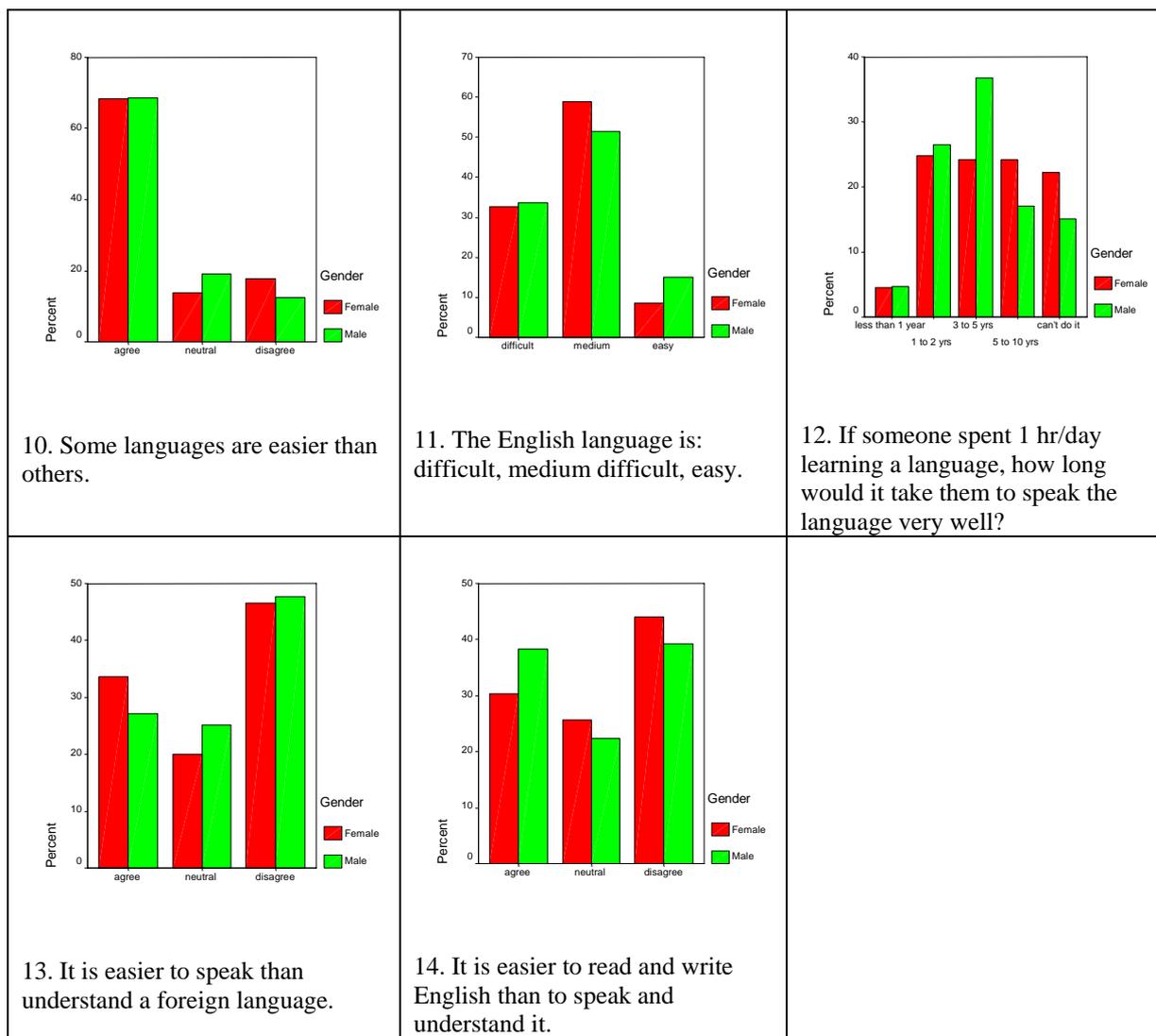


Figure 2: The Difficulty of Language Learning

part of learning a new language is learning new words (46%), with the smallest proportion disagreeing with this statement (23%). Responses for item 18 were fairly evenly spread over the response categories. There were no significant gender differences in terms of responses to items 15 to 20, i.e. males and females responded to items 15 to 20 in a similar fashion.

Learning and Communication Strategies

The charts for learning and communication strategies show distinct responses (see Figure 4). A large majority of respondents believe that it is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation (69%), they enjoy practicing English with Australians they meet (68%), find it acceptable to guess the meaning of an unknown word in English (77%), repeat and practice a lot in general (92%), and to practice with audio equipment such as cassettes or CD Roms (60%). However, respondents disagreed with the statement that one should not say anything in English until one can say it correctly (83%), and that it will be difficult for beginning students to speak correctly if they are allowed to make mistakes (59%). A smaller percentage (43%), but still the largest proportion, disagreed that they felt shy speaking English with other people.

Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney tests showed no significant differences in responses between males and females, although item 23 was marginally significant (Mann-Whitney $U=7289.50$, $p=.053$)

showing a higher mean ranking of women (137.17) compared to men (122.13). That is, women are slightly less likely than men to enjoy practising English with the Australians they meet.

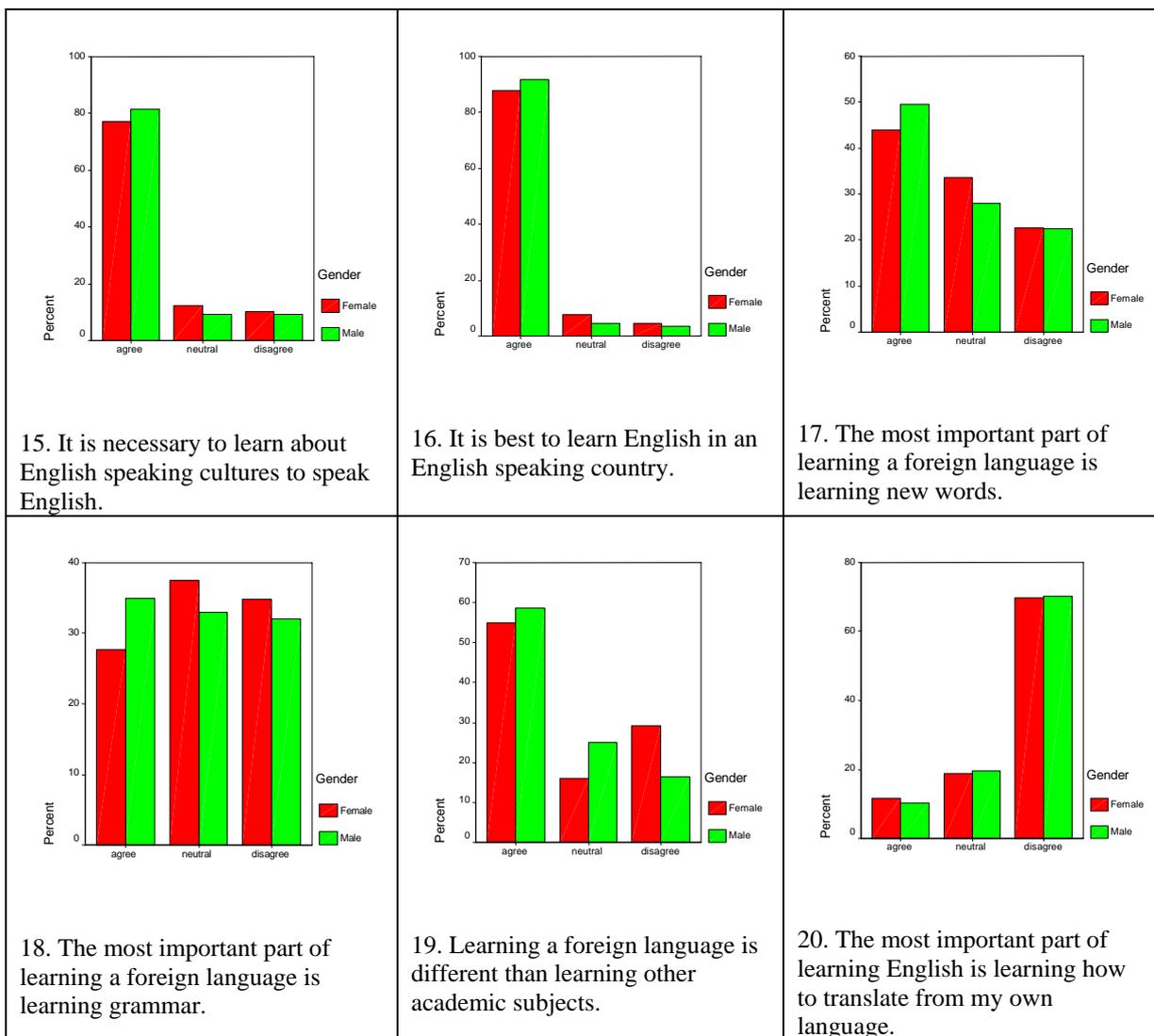


Figure 3: The Nature of Language Learning

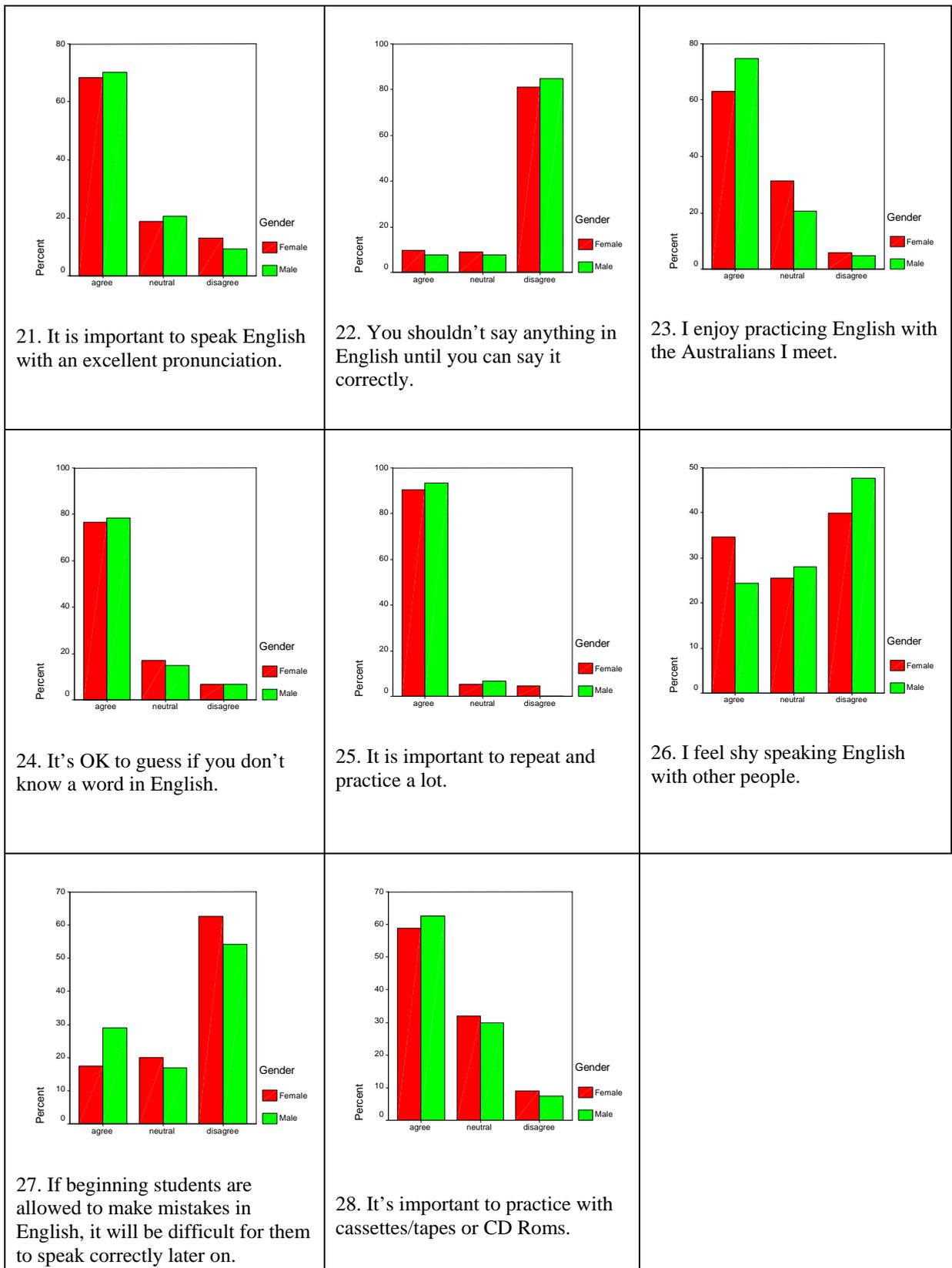


Figure 4: Learning and Communication Strategies

Motivations and Expectations

Responses on items for motivations and expectations indicate that an overwhelming majority of respondents agreed with the statements and only very few were neutral or disagreed as is indicated by the charts. The lowest positive response was obtained for learning English in order to get to know Australians better (70%) (see Figure 5). There are no significant gender differences in respondent's perceptions for the motivation and expectation items.

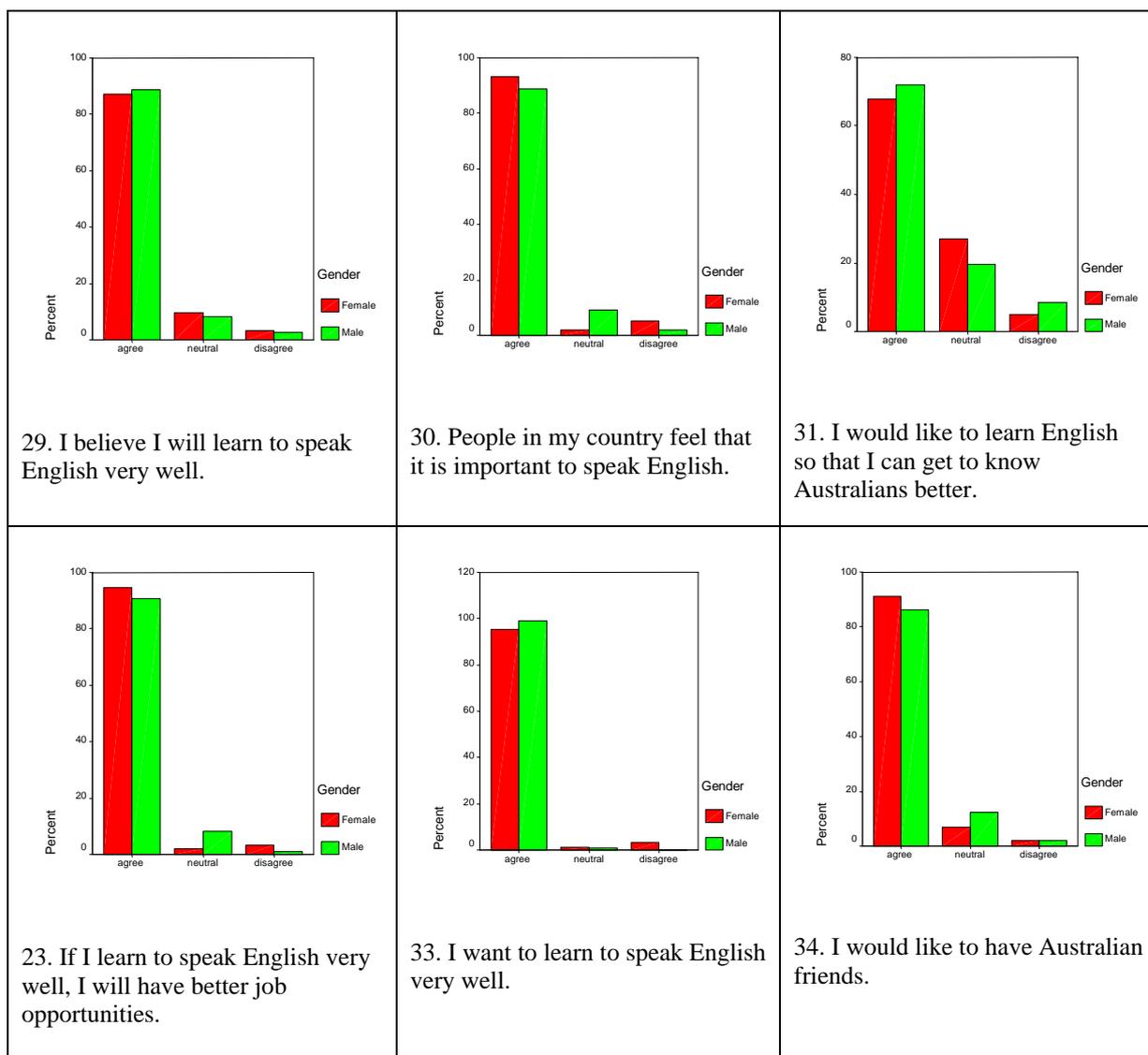


Figure 5: Motivations and Expectations

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to ascertain whether there are any gender differences in language beliefs and to compare outcomes with those of a previous study by Siebert (2003). The results show that males and females in this study generally held similar views about language learning in all categories of the survey instrument 'Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory' (BALLI). However, there were two items on which responses of males and females differed. One concerned the relationship between speaking more than one language and intelligence with females being more likely to view that intelligence plays a greater role in language learning than males. Another difference, although only marginally different, was found in an item that concerned the degree of enjoyment both males and females reported in practicing English with native speakers, with males being more likely to enjoy the experience than females. Thus, the hypothesis that males and females differ in terms of their language learning beliefs was supported only for the two items noted above. This seems contradictory to previous findings which suggest that, compared to males, females enjoy more social learning strategies (Politzer, 1983; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). It may be likely that female students' reticence to speak and enjoy the experience may be reflective of what Dash (2003) identifies as more of a gender issue related to situational anxiety than necessarily a culturally determined one.

Overall, the gender differences found in the current study differ from those reported by Siebert (2003), using a U.S. sample, in terms of quantity and nature. Namely, Siebert found eight items with gender differences, while this study only found two. In the U.S. sample, male and female students differed in their assessments of beliefs related to own language abilities as well as those of their compatriots, and the length of time it takes to acquire a new language, the importance of grammar, pronunciation and use of technology in the classroom. Males were much more optimistic about their own abilities and the length of time it would take them to learn English, and, they were almost twice as likely as females to endorse excellent pronunciation, and more than twice as likely to view grammar learning as the most important part of language acquisition. On the other hand, males and females in the current study did not differ on the same BALLI items as those in Siebert's (2003) study. Here, items related to the degree of intelligence possessed by multilinguals and the degree of enjoyment in practicing English with native speakers.

The differences between both studies could be explained in a number of ways. Firstly, it might be possible that other factors such as culture impact on the nature of student responses to belief-items. Recent evidence suggests that perceptual processes are influenced by culture, including holistic versus analytic perception (Nisbett & Miyamoto, 2005) in general, and in the language-learning context (Alexander & Dochy, 1995; Tumplosky, 1991) in particular. In the Japanese culture, for example, perceptions related to issues such as feminized status of English as a foreign language and the social position of females are considered of crucial importance when examining the influence of gender on foreign language learning attitudes (Kobayashi, 2002). While both the Australian and the U.S. samples represented many countries (Australia = 19; U.S. = 22) the subjects in the current study were predominantly of South East Asian origin, with majority of Chinese ethnicity. This is a unique feature of overseas student composition in Australian Universities today. It has been suggested that learners from Confucian Heritage Cultures such as Chinese, reveal a collective-oriented national cultural trait in a learning context (Contazzi & Jin, 1996; Littlewood, 2001), and may perceive the learning task and the nature of knowledge differently to other cultures (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991). Another factor could relate to context specificity. While the U.S. and the Australian samples were gathered in similar 'western' contexts from participants of tertiary EFL courses, there is evidence to suggest that learner beliefs differ by institutional context. For example, Rifkin (2000) conducted a large sample study across various institutions in the U.S. and found that learners' beliefs about language learning differed by contextual setting. However, he concluded that individual learner differences such as personality might play a greater role than the factors considered in his study. In other studies, individual factors such as language proficiency, motivation, anxiety, attitude, and self-efficacy have been found to play a role in language learner beliefs (Huang & Tsai, 2003; Banya & Cheng, 1997; Truitt, 1995). The available data on respondents' language proficiency in the current study shows

that the subjects were of a higher level than those reported by Siebert (2003). It has been reported that learners who have been learning a foreign language for longer and have achieved greater proficiency tend to hold more positive and realistic views about language learning, than those at early stages of their language learning, suggesting that experience also plays a role in shaping language learner beliefs (Banya & Cheng, 1997).

In terms of pedagogical implications of learner-beliefs research, identification of these beliefs and reflection on their potential impact on language learning and teaching in general, as well as in more specific areas such as learners' expectations and strategy use, can inform future syllabus design and teacher practice in an EFL course. The BALLI assessment tool could be a good starting point. Wenden (1986) points out that activities in which learners examine and evaluate their beliefs may lead to increased awareness and even adjustment of their expectations concerning language learning.

It seems, therefore, premature to conclude that beliefs about language learning differ by gender, though caution should be exercised in generalising the current findings beyond this student population, or indeed to other wider populations, where language learner beliefs are likely to differ. In addition, it is important to note that apart from gender, a number of social, cultural, contextual, cognitive, affective, and personal factors can be responsible for the shaping nature and strength of language learner beliefs (for a review, see Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005). Using a longitudinal research design rather than a cross-sectional as was done here may help to further elucidate the nature and development of language beliefs.

Accordingly, future research could further investigate the role of gender in learner beliefs across different populations, contexts, and age groups. Also, there is currently paucity in literature on the impact of learner beliefs in the language classroom, the stability or malleability of beliefs about language learning, as well as their relationship to other stable individual factors such as personality type.

The limitations of the present study go beyond its contextual and institutional constraints. Given the particularly complex and multi-faceted nature of beliefs about language learning and the myriad factors that can shape learner beliefs, no attempt will be made to generalize the findings of this study beyond the local context, although comparison data suggest feasibility of finding general trends across contexts, and individual differences of learners, through replicated studies, as emphasized by Kern (1995).

CONCLUSION

Overall, with the exception of two items, males and females in this study seem to respond in a similar fashion in terms of their beliefs about foreign language aptitude, the difficulty they perceive when learning a language, the nature of language learning, strategies in learning and communication, and their motivations and expectations. Males and females seem to differ significantly in their belief that multilinguals are very intelligent, with more females agreeing with that statement. They marginally differ in their enjoyment of practicing English with Australians, with women enjoying it less. Before results can be generalized, however, additional research is required to ascertain whether these differences hold in other contexts.

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