

JALT2007

Challenging Assumptions
Looking In, Looking Out

Analyzing and using Japanese EFL learner beliefs

Martin Balint

Kyoto Institute of Technology

Reference data:

Balint, M. (2008). Analyzing and Using Japanese EFL Learner Beliefs.

In K. Bradford Watts, T. Muller, & M. Swanson (Eds.), *JALT2007 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

This article will describe both the analyses and follow-up in-class use of Japanese students' English language learning beliefs to benefit instruction of English classes at a university in Japan. There has been a trend toward greater recognition of the important role learner characteristics in the foreign language learning process have in the past two decades. The learners' preconceived beliefs of foreign language learning, often coming from their previous experiences at learning foreign languages, are at the core of such learner characteristics. Using the procedures described in this article not only allowed the instructor to better assist the students in the English language classes but to also allow students to have a clear understanding of the instructor's beliefs which influence the way the class is taught.

この論文は日本の大学での英語の授業に学生の英語学習に対する信条を取り入れ利用する事が英語クラスの授業をどのように改善するかについての分析とその続報について説明するものである。過去二十年に渡り外国語学習のプロセスにおいて、学習者の性格が与える役割の重要性は強く認識される傾向にある。学習者が外国語学習に対して事前に予想し信じる事は、多くの場合以前の外国語学習においての経験に由来する物であるが、学習者の性格の中心を形成している。この論文に説明されている手順を利用する事は教師がより良い形で学生の手助けをする事だけでなく、授業自体に影響する教師の信条を学生が明確に理解する事を促す。

Investigating foreign language learning beliefs has gradually increased over the past 20 years. Foreign language instructors can benefit greatly from knowing about their students' foreign language learning beliefs. Barkhuizen (1998) aptly states that "...if we, as teachers, are aware of where our learners are coming from (how they approach language learning, what they feel about their language learning experiences, and how they act upon these feelings), we will be able to facilitate desired learning outcomes in the classroom" (p. 102; parentheses in original text). Constructive use of the beliefs, both by the instructor and the students can lead to better understanding of the pedagogy being used and ultimately lead to improved student satisfaction.

Previous studies of foreign language learning beliefs

Investigations of foreign language learning beliefs began in the mid-1980's when Horwitz (1985) initially constructed the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) to use with students enrolled in a foreign language learning methodology course at an American university. Horwitz (1985) asserts that "making the students' belief systems explicit is the first step in their development as foreign language teachers" (p. 333).

One of the main conclusions to come out of the early studies by Horwitz (1985, as well as subsequent studies by other researchers (Kern, 1995; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Peacock, 1998) was the noted differences in beliefs between some of the learners and the foreign language instructors, particularly since the foreign language learners' beliefs conflicted with the communicative language teaching pedagogy just being emphasized by the late 1980's. While comparisons between the outcomes of these different studies were made, particularly in the case of Kern's (1995) study, the results were for the most part similar. The most significant differences between learners' and instructors' language learning beliefs were in aspects of pedagogy (ie. It is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent accent. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules.), how languages are learned (ie. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words.), and the amount of time necessary to become fluent in the second language.

A consequence of differences between what students expect and the type of instruction they receive can of course

lead to learner dissatisfaction as reported in a pair of studies by Cunningham (2002) and Widdows & Voller (1991). Both of these studies are directly relevant since they were carried out with Japanese learners of English. Cunningham (2002) found a clear difference between what the Japanese university students in her study wanted in terms of English instruction and what was offered by the university. While the students preferred oral skill development, the university courses were focused on TOEIC test preparation. Finally, Widdows and Voller (1991) found that the preferences of the 85 Japanese university students surveyed in their study conflicted with the more traditional teacher-controlled or literature-based instruction found in some of the university English language courses at the time. As can be seen from the examples above, learners' dissatisfaction with the type of instruction they receive has been particularly made aware in the Japanese English language learning context.

Some studies of learners' language learning beliefs have identified differences between groups of learners due to their experiences of language learning. As noted by Kern (1995) regarding the results of his study showing that older language learners had somewhat different views than younger language learners, previous instruction in foreign language study likely influences the students' perceptions of language learning (p. 77). Such differences were also found more recently by Savignon and Wang (2003) in their investigation into the attitudes and perceptions of 174 university-level Chinese learners' of English in Taiwan. In describing the results of their study, Savignon and Wang report that "negative attitudes toward form-focused instruction were stronger among those who had had more

English language experience” (p. 239). Closely related, Peacock’s (1998) study of the language learner beliefs of university students in Hong Kong focused specifically on checking for differences in the learners’ proficiency level. Also using the BALLI, he found a number of statistically significant differences of language learning beliefs between low and high proficiency level students.

Another major focus of foreign language learning beliefs has been to investigate their relationship to language learning strategies and learner autonomy (Wenden, 1998; Yang, 1999). Wenden (1998) highlights the need to elicit learners’ beliefs as one of the main elements toward helping students be more autonomous in their language learning (p. 531).

Japanese university students’ English language learning beliefs

A study by Sakui and Gaies (1999) is particularly informative of Japanese university students’ foreign language learning beliefs. While the study also focused on investigating the reliability and validation of the questionnaire used, there was a clear development of sets of beliefs of the nearly 1300 students as they were constructed by factor analysis. Using factor analysis on the responses of the 45 Likert-scale items included on the questionnaire administered by Sakui and Gaies, four empirically-derived factors were found: (a) beliefs about a contemporary (communicative) orientation to learning English, (b) beliefs about a traditional orientation to learning English, (c) beliefs about the quality and sufficiency of classroom instruction for learning English, and (d) beliefs about foreign language learning aptitude and difficulty (See Sakui and Gaies, 1999,

pp. 484-485 for the items for each of these factors). Sakui and Gaies pointed out that the empirically-derived structure of the beliefs they found differed significantly from the results of an earlier study by Luppescu and Day (1990) which apparently showed that Japanese learners did not have any clear beliefs about language learning.

Through a systematic test-retest format and follow-up interviews with a subset of the total number of participants, the researchers found that although there was some inconsistency in responses between the two administrations the questionnaire was reliable. Sakui and Gaies concluded by pointing out the need to have students gain insight into their language learning beliefs to deal with any conflicts they may have with communicative oriented pedagogy.

Analyzing the learners’ English language learning beliefs

Participants

The English language learning beliefs were gathered from 79 second-year students, 56 males and 23 females, at a university in Western Japan. All of the students, between the ages of 19 and 21, were enrolled in 4 intact classes taught by the author. Since the classes were arranged by their academic majors, there were four different groups of students as described in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Number of students in different academic majors in study

Group	No. of students	Academic Major
1	24	Architecture and Graphic Design
2	15	Mechanical Engineering
3	12	Biology
4	28	Information-technology

The limited number of students and their representation within the institution the study took place was due to convenience as they were all students of English Communication courses taught by the author. In addition, no standardized English language proficiency exam was administered by the university and therefore there is no record of the proficiency levels of the students.

Instrument

A bilingual 25-item English Language Learning Orientation Questionnaire (See Appendix 1, with response means omitted) was administered to students in the second week of the 15-week long course. After an initial question of the students' gender, the remaining items were in the form of a 6-point Likert-scale format ranging from 0 to 5.

Item-generation

The questionnaire was developed using a portion of the 45 questions included in the Sakui and Gaies' (1999) study as well as a few additional items of particular interest to the researcher. Although a number of language learning beliefs

questionnaires are available (Cotterall, 1999; Horwitz, 1985; Savignon & Wang, 2003), items from the Sakui and Gaies (1999) questionnaire were used since they had been found to statistically form distinct factors from Japanese learner responses. The number of questions was fewer than that used by Sakui and Gaies due to time limitations. The specific questions were chosen based on their focus of how the students believed in certain forms of language learning methodology, foreign language aptitude and difficulty, as well as their motivation. Items were also chosen based on the subjective feeling that the responses would possibly differ from the beliefs of the instructor (author) and would thus be advantageous to use the results in the subsequent in-class discussion activity. The few additional items not found in the Sakui and Gaies study were to assess whether their high school English education was enjoyable or not (4) and a question to find out the level of interest the students have in learning English (25).

Results and Discussion

The descriptive statistics of the questionnaire items and an ANOVA comparing the four different classes were computed using SPSS 8.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL). The descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

Item	Mean	SD
(17) English language skills will likely be important for my future job	4.20	(.90)
(10) When learning English, it is important to repeat and practice a lot	4.00	(.77)
(9) English communication class should be enjoyable	3.97	(.97)
(25) I am <not interested – extremely interested> in learning more English	3.95	(.99)
(13) If I learn to speak English well, I will have many opportunities to use it	3.76	(1.02)
(12) Speaking and listening to English is more important than reading and writing in English	3.68	(1.03)
(2) It is useful to know about English-speaking countries to learn English well	3.67	(1.08)
(23) People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent	3.63	(1.18)
(16) To say something in English, I think of how I would say it in Japanese and then translate it into English	3.52	(1.07)
(22) It is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent accent	3.51	(1.07)
(15) Japanese people think it is important to learn to speak English	3.29	(1.05)
(18) I can improve my English by speaking English with my classmates	2.90	(1.03)
(11) Learning English mostly a matter of learning new vocabulary	2.81	(.96)
(20) I want my teacher to correct all my mistakes	2.67	(1.02)
(3) Learning English is mostly a matter of learning grammar rules	2.33	(1.08)

Item	Mean	SD
(8) I prefer to have my teacher provide instructions in Japanese	2.28	(1.23)
(19) Some people are born with a special ability to learn foreign languages	2.27	(1.45)
(4) My high school English education was enjoyable	2.22	(1.37)
(5) Considering the amount of English study, I am satisfied with my progress	2.05	(1.01)
(14) I am taking this course only to receive necessary academic credit	1.95	(1.36)
(21) If I heard a foreigner of my age speaking English in a public area, I would go up to that person and practice speaking	1.94	(1.07)
(7) Women are better than men at learning English	1.81	(1.13)
(24) I will likely only use English in the future when traveling to foreign countries for holidays	1.78	(1.13)
(6) Japanese are good at learning foreign languages	1.38	(.92)

Note: Based on 6-point Likert-scale from 0 to 5

It is informative to look more carefully at the items in which the students either most strongly agreed to or most strongly disagreed with. It is clearly evident from the responses to a combination of the items that the students have a high level of motivation to learn English, as they are not taking the elective English course simply for academic credit and see the need for English in their future work (17, 13, 14 and 24). Another set of strongly agreed to items reflect their views of specific type of instruction or the particular language skills they want. There is a general understanding that it is necessary to repeat and practice a lot for language learning to happen (10), a preference toward

having communicative classes that are enjoyable (9), and the belief that speaking and listening are more important than reading and writing (12).

It is worth noting that the results do match many of those found by Sakui and Gaies (1999). In particular, the second and third most strongly agreed with items (10 and 9), were the top most strongly agreed with items in their study. Additionally, the low perceptions of satisfaction with their previous progress of English (5) and the belief that Japanese are not good at learning foreign languages (6) are correspondingly some of the most disagreed items. The only surprising difference is that of the most strongly agreed item in the present study, that English language skills will likely be important for their future jobs, was responded somewhat lower (# 11) by the students investigated by Sakui and Gaies (1999). It is possible that since the students in this study are in engineering and technology fields, they view a greater need for English in their future work than those of students from various other academic fields in Sakui and Gaies' study. An ANOVA was performed to check for any differences between the groups of learners based on their academic major. Table 3 shows the items found to be statistically significant.

Table 3. Significant differences of items found between academic major groups

Item	Significance Level ($p < .05$)
(2) Useful to know about English-speaking countries in order to speak English well	.019
(4) My high school English education was enjoyable	.020
(7) Women are better than men at learning English	.022
(8) I prefer to have explanations in Japanese	.000
(13) If I learn to speak English well, I will have many opportunities to use it	.014
(18) I can improve my English by speaking with classmates	.038
(21) If I hear a foreigner speaking English nearby, I would approach to practice	.012

Differences between the academic fields were found to be statistically significant on a total of seven items. In many cases, it was the class of information-technology students that was found to be statistically different from the other groups of students. The differences in means between individual classes that were statistically different than the other groups are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Significant mean differences between specific groups and average of the other groups.

Item	Average other groups mean	Specific different group mean (group)
2	3.82	3.06 (group 2)
4	2.03	3.10 (group 3)
8	1.84	3.00 (group 4)
13	3.92	3.39 (group 4)
14	1.68	2.36 (group 4)
18	3.10	2.53 (group 2)
21	2.17	1.54 (group 4)
25	4.20	3.48 (group 4)

The differences between groups in two items in particular are worth highlighting. As can be seen in Table 4, the mean of the responses for students of three classes combined for item 8 was 1.84, clearly indicating that they did not prefer to have explanations given in Japanese, the students in the information-technology class were found to prefer explanations in Japanese much more with a mean for the individual class at 3.0 (slightly positive). This result is possibly accounted for by the results of other items that show a difference in the information-technology students (group 4) though. The mean differences found on items 14 and 25, those indicating the motivation and interest in English language learning, can be seen to fall into the same pattern with information-technology students being different as an individual group. Although there was no assessment to gauge the level of English language proficiency of the students in the different classes, it seemed that there were a number of low proficient learners within

the information-technology class that may account for these results. Unfortunately, without a proficiency measure, this is only speculative. Another interesting finding was that the class of mechanical engineering students disagreed much more than the other classes that speaking in English with their classmates would help them learn. These results suggest that certain forms of instruction, particularly communicative language teaching in which pair- and group-work are used as well as those courses taught by native English speakers who cannot speak the students' L1, can have an adverse effect and need to either be altered or clearly letting students know of the justifications for the type of communicative instruction. In sum, the result of the ANOVA for group differences seems to indicate that there should be some consideration taken into account when teaching students of different academic majors.

Using the Learners' English Language Learning Beliefs

Although there have been some previous publications regarding attempts to change the students' *bad beliefs* in the previous literature of learners' foreign language learning beliefs (Bassano, 1986; Morgan, 1993; Peakock, 1998), the following activities using the results of the questionnaire were intended to simply make learners aware of the general opinions of students in the English Communication courses as well as noting any differences between the students' and my own beliefs of language learning (as the instructor of the class) which could cause students to be unsatisfied with the instruction. This concept was an adapted format of how Horwitz (1985) used the results with pre- foreign language teaching students in a foreign language methods course at an American university (p. 334-335).

Group discussions of questionnaire results

The students were randomly put into groups of four students to have a discussion based on the information of the questionnaire. Two handouts, one with the results of the questionnaire and another with specific questions regarding the questionnaire results, were then provided to each student (See Appendices 1 and 2). Beyond an attempt to have the students discuss any results that surprised them, there was a set of questions that asked for clarification of the information embedded in the questions. These questions came as a result of the unclear meanings some of the questions seem to have when looking closely at their wording and the statistical results. The discussion coincided with instruction of discussion gambits, such as “What do you think about...”, “In my opinion, ...”, and “I agree/disagree”, thereby making the discussions constructive toward a communicative element.

While the students were discussing in their groups, I circulated around the room and listened. When all the groups were finished with the discussions, various groups were called upon to provide a brief summary to some of the answers they gave regarding the questions that needed more clarification. Key ideas were then written on the whiteboard to process as a class.

Listening to instructor’s comments activity

The second section of the handout provided a chart format for students to take notes of the instructor’s comments regarding the results. Before starting with the comments, students were told to listen specifically for any comments

that described surprise or showed a big difference between the overall students’ beliefs and those of the instructor’s. After listening and taking notes of the instructor’s comments, the students were given time to check their notes with their group members. A follow-up review of the instructor’s comments was processed by eliciting various students to describe some of the comments they had written notes on.

Learners’ beliefs influencing pedagogical decisions

It should be noted that the results of the questionnaire did have an impact on the instruction in the classes. Some good examples of this were both the increased focus on pronunciation when possible as well as the addition of more review activities that repeated the previously taught language. These changes were easily justified based on the results of the questionnaire.

Limitations and future research

The present study was somewhat small-scale and would certainly benefit by being done with a larger, more overall representative group of learners. More importantly, future research into the differences of academic majors would be enhanced by collecting more detailed demographic information as well as assessing the learners’ English language proficiency. By having this further information, it would be possible to statistically check for the influences of other factors that may account for the differences found in this study.

Conclusion

The importance of learner factors within foreign language learning is now widely acknowledged. Gathering of students' foreign language learning beliefs is valuable in understanding the learners' views and serves to aid in making students aware of both other students' and of their instructor's. Used constructively, the learners' beliefs can be used to clearly explain any differences between the instructor's beliefs and thus avoid disappointment in the instruction of the class. Such actions should not be limited to the university level and would likely be even more beneficial to high school students since it can have a longer-term effect on shaping their English language studies.

The results of group comparisons, in this case of students with different academic majors, indicated that such analyses are informative. With this kind of knowledge at hand, instructors can adjust according to the overall group to provide a more student-centered form of instruction. A set of follow-up activities using the results of the questionnaire, including group discussion and a listening task, allowed the students to know how their classmates as a whole responded and clearly understand the beliefs of the instructor.

Martin Balint is an associate professor at Kyoto Institute of Technology. He is currently interested in research on Japanese EFL language learner beliefs and content-based English language instruction. <z98373@kit.ac.jp>

References

- Barkhuizen, G. (1998). Discovering learners' perceptions of ESL classroom teaching/learning activities in a South African context. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32 (1), 85-108.
- Bassano, S. (1986). Helping learners adapt to unfamiliar methods. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 40 (1), 13-19.
- Cotterall, S. (1999). Key variables in language learning: What do learners believe about them? *System*, 27, 493-513.
- Cunningham, C. (2004). *Company culture and ideological differences: An analysis of 'split' within one university in relationship to curriculum goals*. Retrieved February 24, 2005, from <http://www.cels.bhem.ac.uk/resources/essays/Cunningham6.pdf>.
- Horwitz, E. (1985). Using student beliefs about language learning and teaching in the foreign language methods course. *Foreign Language Annals*, 18 (4), 333-340.
- Kern, R. (1995). Students' and teachers' beliefs about language learning. *Foreign Language Annals*, 28 (1), 71-92.
- Luppescu, S. & Day, R. (1990). Examining attitude in teachers and students: the need to validate questionnaire data. *Second Language Research*, 6, 125-134.
- Mantle-Bromley, C. (1995). Positive attitudes and realistic beliefs: Links to proficiency. *Modern Language Journal*, 79 (3), 372-386.

- Morgan, C. (1993). Attitude change and foreign language culture learning. *Language Teaching*, 26, 63-75.
- Peakock, M. (1998). The links between learner beliefs, teacher beliefs, and EFL proficiency. *Perspectives*, 10 (1), 125-159.
- Sakui, K. & Gaies, S. (1999). Investigating Japanese learners' beliefs about language learning. *System*, 27, 473-492.
- Savignon, S. & Wang, C. (2003). Communicative language teaching in EFL contexts: Learner attitudes and perceptions. *IRAL*, 41, 223-249.
- Wenden, A. (1998). Metacognitive knowledge and language learning. *Applied Linguistics*, 19 (4), 515-537.
- Widdows, S., & Voller, P. (1991). PANSI: A survey of the ESL needs of Japanese university students. *Cross Cultures*, 18(2), 127-139.
- Yang, D. (1999). The relationship between EFL learners' beliefs and learning strategy. *System*, 27, 515-535.

Appendix 1

English language learning orientation questionnaire

全く思わ ない	ほとんど思 わない	あまり思わ ない	少し思う	かなり思う	強く思う
0	1	2	3	4	5

- あなたの性別を教えてください。
男性 女性
- It is useful to know about English-speaking countries in order to speak English well. 3.67
英語を話すためには英語を話す国について知ることが役に立つと思う。
- Learning English is mostly a matter of learning grammar rules. 2.33
英語を習得すると言う事は実際のところ文法ルールを学習する事である。
- My high school English education was enjoyable. 2.21
私の高等学校での英語の授業は楽しかった。
- Considering the amount of time I have studied English, I am satisfied with my progress. 2.05
私が英語学習に費やした時間を考えて、私は自分の向上に満足している。
- Japanese are good at learning foreign languages. 1.38
日本人は外国語学習が上手だ。
- Women are better than men at learning English. 1.80
女性は男性よりも英語学習が上手だ。
- In English classes, I prefer to have my teacher provide explanations in Japanese. 2.28
英語の授業中、先生が日本語で説明してくれる方がよいと思う。
- English communication class should be enjoyable. 3.97
英会話のクラスは楽しい物であるべきだ。

JALT2007 — Challenging Assumptions	10. When learning English, it is important to repeat and practice a lot 英語を学ぶとき、たくさん繰り返し練習することが大切である。	4.00	18. I can improve my English by speaking English with my classmates. クラスメートと英語で話すことで私の英語は上達すると思う。	2.90
	11. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words. 外国語を学ぶと言うことは、実際のところ多くの新しい単語を勉強する事である。	2.81	19. Some people are born with a special ability to learn foreign languages 人によっては生まれながらに外国語習得のための特別な才能を持っている。	2.27
	12. Speaking and listening to English are more useful than reading and writing English. 英語を話し、聞くことは、英語を読んだり書いたりすることよりも役に立つと思う	3.68	20. I want my teacher to correct all my mistakes. 私は先生に間違いを全て訂正してほしい。	2.67
	13. If I learn to speak English very well, I will have many opportunities to use it. もし私が学習してとても上手に英語を話せるようになったら、私はそれを使う多くの機会を持つと思う。		21. If I heard a foreigner of my age speaking English in a public area, I would go up to that person to practice speaking. もし私と同年代の外国人が公共の場所で英語を話しているのを耳にしたら、私は会話の練習のためにその人に近づいてみる。	1.94
	14. I am taking this course only to receive necessary academic credits. 私は必要な単位を取るためだけにこの授業を受けている。	1.95	22. It is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent accent. 外国語をとてとても上手なアクセントで話すことは重要である。	3.50
	15. Japanese people think it is important to learn to speak English. 日本人は英語を話す事を学習することを大切だと考えている。	3.29	23. People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent. ひとつ以上の言葉を上手に話す人はとても知的である。	3.63
	16. To say something in English, I think of how I would say it in Japanese and then translate it into English. 英語で何か言うとき、私はまず日本語でどのように言うかを考えてから、それを英語に訳す。	3.52	24. I will likely only use English in the future when traveling to foreign countries for holiday 私は恐らく将来休暇で外国旅行をするときにしか英語を使わないだろう。	1.78
	17. English language skills will likely be important for my future job. 英語力は将来の仕事にとって恐らく重要であると思いますか？	4.20	25. I am _____ in learning more English. 私はもっと英語を学習することに_____。 (0) Not interested at all (5) Extremely interested (0)全く興味を持っていない (5)非常に興味を持っている	3.95

Appendix 2

Talking about foreign language learning

What are the three highest rated questions?

What are the three lowest rated questions?

In small groups, please comment about the following information from the questionnaire.

- (#2) It is useful to know about English-speaking countries in order to speak English well. What kind of information is helpful?
- (#4) Many students said they did not enjoy their high school English education. Tell your partners about your experience.
- (#9) English communication classes should be enjoyable. Explain what you think this means. *What is “enjoyable” English language learning?*
- (#6) Japanese are not good at learning foreign languages. Why? - *Is there a difference between learning English and other Asian languages, such as Chinese or Korean?*
- (#12) Speaking and listening are more useful than reading and writing of English.
Explain your belief or why you think most students think so.
- (#13) If I learn to speak English very well, I will have many opportunities to use it.

What kind of opportunities will you have?

- Please feel free to comment about any other information regarding English (or foreign) language learning –

What are your teacher’s views? (*Listening Practice*)

Listen carefully to my personal comments about English language learning, from a teaching perspective, and write down some notes (to later share with classmates). Listen especially for any differences of what I believe and the typical beliefs of the all the students from the Communicative English classes.

Questions (Answers)

talked about

Notes

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____