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Our ways of learning language

ABSTRACT

For the last decade or longer, applied linguists have paid increasing attention to learners' strategies and styles of learning (Wenden & Rubin 1987; Oxford 1990, Chamot & O'Malley 1990; Cohen 1998). There is an historical reason for this interest, which is discussed in the final part of this paper. The concern that teachers have with learners' beliefs may, however, also be based on at least four immediate, practical reasons. The various configurations of learners' beliefs and teachers' beliefs yield at least three conditions or states that intimately concern language teachers. This paper presents a pilot study of how an adaptation of an instrument designed earlier to identify learners' beliefs about language learning was applied in the context of our own institution. Its results are discussed within the contours of five categories: learners' motivations for learning language; their ideas about language learning aptitude; their opinions of the difficulty of learning English; their second language learning and communication strategies; and, finally, their views on the nature of language learning. The results not only show a remarkable congruence with those of the earlier study, but also that learners' preconceived ideas about language learning may in fact impede their development. How these sometimes erroneous beliefs can best be challenged and changed is finally considered.

Keywords:
academic language proficiency; language learning

Learners' beliefs about language learning

During the last decade applied linguistic studies has seen a substantial and renewed interest in learners' styles of learning, as well as in the strategies that they use to gain a command of a new language (cf., e.g., Wenden & Rubin 1987; Oxford 1990, Oxford & Crookall 1989, Chamot & Kupper 1989, Chamot & O'Malley 1990; Cohen 1998). Learner styles are broadly defined here as encompassing ways that learners consciously or unconsciously use to gain a command of a new language, their strategies for developing this command, and, even, their idiosyncratic techniques for becoming competent users of their selected target language. Apart from the historical reasons for this concern with learners' styles of learning, which will be referred to again below, there are also a number of practical reasons, relating to the instructional context, for such interest. Our current focus is on learners' beliefs, which are the sets of assumptions and preconceptions about language learning that learners often carry with them into class, and that may refer to, or find

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expression in, their learning styles and strategies. These beliefs are important for at least four immediate reasons:

● They frame learners' expectations, and are potentially powerful motivating influences or impediments to language learning.
● If learners' beliefs are not aligned with the teacher's, then learning, developing and progressing may be impeded as a result of conflict within the instructional situation.
● If learners' views of language learning are erroneous, language learning may be less effective (Horwitz 1987: 126).
● Learners' views of language learning can potentially change and be modified, whereas cognitive styles may be less amenable to change (Horwitz 1987: 126).

As Horwitz's original study of students' preconceived ideas has indicated (1987: 127), such

> … beliefs have varying degrees of validity and numerous origins, often differing radically from the current opinions of second language scholars; in many cases, the term 'myth' might be a more accurate characterisation (Horwitz 1987: 119).

In an age where the expectations of the student are paramount, one may be somewhat reluctant to characterise learners' views as erroneous or mythical, yet there is no doubt, as the results of this study will confirm, that they at times border on myth. Where these learners' teachers have recently been professionally trained and, therefore, use methods of language teaching and approaches that, for example, promote fluency and communication instead of conventional grammar teaching, it is quite possible that conflicts may arise between learners' beliefs and expectations on the one hand, and teachers' instructional practices on the other. Learners' resistance to instructional practices may well be related to such a conflict between expectations and beliefs.

Teachers may therefore find themselves and their learners in one of the following states (there may be more):

1) Learners' beliefs are aligned with those of the teacher.
2) There is a mismatch between learners' beliefs and those of the teacher.
3) Whether congruent with or different from those of the teacher, learners' beliefs may be an impediment to learning.

The current discussion is part of an ongoing investigation, within our unit, of learners' and teachers' beliefs. We intend to report separately on a survey of teachers' beliefs, and on whether, and how, these beliefs are aligned to or in conflict with learners' beliefs. This kind of investigation is important to our work since, in most cases, we have very limited time with students in which to deal with a problem that has great urgency for our whole institution. This problem is that our students, for the greater part, have been identified by a reliable, standardised placement test as being at risk academically because of too low a level of (academic) language proficiency. The test we use is powerful in predicting success in the first year of study. Its results indicate the urgency of designing and mounting an intervention, in the form of a set of courses of language proficiency development, to minimise the risk.

If students who are identified as being at risk do not develop and sustain such proficiency early on in their studies, the time that they spend struggling with their academic work becomes futile and wasteful, in both human and financial terms. The intervention for which we are responsible, viz. to assist in bringing them up to a level of proficiency that will enhance their chances of academic success, is made even more urgent by the limited time — less than one calendar year — in which this must be accomplished. We therefore do not have the luxury of facilitating the

development of students over many years, which would normally be ideal for sustaining the kind of growth that is possible through language instruction.

The discussion is also a report on the beginning of an investigation that will gradually be refined. We have, in other words, used the data that were currently available to us as a pilot study, with the intention of modifying the statements, where the need arises, or altering the methodology, if necessary. We report later on the modifications that we foresee, as a result of this preliminary analysis, to the instrument that was employed for this investigation. We turn now to a description and discussion of that instrument.

Learner questionnaire

In assessing and identifying learners' beliefs and assumptions about language learning, we used an adaptation of an instrument, the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) developed and used by Horwitz (1987; cf. her appendix, p. 127, for the full inventory). Where the original inventory had 34 statements, our modification, BALLI-M, reduced this number to 25. The reason for doing so was that some of the statements with which respondents were asked to agree or disagree assumed or implied that learning English could take place only or ideally in an English-speaking country (e.g. statement 12. "It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country"). Even more inappropriately for our context, it is assumed that this country was or is the USA (13. "I enjoy practicing English with the Americans I meet"; 24. ""I would like to learn English so that I can get to know Americans better"; 32. "I would like to have American friends", and so forth). Despite the number of statements that were either inappropriate or not amenable to adaptation to our context, however, we found the format generally quite useful.

In the learner questionnaire, we asked learners to use a seven-point scale to agree or disagree, strongly or otherwise, with a number of statements made in the first person, indicating whether and to what extent these were true for them. The questionnaire was completed in the classroom, and the answers were transferred after completion to a separate sheet, which was handed in anonymously in order to ensure answers that were as honest as possible. Students were assured that the task was not intended for evaluation purposes, but for ascertaining the strategies they used to learn English. This is what the questionnaire, entitled "My way of language learning", looked like:

My way of language learning

Here is a questionnaire that you have to complete in order to evaluate your own language learning style and your beliefs about language learning.

For each statement, you have to choose the response that you believe is true for you, by marking it clearly on the scale provided:[1]

1. I would like to learn English so that I can study successfully.
2. The most important part of learning another language is learning its vocabulary.
3. I believe that some people have a special ability for learning new languages.
4. I believe that I will learn to read, write and speak English very well.
5. You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly.
6. English is a language of opportunity and employment.

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1. Adapted from E.K. Horwitz 1987. Surveying student beliefs about language learning. In A. Wenden & J. Rubin (eds.), *Learner strategies in language learning*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice/Hall. Pp. 119–129.

7. The most important part of learning another language is learning its grammar.
8. It is easier for children than for adults to learn English as another language.
9. I enjoy practising English with people I meet, whenever possible.
10. It's OK to guess if you don't know a word in English.
11. If I improve my English, I will have a better chance to find a good job.
12. Learning English is different from learning other academic subjects.
13. People who are good at mathematics are not good at languages.
14. I feel timid when speaking English with other people.
15. I want to learn to speak, read and write English very well.
16. The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from my mother tongue.
17. Women are better than men at learning languages.
18. If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on.
19. I find it important to create opportunities for myself to use English outside of class.
20. Everyone can learn to use English as a second/foreign language.
21. The most important part of learning English is to become fluent in communicating.
22. English is one of the most difficult languages to learn for someone who does not have it as a first language.
23. It is important for improving my English that the teacher requires me to repeat a lot.
24. I like to rehearse in my mind what I want to say before I speak or write something in English.
25. I like to have the teacher correct every error I make, so that I don't learn bad habits.

The questionnaire was part of a workbook that students used in the second term, and was completed by students early in the term. Whether this timing is ideal will be discussed below.

The statements to which students were asked to respond can be placed into five different categories (see below), though on the questionnaire the statements were scattered, and thus occurred fairly randomly. The advantage of this is that students may more easily be caught out at giving contradictory answers to more or less similar questions, and that one can therefore build up a picture of where, for some reason, they may have tried to bluff their way through. At the same time, however, there is a drawback to this, viz. that the apparent contradictions may have been made in good faith, i.e. without any intention to mislead or to be dishonest. If categories of statements were grouped together, the contradictions might have been more obvious to respondents. We shall return below to instances of this, and the resultant problems in interpretation.

To interpret the statements, we used the same five categories as those used in summarising the original inventory. Although different categorisations would be possible, we thought it useful to consider statements in the groupings used by Horwitz (1987):

● *Aptitude*
  Belonging to this category are statements 3, 8, 13, 17, 20.
● *Difficulty of language learning*
  Statements 4 and 22.
● *Nature of language learning*
  Statements 2, 7, 12, 16, 21.
● *Learning and communication strategies*
  5, 9, 10, 14, 18, 19, 23, 24, 25.

● *Motivations*
   1, 6, 11, 15.

As we have remarked above, the intention in administering the questionnaire was, firstly, to refine it for full-scale use in 2003, and, secondly, to undertake a preliminary analysis of the results in order to make a start on their interpretation.

Results and analysis

Since the analysis was intended to be the beginning of the process of interpretation, we were willing, at this stage, to tolerate a rougher measure of agreement or disagreement with the statements from the respondents than the data allowed us to discern. The seven-point scale was therefore reduced to a five-point scale by collapsing the two points at each extreme. Furthermore, in order to get a fairly general idea of agreement and disagreement, scores lying on either side of the mid-point, which indicated neutrality or uncertainty, were generally interpreted as showing agreement or disagreement.

Eighty student responses to the survey were analysed.

We deal first with the category of **motivation(s) for learning English**, because here there seems to be the least disagreement among students. Asked to express an opinion on the statement "I would like to learn English so that I can study successfully" (statement 1), 90% agree or agree strongly. Similarly, 86% (71% fairly strongly or strongly) think that English is a language of opportunity and employment (statement 6), and 84% agree that improving their English would give them a better chance of finding a good job (statement 11). Moreover, 96% agree, most very strongly, that they want to learn to speak, read, and write English very well (statement 15). There is very little amiss with these learners' motivation to develop their English.

How do they judge their own and others' **aptitude** for learning English, however? Learners' preconceptions are strongly in evidence in this category. While almost all (91%) agree (and some 86% strongly or fairly strongly) that learning English is within everyone's capability (statement 20: "Everyone can learn to use English as a second/foreign language"), they nonetheless generally think that "Some people have a special ability for learning new languages" (statement 3, with which 73% agree)!

In view of this apparent contradiction, it is interesting to note that these learners' views are quite sober when it comes to identifying the people with such special abilities. It is, by inversion, probably not those who are not good at mathematics, one of the red herrings tossed out to respondents in the form of statement 13 ("People who are good at mathematics are not good at languages"), as can be seen from the following summary of results (Table 1):

TABLE 1

People who are good at mathematics are not good at languages (statement 13)

Agree strongly or fairly strongly	18%
Agree	4%
Uncertain	10%
Disagree	13%
Disagree strongly or fairly strongly	56%

As can be noted, a full 69% (n = 80, as in all of the following) did not take up the bait, and dis-

agreed. The same pattern of sober consideration is evident in the responses to statement 17, which potentially has an even higher degree of controversy (Table 2), though it is also evident that this might have been considered a trick question by the respondents, since a good 17% indicate that they are uncertain. Nonetheless, it is heartening that, in this respect at least, learners do not have preconceived notions that might impede their learning, since 63% disagree with the statement in 17:

TABLE 2

Women are better than men at learning languages (statement 17)

Agree strongly or fairly strongly	14%
Agree	6%
Uncertain	17%
Disagree	8%
Disagree strongly or fairly strongly	55%

Who then might those people with 'special ability' for learning a language be? The closest that one comes to an answer to this question from this group of respondents is in their responses to statement 8 (Table 3, below):

TABLE 3

**It is easier for children than for adults to learn
English as another language (statement 8)**

Agree strongly or fairly strongly	69%
Agree	9%
Uncertain	6%
Disagree	4%
Disagree strongly or fairly strongly	13%

Here, 78% of respondents agree, while only 17% disagree. Of course, given the kind of proficiency — which involves becoming academically more literate — that these learners are seeking to develop, this is an unfortunate bias. It is indeed a bias that may, especially since it is unwarranted, impede their own development of this kind of language proficiency.

Although Horwitz's (1987) original survey included a majority of male respondents, and although she therefore cautions against using her results as a benchmark of any sort, it is nonetheless intriguing to note that, on the four items of language aptitude that she reports on, there is a remarkable degree of congruence with those of the current study (Figure 1 below). The four items are statement 3 (Some people have a special ability), 8 (Children find language learning easier), 17 (Women are better than men at learning languages) and 20 (Everyone can learn to use English):
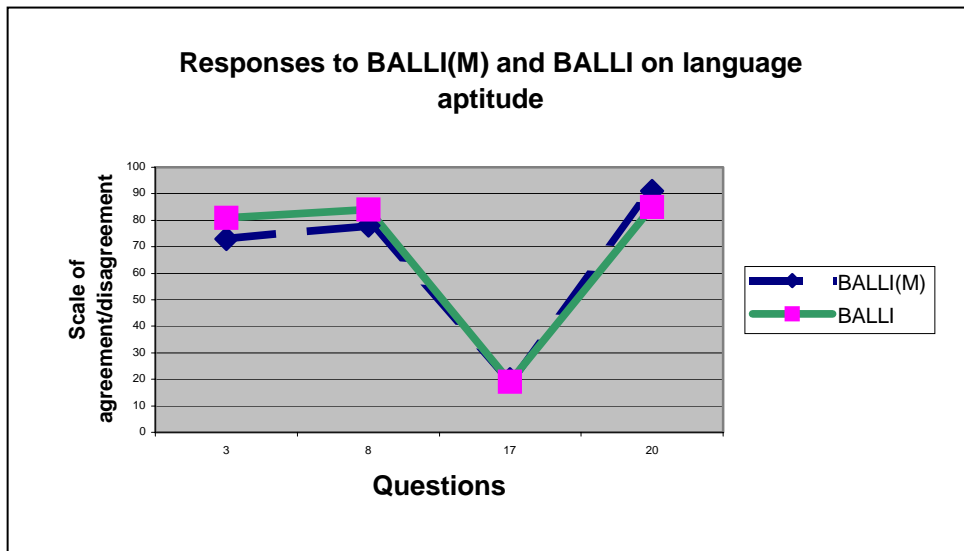
Responses to BALLI(M) and BALLI on language aptitude

FIGURE 1

In fact, the correspondence between this survey's results and those of the original is 0.98, which is as close as it could probably be. If one draws a graph that shows the correspondence between the ten items that have the greatest similarity on the original BALLI survey and the current one, the overlap is equally high, viz. 0.89 or, in percentage terms, 89% (Figure 2):

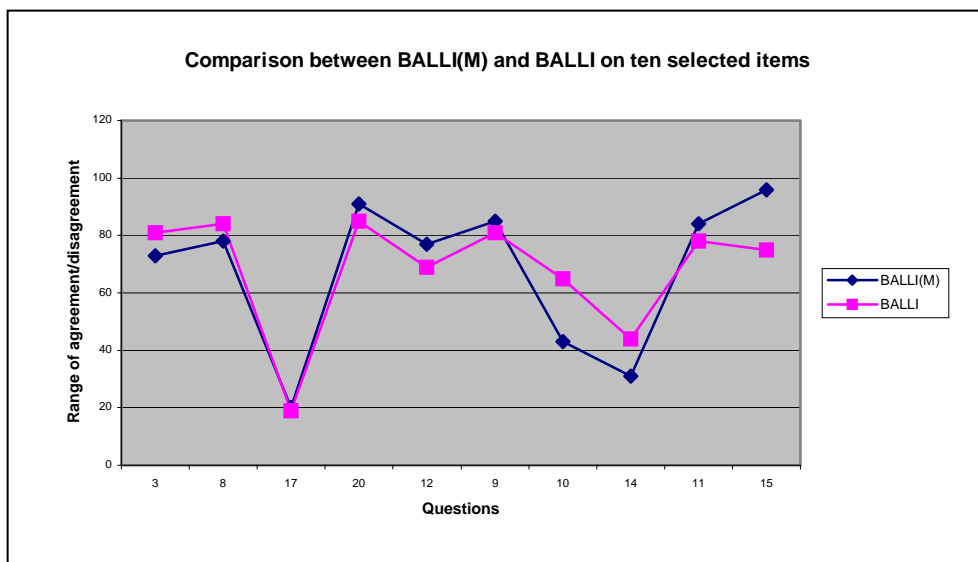**Comparison between BALLI(M) and BALLI on ten selected items**

FIGURE 2

In spite of the fact, therefore, that the original study was small (n = 30), it is hard to ignore the observation that the results seem to exhibit certain similarities.

In addition to the findings relating to these items on aptitude and motivation, there is the heartening response that one finds to the first statement on the **difficulty of language learning** (4: "I believe that I will learn to read, write and speak English very well"), where a good 97% agreed or agreed strongly. This ties in with the generally very positive motivation that these respondents exhibit for learning English for academic purposes.

There is an almost even balance, however, when we consider these students' response to the second statement on the difficulty of learning English (Table 4):

TABLE 4

English is one of the most difficult languages to learn for someone who does not have it as a first language (statement 22)

Agree strongly or fairly strongly	31%
Agree	15%
Uncertain	3%
Disagree	6%
Disagree strongly or fairly strongly	45%

Thus, 46% agree, while 51% disagree with the statement. There indeed appears to be a partial contradiction in students' responses when one compares these results to the students' very strong belief that they are able to learn to use English very well (statement 4), unless, of course, that set of responses indicates also a good measure of self-confidence. However, this is like a double-edged sword: the more confident one is of one's own abilities, and the less effective the results if one does not get things right as expected, the greater the chances are that one will become frustrated and disappointed.

We turn now to students' responses to their **language learning and communication strategies**. The students' keenness is again evident in their responses to item 9 ("I enjoy practising English with people I meet, wherever possible"), where 85% agree or agree strongly. This ties in with their responses to the statement (19) that "It is important to create opportunities for myself to use English outside of class", to which 93% agree. One might say that the slight hedge 'wherever possible' in 9, and the mere intention in 19 ('It is important' — without stating whether this importance is actually converted into practical action) are simply indicative of a keenness that was

already evident in this group's high level of motivation, but may not have led to any concrete action on the part of the learners.

So it is important to enquire, too, how these students feel when they actually use English to communicate with others outside of the classroom. We have one answer to this in their responses to the statement (14) that "I feel timid when speaking English with other people". The following chart (Figure 3) sums up their responses:

I feel timid when speaking English with other people

Agree
31%
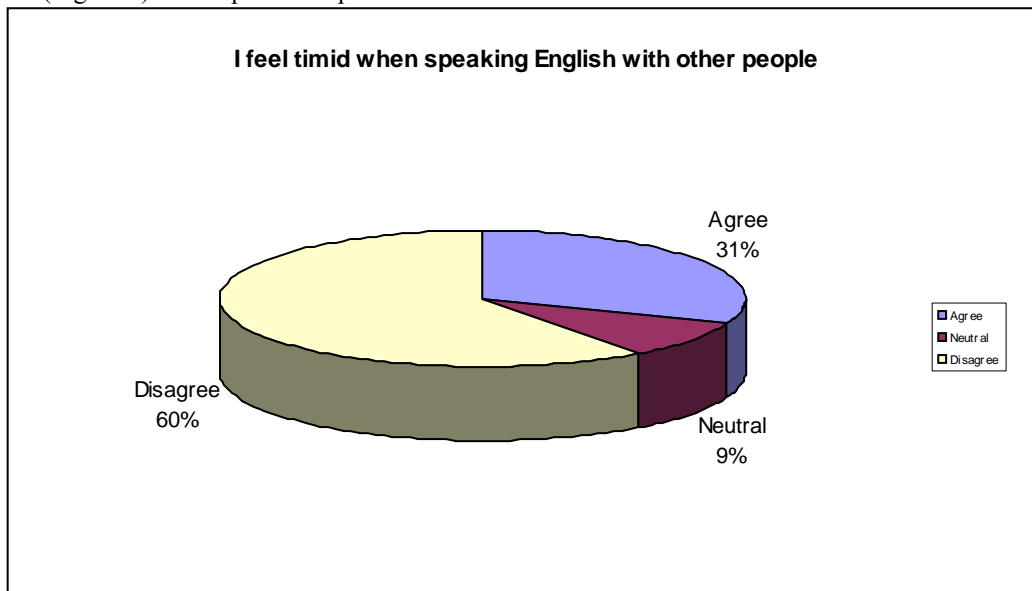
Neutral
9%

Disagree
60%

☐ Agree
■ Neutral
☐ Disagree

FIGURE 3

Though the majority (60%) appear to be relatively confident, it is nonetheless telling that some 31% (or perhaps more) experience a lack of confidence when speaking English. This trend, of behaving cautiously and perhaps feeling slightly intimidated, is illustrated also in their varied responses to statement 10: "It's OK to guess if you don't know a word in English." Here, only 43% agree that it is indeed in order to do so, while 45% disagree. Such cautiousness, and the fear of being ridiculed, of course militates against approaches to learning and teaching language that emphasise the lowering of anxiety and stress in the process of language learning, and that proceed from the assumption that good language learners are ones who, inter alia, are willing to take risks (Weideman 2002: 45f., 96–104).

Since an approach which is non-threatening and which encourages learners to produce as much language as possible is followed by teachers on the course for which these students are enrolled, one indeed has a first indication here of a mismatch between learners' beliefs and teacher's style. Learners cannot produce enough language if they feel intimidated, are fearful of being ridiculed, or unwilling to take the risk of getting it wrong. Of course, in an environment like a university, where accuracy is one of the hallmarks of the academic process, it may be difficult to keep the development of one's language proficiency separate from the demands made by other subjects. Yet, there is evidence that students are aware of this difference: 77% of them indicate that they are of the opinion that learning English is different from learning other academic subjects (item 12).

There is some encouraging evidence that this awareness may at least in part be transferred by students to risk-taking behaviour in the case of learning English, since 85% of these respondents also reject, in reply to statement 5, that you should not say anything in English until you can say it correctly.

At the same time, however, their very conventional beliefs about making errors and of having to repeat a lot are evident in their answers to three items, numbers 18, 25 and 23 (Table 5):

TABLE 5
Conventionality of beliefs about language learning as evidenced by three items

Item	Statement	Percentage agreeing	Percentage disagreeing
18	If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on.	52	38
25	I like the teacher to correct every error I make so that I don't learn bad habits.	69	26
23	It is important for me that the teacher requires me to repeat a lot.	59	34

Thus, only 34%, slightly more than one third, are willing to shoulder responsibility for their own learning (item 23). Their learning styles appear to be strongly dependent upon the teacher (cf. item 25, also 23). Again, in a context where their lecturers require independent work from students, and encourage language proficiency development strategies from learners that imply that they themselves have responsibility for the growth in their proficiency, this is a potential flashpoint. There is bound to be conflict here between instructional style and learners' expectations.

The picture is equally bleak when one considers the responses of this group as to the **nature of language learning**, since their views are, again, quite conventional. More than 90%, for example, state that the most important part of learning another language is learning its vocabulary, and, apparently without regard for the contradiction, 78% claim that it is grammar that is most important (Table 6):

TABLE 6
The most important part of learning another language is …

	Agree	Disagree
learning its vocabulary	93%	6%
learning its grammar	78%	13%
to become fluent in communicating	77%	18%
learning how to translate from my mother tongue	61%	26%

The responses to the third of the four statements constitute a glimmer of hope. However, the problematic view that one has to translate from one's mother tongue in order to learn English well (item 16) is backed by more than 60% of learners. Once more, such a view, quite apart from being erroneous, is almost certainly in conflict with the teacher's style in an instructional environment that encourages fluency. This response even casts doubt on the interpretation that respondents gave in their answers to the statement (24) that "I like to rehearse in my mind what I want to say before I speak or write something in English". Here, 62% agreed, which, together with the answers to

item 16, indicates that the desired strategy (of rehearsing *in English*) that item 24 attempted to elicit may have been interpreted by respondents as "I like to translate in my mind …"

The other observation that casts some gloom over the responses that deal with views of language learning is that this set appears to correlate less well with those of Horwitz's (1987) original study. What is indeed congruent is that, in general, both the original study and this one have indicated that students have fairly restricted views of language learning. Where the teacher thus holds an open, communicatively-oriented view of language and language learning, these students' expectations are at variance with those of the teacher, and potentially also at odds with the instructional material that supports their language classes and the development of their language proficiency.

Learners' beliefs an impediment to learning

What can be done if learners are so dependent upon the teacher that they do not realise that they must shoulder responsibility for their own learning and growth? Surely this conflicts with a teacher's belief in learner independence, which Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver & Thwaite (2001: 481, 487, 488) have identified as one of the important principles that language teachers subscribe to?

The examples we have given above of erroneous views held by learners (cf. the discussion above of their responses to item 16, for example), together with the restricted views of language learning that they have, clearly constitute a recipe for conflict. If, for example, learners think that learning English for academic purposes is merely learning some vocabulary and grammar, and their language instructors follow communicative and task-based approaches, there is a problem. In an instructional context where the latter are used, the teachers would value, for instance, the ability of students not only to know and learn new vocabulary or grammar, but also to do the following set of actions ever more competently:

1. Interpret texts in light of their own experience and their own experience in light of texts;
2. Agree or disagree with texts in light of that experience;
3. Link texts to each other;
4. Synthesize texts, and use their synthesis to build new assertions;
5. Extrapolate from texts;
6. Create their own texts, doing any or all of the above;
7. Talk and write about doing any or all of the above;
8. Do numbers 6 and 7 in such a way to meet the expectations of their audience (Blanton 1994: 226).

One solution to the problem is, of course, simply to require students to do the kind of tasks based on the above construct, and thus to demonstrate to them how helpful, useful, motivating, topical and relevant such tasks are for gaining academic competence in language. That may, however, not be enough, since a conflict of expectations of what the language class should consist of might already have put off some students before they even attempt these kinds of task. Horwitz's suggested solution (1987: 126) is that one confronts these views head on, as it were, and discusses their validity openly with students. There seems to be very little to do as alternative.

Why the current interest in beliefs about language learning?

As many of the original studies (Wenden & Rubin 1987; Oxford 1990, Chamot & O'Malley 1990) into learners' beliefs, strategies and styles of learning indicate, this interest is rooted in earlier

investigations into what a good language learner is. One therefore often finds references in these to Naiman, Frohlich, Stern and Todesco's (1978) large-scale study, *The Good Language Learner* (Toronto: OISE) (cf., e.g., Wenden 1991: 121, who adapts these insights for tasks that relate to learner training in autonomy). These earlier studies, in turn, seem to have grown out of a disillusionment with the quest for finding the best method of language teaching, since studies of the efficacy of methods of language teaching remained inconclusive. This turning away from an interest in methods of language teaching was, of course, strengthened at a later stage by arguments from a post-modern, critical perspective, against method (cf., e.g., Pennycook 1989). As Kumaravadivelu (1994: 28) has also pointed out,

> as long as we are caught up in the web of method, we will continue to get entangled in an unending search for an unavailable solution, … a search [which] drives us to continually recycle the same old ideas …

The trend towards learner-centred methodologies such as the communicative approach in any case strengthened interest in learner individuality. In fact, a sensitivity to individual learning strategies is now much more fashionable than before. Nunan (2000: 6; cf. too Gebhard 1999: 547) takes the individualist stance almost to an extreme:

> … at this stage in our work we are not looking for averages, norms, or generalizability, and we are not interested in populations and sample. In fact, we are happy to celebrate through our work the particular, the atypical, the unique.

The broad tendency is, however, to emphasise learner independence or autonomy, and, with that, to attempt to discover the strategies that learners use. These strategies are often the result of their preconceptions and beliefs about language learning. The argument, then, seems to proceed from the assumption that if one cannot find a 'correct' or ideal method, one needs to look at what makes a good language learner. Having found that good language learners use certain strategies that depend, for example, on a preceding willingness to take risks, as well as on an independent inclination towards learning, language teachers can do at least two things:

1) Create an instructional context in which risk-taking is encouraged by lowering the anxiety levels in the language class.
2) Discuss with students openly what makes a good language learner.

Not all students would agree, of course. As one student commented on a course evaluation form recently, "If only we could do more English learning or vocabulary that is related to the questions asked on the test. In the test they never ask what a good language learner is …". Such an opinion indicates that there is still much persuasion to do before students will be convinced that the strategies employed by good language learners will work for them too, even, and especially, when they are 'learning English'.

If Horwitz (1987) and Wenden (1991) are right, then learner strategies can indeed be taught, and beliefs altered. That is the substance of our present day challenge in language teaching.

Possible refinements

We conclude by looking at a number of possible modifications to this instrument in the light of the trial run being reported on here.

First, the reliability of the instrument (Alpha = 0.6654 for this sample) can be improved either by refining some of the statements that did not work well, or by omitting some that detract from

the overall reliability of the instrument. In fact, a preliminary analysis shows that the reliability goes up by more than 0.06 to 0.7296 when four of the items are eliminated.

Second, as regards the methodology, we have been advised that the more conventional scale would be one that is anchored in a 'strongly disagree' on the left, and a 'strongly agree' on the right-hand side. Also, it might be a good idea not merely to have a scale that is anchored at its extremes in this way, but to consider one where every separate interval carries a particular description. Thus, one would perhaps rather have a scale from 'strongly agree' over 'disagree fairly strongly', 'disagree', 'uncertain', 'agree', and 'agree fairly strongly' to 'agree strongly.' For a seven-point scale, which allows greater variance, one might need to add a 'very' category at either extreme.

Third, regarding the timing of administering the questionnaire, our opinion is that its completion should probably be advanced. Horwitz's (1987) and Wenden's (1991) proposals to confront students with alternatives to their erroneous or preconceived ideas about language learning indeed appear warranted in the light of our findings, which means that we would probably be looking at administering this questionnaire much earlier in the course than we did during the current academic year. Given the limited time at our disposal and the urgency of what students have to achieve, the second term may be already a little late for doing so.

Fourth, we have been advised that having only two statements in a single category, as is the case with the one on 'Difficulty of language learning', makes generalisations about such a category problematic and questionable. As it turns out, the interpretation of the responses to these two items refers naturally to a number of others in the category 'Motivations', and may equally well be re-classified to form part of the 'Nature of language learning' category, if and when such categories are eventually probed further.

Moreover, it would be ideal if we could extend this study to see how well the profiles of learners in terms of their assumptions about language learning correlated with their language course marks and their marks in other academic subjects. This is one line of future investigation that we think may yield potentially useful results. If learners' beliefs as measured by such an instrument as the one we used turns out to be a good predictor of language proficiency, and if, furthermore, these beliefs are indeed shown to be amenable to change, it would not only be important, but necessary to attend to such beliefs early on in a course. Any way of minimising risk for those who are most prone to failure will help to eliminate at least some waste in our higher education system.

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