

# The Gap Between Teachers' and Learners' Beliefs

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Studies on learners' beliefs about language learning (e.g., Horwitz, 1988) or those of teachers' beliefs on language learning (e.g., Okazaki, 1996) have been done, but little has been investigated on the gap between beliefs held or strategies used by teachers and learners. Our research examines the gap between teachers and students beliefs about language learning. We chose to also include an examination of student and teacher learning strategies because these strategies often reflect individual learner's beliefs (Nakayama, 2004). We focus on Japanese teachers of English and Japanese students in Japan. A self-report questionnaire was used to reveal the beliefs of both student and teachers and show the differences in their beliefs about language learning and learning strategy preferences.

私達の知る限り、言語学習者の学習観、あるいは語学教師の学習観に関する研究はあるものの、両者の学習観の相違についての研究はほとんどなされていない。本稿では、日本人の語学教師と英語学習者の学習観と学習方略について、尺度アンケートを通して、どのような学習観を持っているのか調査し、両者がどのような学習観において相違し、またそれぞれどのような学習方略の使用を好むのか、その実態を探ろうとするものである。

In general, most non-native teachers of English would be considered to be above average learners of English as a foreign language. They often have unique learning beliefs and strategies which help maintain their skills, proficiency and confidence in continuing to learn English (Nakayama, Ochiai, Inada, Mori, and Kuramoto, 2004). Many of these teachers feel that their way of learning and beliefs about learning are the best and most effective (e.g., Kern, 1995). According to Kern (1995), some teachers introduce their own beliefs and strategies, developed from their own experiences, to their students. While some students may imitate their teachers' approach to learning English and may change their own beliefs, others do not. The effectiveness of the learning strategies and beliefs would seem to be proven by the teacher's success. Why does not every student imitate the teacher's ways of learning even though it would appear that success is somewhat guaranteed? This could be because students also have their favorite learning strategies and their own ideas about learning English.

But how do teachers ideas about English learning differ from those of their students? In order to answer this question, we would need to investigate the differences in both learning strategies and beliefs. In this study, we limit the investigation to the gap between beliefs and strategies preferred by Japanese teachers of English and their students.

## Literature Review

### *What are "Beliefs"?*

The term *beliefs* is defined as, "psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true" (Richardson, 1996, p. 103). Though they are thought to be inflexible, less open to critical examination, and based on one's evaluation and judgment (Pajares, 1992), the instability of the beliefs has been reported in several studies (e.g., Okazaki, 1996). In our study, learning beliefs are defined as one of predictors of learning behaviors including learning strategy, and they are changeable in the course of teaching and learning the target language. Understanding the process of how such beliefs can change is important not only for researchers but also for both teachers and learners to improve the practice of English teaching and learning.

### *Previous research on the differences between teachers' beliefs and learners'*

Horwitz (1988) provides the fundamental questions on the differences between learner beliefs and teacher beliefs. She mentions the differences among students' and teachers' view of classroom reality and raises the questions. To what degree do foreign language students' beliefs about language learning correspond to those of their teachers?

In our previous study (Nakayama et al, 2004) on the Japanese English teachers' beliefs, we found that the participant teachers have kept up with the present teaching situations and students in order to facilitate their students to learn English effectively. Along the similar line, Lutz (1990)

found that the American students' and teachers' response were on the whole quite consonant with one another, while mismatches between the Japanese graduate students and the American faculty were widespread. Kern (1995) compared one group of students' beliefs about language learning with those of their teachers and with those of their peers at another institution. He also examined change in students' beliefs in relation to those of their instructors in an effort to develop hypotheses about the potential influence of teachers' beliefs on students' beliefs. According to the results, global analyses of group means and percentages showed overall similarities between teachers' and students' beliefs as well as between students' pre and posttest responses, while analyses of individuals and course section groups revealed much greater differences.

### *Target Issues and Research Questions*

Our preceding research (Nakayama et al, 2004) indicates that teachers, especially Japanese teachers, might try to change their beliefs in order to keep up with their students. On the other hand, as Kern (1995) stated, there is a possibility that teachers' beliefs influence their students' beliefs. In terms of these two perspectives, our research addressed the question: How do the beliefs of teachers' differ from those of students? In order to examine this research question in detail, we also investigate preferences of learning strategies, which are influenced by learning beliefs.

**Study****Method****Purpose**

The purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate teachers' and their students' beliefs about English learning as well as preferences of learning strategies, to compare them, and to discuss the implications of this study for the English teaching practice.

**Participants**

The participants of this study included four Japanese teachers of English and their students ( $n=444$ ; male: 420; female: 21; missing: 3). All participants belonged to the same Japanese University in a rural district of Japan. The students were 4<sup>th</sup> week spring semester freshmen (age range: 18-19 years old), majoring in engineering. Their participation was completely voluntary. In fact, we asked 5 teachers and 527 students to join this research, but one of the teachers and 83 students declined.

**Instruments**

As for the instruments, we prepared four different self-report questionnaires. They were the Language Learning Belief Scales (LLBS), the General Learning Beliefs Scales (GLBS), the Direct Language Learning Strategy Scale (DLLSS), and the Indirect Language Learning Strategy Scale (ILLSS). All scales were in agreement based on a 5 point Likert Scale: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree.

**LLBS (Language Learning Beliefs Scales).** We used the revised version of BALLI (Nakayama, 2004), and made the LLBS. This was done because the original version of BALLI (Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory; Horwitz, 1988) was developed for ESL contexts, which is completely different from EFL context, and some of the items did not make sense in our research context (e.g., Shimoyama, Isoda, Yamamori, 2002).

**GLBS (General Learning Beliefs Scales).** Regarding the GLBS, we adopted Ueki's inventory on general learning beliefs scales for Japanese students (Ueki, 2002). This was originally developed for measuring the Japanese students' learning beliefs and therefore we did not revise it.

**DILLSS (Direct Language Learning Strategy Scales) and ILLSS (Indirect Language Learning Strategy Scales).** Concerning the DLLSS and the ILLSS, we used the revised version of SILL (Nakayama, 2004), and made DLLSS and ILLSS, because the reliability and validity of using the original version of SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning; Oxford, 1990) in EFL context has been criticized by several researchers (e.g., Robson and Midorikawa, 2001).

**Procedures**

Both teacher and student participants were asked to complete the four self-report questionnaires mentioned above. However, we chose to examine teachers' past beliefs about language learning because their current beliefs are likely to have been founded in their past beliefs as successful language

learners. On the other hand, we asked the students to provide answers about their current beliefs and strategy preferences.

Administration of these 5 point Likert scales took about 20 minutes. The administrator, one of our authors, informed them that their participation was voluntary, that their responses would be used only for this study, and that their personal information would be kept confidential.

## Results

### *Descriptive Statistics*

The descriptive statistics of all scales are shown from Appendix A to D. These tables include mean average (M) and standard deviation (SD) of each item. In all tables, Ma-Mb indicates simple deviation among the mean averages of students' and teachers' results. The positive scores indicate that students agree with the item more than teachers do and the negative scores indicate that teachers agree with the item more than students do.

### *Results of Language Learning Beliefs Scales (Appendix A)*

The results of learning beliefs scales showed that both students and teachers have relatively similar beliefs about English language learning. However, some of the items indicated the differences between them to be more than 1 point such as, lb8, lb11 and lb1. Especially, the results for lb1 in Beliefs about Language Learning Aptitude category showed a gap that was quite notable. While students did not think that "Some people are born with a special ability which helps them learn a foreign language," teachers seemed to rather strongly believe so.

### *Results of General Learning Beliefs Scales (Appendix B)*

Similarities rather than differences were found in general learning beliefs held by students and teachers, except for gb1, gb3, and gb4. The differences seen in these three items indicate that, in comparison to the students, the teachers attach more importance to learning the target language where it is spoken, the need for "good" teachers for obtaining a high proficiency in English learning, and spending a lot of time studying English.

### *Results of Direct Language Learning Strategy Scales (Appendix C)*

The results for Frequent Use Strategy items showed that both students and teachers did not use those strategies very frequently, and the differences were slight.

As for Guess Strategy items, it was revealed that the teachers used these strategies more frequently than the students. The greatest difference was in the item, "I try not to translate words word for word (ds8)," students answering they would rather not use it, and teachers answering they would use it very frequently. In other words, when the teachers encountered unknown words or phrases, they tend to guess meanings from the words and phrases they already know or from the context before looking the words up in the dictionary.

Concerning Recitation strategy, the teachers tried to learn words by pronunciation and reading aloud (ds3), which showed the second largest gap (Ma - Mb = -1.40) revealed between students and teachers in the whole scales.

With regard to Imaging Strategy, both similarity and difference were found respectively in each item. While both the students and the teachers claimed that they did not use these strategies very frequently, the teachers were slightly more likely to try to connect the words to the other words or phrases so that they can associate the target words with the other words.

### ***Results of Indirect Language Learning Strategy Scales (Appendix D)***

The results for the Metacognitive Strategy category revealed that students did not use these kinds of strategies very frequently. On the other hand, teachers answered that they used it quite often. Especially for the items “I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English (is3),” and “I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English (is1),” the differences were greatest.

As for Social Strategy, both students and teachers did not use them very frequently. The teachers, in particular, responded that they did not practice English with other learners or ask for help from native English Speakers.

## **Discussion**

### ***Limitations of this study***

This is an exploratory cross-sectional study, with data being collected from only two groups at a single point and then comparing them. The results would be limited to the conditions of those participants, methodological procedures, and educational settings. Therefore, we should be careful about the over-generalization of the results. Moreover,

since the participating teachers were asked to answer the questionnaire by remembering their school days, their answers probably reflect what they did when they were learning English as students. Keeping this in mind, the results discussed here reflect the gap between the current beliefs and strategy preferences of the students' and the past ones of teachers'.

### ***Gap in Beliefs***

In our study, the results of the students' and teachers' responses showed very little difference. They might indicate that people, who learn English in the Japanese context, tend to form similar beliefs as our participants. This seems to be a valuable point, although we cannot draw conclusions based solely on this study.

It is difficult to explain fully why there was a noticeably larger gap in the item (Ma - Mb = -1.65), “Some people are born with a special ability which helps them learn a foreign language (lb1).” It might be because as students, teachers had encountered other learners who were superior to them, during their experience learning English. This could have influenced their beliefs. The students, who did not think so, might not have yet recognized more successful learners around them or they might be successful learners themselves. It can be suggested that in order to improve English skills, grouping together learners of different skill levels is a good way to promote proficiency in English. However, it is interesting that the results for one of the items in the General Beliefs category seem rather contradictory: the teachers rated lower (M=2.50) the following item, “You get a good grade when you are in the advanced learner class (gb7).”



**Gap in Strategy Use**

The frequent use of the Guess Strategy might be regarded as one of the crucial points in successful English learning, simply because the teachers' responses on the questionnaire indicated that they used it more frequently than the students when they themselves were learning English as students. Although this type of learning strategy requires much more cognitive costs and effort, it seems to be an effective way of learning. The students, on the other hand, seemed to prefer remembering new English vocabulary with a single Japanese translation. It is possibly a strategy used in order to get high scores on exams.

Another salient gap was found in the use of Metacognitive strategies. The teachers reported that they tried to find out how to be better learners of English (is2) and to make time for study by planning their schedules (is3). This might indicate that they saw themselves more objectively and consciously than the students, grasped what they should do, and recognized what they had and had not already learned.

**Should teachers and students try to narrow the gap?**

Perhaps students and teachers do not have to try to narrow the gap deliberately, since it seems that as students become proficient in English, their beliefs are likely to become similar to those of teachers'.

One of the most conspicuous aspects among the results was the students' beliefs in Traditional Learning Styles: the students tend to believe more strongly than the teachers that learning a foreign language is a matter of "learning a lot of grammar rules (lb8)" or "translating (lb11)." These beliefs could conflict with the use of the Guess Strategy,

which is essential for rapid reading, scanning and speaking. If students stick to these types of beliefs, they might lose opportunities to try more effective learning strategies. Whether or not students can become successful learners seems to lie in how they manage to deal with this kind of conflicts. Moreover, it depends on how language teachers facilitate their students in terms of effecting their beliefs.

**Conclusions****Summary**

In this study, we made an attempt to explore the gap between teachers' and students' beliefs in language learning and strategy use. Although the results revealed more similarities than differences, they also showed that students thought learning English was a matter of learning grammar rules or translating. We have pointed out that these types of beliefs in traditional learning styles might possibly conflict with some effective strategies of learning English. In the Japanese context, where the grammar translation method is still widely accepted as a traditional approach to language teaching (Takanashi & Takahashi, 1990), students' beliefs about language learning may be formed based on these types of language class room experiences. However, from the perspective of life-long education, it would be better to make an effort to change such conflicting beliefs. It seems crucial for both students and teachers to rethink about what it is to learn a foreign language and find out the better ways to teach and learn the target language.

**Implications for practice**

It might be one of the most useful teaching methods to examine both the similarities and differences between the teachers' and students' beliefs and learning strategy preferences. In university or college level teaching context, the first day (class) of the semester are to be used for the course guidance. In an occasion like this, the teachers are encouraged to not only explain the course syllabus and evaluation policy but also to discuss their learning beliefs and strategy preferences on the basis of the results of a simple survey like our studies, which may help both the teachers and students to work together.

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## Appendix A. Results of Language Learning Beliefs Scales (LLBS)

No.	Item	Students (n=444)		Teachers (n=4)		M <sup>a</sup> - M <sup>b</sup>
		M <sup>a</sup>	SD	M <sup>b</sup>	SD	
Beliefs about Speaking English						
lb3	It's important to speak a foreign language with an excellent accent.	3.61	1.20	3.00	.82	.61
lb4	You shouldn't say anything in the language until you can say it correctly.	2.06	1.05	1.25	.50	.81
lb10	If I get to speak this language very well, I will have many opportunities to use it.	3.75	1.20	4.00	.82	-.25
lb12	If I learn to speak this language very well, it will help me get a good job.	3.87	1.03	4.50	1.00	-.63
Beliefs about Traditional Learning Style						
lb6	Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words.	3.20	1.11	2.50	1.73	.70
lb7	It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	4.14	.89	4.25	1.50	-.11
lb8	Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules.	3.25	1.03	2.00	.82	1.25
lb11	Learning another language is a matter of translating from English.	2.98	.93	1.50	.58	1.48
Self-efficacy						
lb2	I believe that I will ultimately learn to speak this language very well.	2.84	1.12	3.00	1.41	-.16
lb5	I have foreign language aptitude.	1.91	.99	2.75	.96	-.84
Beliefs about Language Learning Aptitude						
lb1	Some people are born with a special ability which helps them learn a foreign language.	2.60	1.31	4.25	.50	-1.65
lb9	Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.	2.70	1.16	3.25	1.50	-.55
lb13	People who are good at math and science are not good at learning foreign languages.	2.63	1.19	1.75	1.50	.88
lb14	Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	3.54	1.19	3.25	1.50	.29



## Appendix B. Results of General Learning Beliefs Scales (GLBS)

No.	Item	Students ( <i>n</i> =444)		Teachers ( <i>n</i> =4)		<i>M</i> <sup>a</sup> - <i>M</i> <sup>b</sup>
		<i>M</i> <sup>a</sup>	SD	<i>M</i> <sup>b</sup>	SD	
Beliefs about Learning Environment						
gb1	It is important to be in the environment which I can study effectively.	3.73	1.06	4.50	1.00	-.77
gb4	If your teachers are good at teaching, you get a good grade.	3.27	1.17	4.00	.82	-.73
gb7	You get a good grade when you are in the advanced learner class.	2.22	1.09	2.50	1.00	-.28
gb10	In order to improve your grade, you need a teacher who teaches intelligibly.	3.82	.98	3.50	.58	.32
Beliefs about Learning Strategy						
gb2	Those who can do well are good strategy users.	4.00	.99	3.75	.50	.25
gb5	It is effective to establish your own preferred strategies.	4.23	.76	4.25	.50	-.02
gb8	It is effective for me to think of how I should study.	3.50	1.04	3.25	1.71	.25
gb11	It is effective to find a good strategy by trial and error.	3.77	.86	4.00	.82	-.23
Effort-oriented Beliefs						
gb3	It is effective to spend a lot of time studying.	3.22	1.24	4.00	.82	-.78
gb6	It is effective to study with sheer willpower.	3.87	1.00	4.00	.82	-.13
gb9	You can unconsciously acquire knowledge and skills when you do it again and again.	4.16	.82	4.00	.00	.16
gb12	It is effective to make steady efforts.	3.84	1.01	4.25	.50	-.41

## Appendix C. Results of Direct Language Learning Strategy Scales (DLLSS)

No.	Item	Students ( <i>n</i> =444)		Teachers ( <i>n</i> =4)		<i>M<sup>a</sup></i> - <i>M<sup>b</sup></i>
		<i>M<sup>a</sup></i>	SD	<i>M<sup>b</sup></i>	SD	
Frequent Use Strategy						
ds5	I learn words outside the class by using them as much as I can.	2.10	1.06	2.75	.96	-.65
ds6	I learn words by using the words I know in many different ways.	2.36	1.09	2.75	.96	-.39
ds7	I learn words through TV programs or movies.	2.43	1.25	3.25	1.50	-.82
Guess Strategy						
ds1	Before looking up words in the dictionary, I guess the meanings of them by thinking of the relationship between what I already know and new things I learn in English.	3.12	1.18	4.25	.50	-1.13
ds2	Before looking up words in the dictionary, I guess the meaning of them from the context and the meaning of a passage.	3.31	1.12	4.50	.58	-1.19
ds8	I try not to translate words word for word.	2.51	.91	4.25	.96	-1.74
Recitation Strategy						
ds3	I learn words with the pronunciation, reading aloud.	2.85	1.27	4.25	1.50	-1.40
ds4	I hum words until I can remember them.	2.57	1.22	3.00	1.83	-.43
Imaging Strategy						
ds9	I look over words again and again so that I can make an image of the words in mind.	2.72	1.16	2.50	1.00	.22
ds10	I connect words to the other words or phrases so that I can associate the target words with the other words.	2.81	1.14	3.25	1.50	-.44

## Appendix D. Results of Indirect Language Learning Strategy Scales (ILLSS)

No.	Item	Students (n=444)		Teachers (n=4)		M <sup>a</sup> - M <sup>b</sup>
		M <sup>a</sup>	SD	M <sup>b</sup>	SD	
Metacognitive Strategy						
is1	I look for opportunities to use as much as possible in English.	2.58	1.13	3.25	.96	-.67
is2	I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.	3.05	1.16	4.25	.50	-1.20
is3	I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.	1.98	1.01	3.50	1.29	-1.52
is4	I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.	2.24	1.02	3.50	.58	-1.26
Social Strategy						
is5	I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.	2.49	1.26	2.50	1.73	-.01
is6	I practice English with other students.	2.72	1.23	2.00	1.41	.72
is7	I ask for help from English speakers.	2.90	1.27	2.00	.82	.90