
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Tertiary Ecuadorian Students' Beliefs About Learning a Foreign Language: A Descriptive Study

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| ABSTRACT

This descriptive study aimed at identifying tertiary Ecuadorian students' beliefs about learning a foreign language. The sample was composed of 200 (n=200) students enrolled in the first semester of Agriculture, Nursing, Pedagogy, and Psychopedagogy in a public university in the Los Rios province, Ecuador. Among the participants, 168 were female (84%), and 32 were male (16%). The mean age was 21.49, varying from 18 to 44 years old. The data was collected using the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory questionnaire (BALLI), and it was analyzed using descriptive statistics. Results demonstrated that participants reported strong beliefs in the categories of aptitude for learning the language, motivation and expectations, and learning and communication strategies. The results of this research will unblock a new field of studies to be conducted in the country. The authors recommend doing qualitative studies to deeply understand the reason for each one of the most salient beliefs.

| KEYWORDS

Beliefs, BALLI, Ecuador Tertiary Education

| ARTICLE DOI: [10.32996/jeltal.2022.4.1.2](https://doi.org/10.32996/jeltal.2022.4.1.2)

1. Introduction

Identifying and understanding students' beliefs about teaching or learning a second language has been the primary focus of educators around the globe (Ariogul et al., 2009). This phenomenon happens because "beliefs are predispositions to action" (Rokeach, 1968, p. 113). In other words, they are responsible for the way we act. The first studies in Applied Linguistics about beliefs were driven in the 80s. They have been considered relevant to understanding the students' actions related to second language acquisition. According to Barcelos (2004) and Richardson (1996), comprehending students' beliefs helps to understand their actions and emotions when learning a language. Barcelos (1995) discovered that students' first language had an effect on their beliefs about language learning. Richardson (1996) postulated that beliefs are related to our affective domain. For the author, different areas have the same opinion that beliefs are "psychologically held understandings, premises or propositions about the world that are felt to be true" (Richardson, 1996, p.104).

Beliefs have an important role in the students' second language learning process. Kalaja and Barcelos (2007) talked about how the learners' beliefs about second language acquisition change over the learning progression. The language acquisition process holds dynamic beliefs because of the experiences and interactions.

Given the importance of studying beliefs in the second language context, this descriptive study aims to identify the tertiary Ecuadorian students' beliefs about learning a foreign language. Our research is based on the fact that learners have beliefs that influence their learning process. To reach our goal, this study uses BALLI (Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory) as an instrument of data collection. BALLI is a questionnaire created to investigate the students' beliefs regarding the process of learning another language. Since its creation in the 1980s by Horwitz, BALLI has been used in different contexts to search about students' beliefs.

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Even though there are many studies on using BALLI in the tertiary context worldwide, there is no study in Ecuador. Consequently, we hope that the results will make other people in the educational field, especially teachers, aware of these beliefs from the Ecuadorian students. This work will likewise contribute to the dissemination and development of other researchers that also have the same theme. So our study addressed the following research question: a) What beliefs do tertiary Ecuadorian learners hold about learning a foreign language?

Thus, this article is divided as follows: first, we make this brief introduction; then, we present the literature review of this study, which discusses the definitions of beliefs. Later, in this same topic, we present the main discussions and the main authors who have already developed researches using the BALLI questionnaire; in the third section of this research, we demonstrate the methods used to carry out this study; in the next topic, we present the results found during the data collection; then, we make the discussions based on the theories and the results; and, finally, we present the conclusions of our study.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Beliefs

Studies on beliefs have increased since the last two decades (Schmitz, 2012; Anjos, 2016; Davies, 2004, Moussu & Llorca, 2008). However, its definition is still uncertain. Barcelos (2004) postulated that there is no specific term to refer to beliefs in Applied Linguistics, which added the complexity of the phenomenon itself. Richardson (1996, p. 103) defined beliefs as "psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true". In the Language Learning context, beliefs are defined as "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)." Horwitz (1987), on the other hand, said that beliefs are learners' preconceived ideas or notions. This definition matches with Barcelos (2000), who mentioned that the term belief relates to the terms "implicit world" and "culture of learning," in other words, she postulated that beliefs are students' ideas about the best teaching practices and the rights and duties of teachers and learners in the learning process" (Barcelos, 2000, p. 43).

Understanding learners' beliefs in the language learning context are essential because they influence both the actions and experiences of language learners (Horwitz, 1999). Most of the time, young learners have 'misconceptions' that may influence their learning achievements and experiences (Cotteral, 1999; Horwitz, 1999; Sakui & Gaies, 1999). A study conducted by Anjos (2016) showed that students possessed the belief about the ideal English speaker, and for that reason, they used to believe that their English is not as good as a native.

Due to the importance of identifying and understanding students' beliefs, many techniques and tools were created to help the researcher in this process. The most known questionnaire to investigate beliefs was created by Horwitz (1987). It is called BALLI, Inventory of Beliefs about Language Learning. This questionnaire is a five-point Likert scale that measures beliefs in five areas: difficulty in learning the language, aptitude for learning the language, nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation and expectations. Since BALLI's first publication, it has been used in a wealth of studies all over the world (Placci & Valsecchi, 2021). Table 1 presents some of these studies.

Table 1. BALLI studies around the globe

Authors	Year	Participants	Context (Country)
Peacock	1999	University students and teachers	China
Sakui & Gaies	1999	University students	Japan
Bernat & Lloyd	2007	University students	Australia
Mohebi & Khodadady	2011	University students and teachers	Iran
Daif-Allah	2012	University students	Egypt
Abdolahzadeha & Nia	2014	school students	Iran
Nikitina & Furuoka	2014	University students	Malaysia
Ormeño & Rosas	2015	University students and professors	Chile
Gómez	2017	University students	Colombia
Liu & Rutledge	2020	Elementary school students and teachers	USA

Table 1 portrays some of the studies conducted worldwide from 1999 to 2020, which shows the importance of researching beliefs in the contemporary ages. This type of literature in Ecuador was searched, but it was not possible to find any study focusing on

beliefs, especially learning a foreign language. Therefore, the results of this research will unblock a new field of studies to be conducted in the country, and it will contribute to language teachers comprehending their students' beliefs.

3. Methodology

3.1 Setting and participants

This descriptive study was undertaken at Universidad Técnica Estatal de Quevedo. A total of two hundred (N=200) students from different degree programs such as Agronomy, Pedagogy, Psychopedagogy, and Nursing volunteered to participate in this study. Of these 200 participants, 168 were female (84%), and 32 were male (16%). The mean age was 21.49, varying from 18 to 44 years old. All the participants were freshmen students enrolled in the subject English I with a workload of four hours a week. Table 2 displays participants' information.

Table 2 – Participants Degree Information

Degree	N. of participants	Female	Male
Agriculture	23	12	11
Nursing	55	48	7
Pedagogy	60	55	5
Psychopedagogy	62	53	9
TOTAL	200	168	32

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

This study employed an adaptation of the BALLI to assess Ecuadorian students' beliefs about learning a foreign language. The 30-statement uses a 5-point Likert scale, which one means "strongly agree" and five "strongly disagree". The survey was sent via google forms to students, and they were required to answer a Spanish version, due to its low level of English, during class time. To ensure the trustworthiness of the translation, all the researchers did the translation in English-Spanish together, and later they sent the questionnaire to three professors at the same university to check if the translation was done correctly. Each student had 40 minutes to finish answering it.

This study followed the ethical procedures; so, before the initiation of the study, a consent form was sent via google form to each participant to be read and filled out. This document explained the goal and the nature of the research, how their privacy would be maintained and how the answers would be published later. Some guidelines on how to respond to the questionnaire were also included.

Finally, the analysis was done using the statistical program SPSS 25. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequencies, were calculated to summarize the learners' beliefs about language learning item by item. Internal consistency was assessed by using Cronbach's Alpha. The alpha for the BALLI questionnaire was .938 indicating high reliability. The next section displays the results gathered from the quantitative data in percentage.

4. Results

4.1 Difficulty in learning the language

We have two different types of answers about the two aspects of the difficulty in learning the language category. First, 46% of the students agreed that it is easier to read than write in foreign a language. Second, 47% of them are neutral regarding being easier to speak than understand a foreign language. Table 3 shows these results.

Table 3. Difficulty in learning the language Belief

Belief	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	Std. Dev.
It is easier to read than write in foreign a language.	17.5	28.5	42.5	6.5	5.0	2.53	.017
It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language.	10.0	24.5	47.0	11.0	7.5	2.81	1.013

Note: * 1 = Strongly agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly disagree

4.2 Aptitude for learning the language

Regarding the aptitude for learning the language category, 67.5% of the participants agreed that it is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language. Also, 53% of them agreed that some people are born with a special ability that helps them learn a foreign language. A high percentage, 63%, agreed that people who speak more than one language well are very intelligent, and 84% agreed that everyone could learn to speak a foreign language. We also found out that 49.5% agreed that it is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another, and 46% agreed that people who are good at math and science are not good at learning foreign languages. However, we encountered some neutral answers that called out our attention: 42.5% are neutral about people in Ecuador being good at learning languages, 36.5% said they are neutral about having a special ability for learning foreign languages, and finally, 45.5% mentioned that they are neutral about women being better than men at learning foreign languages. This data is displayed in table 4.

Table 4. Aptitude for learning the language

Belief	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	Std. Dev.
It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.	27.5	40.0	19.5	8.0	5.0	2.23	1.092
Some people are born with a special ability that helps them learn a foreign language.	16.0	37.0	32.5	9.5	5.0	2.50	1.032
People in Ecuador are good at learning languages	9.5	31.0	42.5	13.0	4.0	2.71	.949
It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another.	11.0	38.5	29.0	15.0	6.5	2.68	1.065
People who are good at math and science are not good at learning foreign languages.	4.5	11.5	36.5	33.5	14.0	3.41	1.013
I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	4.0	14.0	45.5	28.5	8.0	3.22	.927
Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.	4.0	10.0	54.5	21.0	10.5	3.24	.915
People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent.	25.0	38.0	23.0	8.0	6.0	2.32	1.115
Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	54.0	30.0	6.5	2.5	7.0	1.79	1.138

Note: * 1 = Strongly agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly disagree

4.3 Nature of language learning

Concerning the nature of the language learning category, 72.5% of the learners agreed that learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words. Also, more than half of the participants agreed that the most important part of learning a foreign language is learning grammar. 61%, learning a foreign language is different from learning other university subjects, 62% agree, the most important part of learning a foreign language is learning to translate from Spanish to a foreign language, 67.5%, and it is better to learn a foreign language in a foreign country, 51% agree. But only 47% of the students agreed that it is necessary to know the foreign culture foreign language. Table 5 illustrates this information in more detail.

Table 5 Nature of language learning

Belief	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	Std. Dev.
It is necessary to know the foreign culture in order to speak a foreign language.	16.0	31.0	33.0	15.5	4.5	2.62	1.069
It is better to learn a foreign language in a foreign country.	19.0	32.0	27.5	15.0	6.5	2.58	1.149
Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words.	26.0	46.5	16.5	7.0	4.0	2.17	1.021
The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning grammar.	22.5	38.5	25.0	9.5	4.5	2.35	1.069
Learning a foreign language is different from learning other university subjects.	19.5	42.5	23.0	9.5	5.5	2.39	1.074
The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning to translate from Spanish to a foreign language	23.5	44.0	23.0	6.0	3.5	2.22	.988

Note: * 1 = Strongly agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly disagree

4.4 Learning and communication strategies

Concerning the learning and communication strategies category, most of the students, 81%, believe that it is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent accent. Regarding their emotions, while speaking, 47% of them agreed that they feel shy about speaking English with other people. The participants believe that to improve the foreign language; they have to repeat and practice a lot, 87.5%; they have to practice with audio and YouTube videos, 78.5%, and 44% of the students agreed that if you are allowed to make mistakes, in the beginning, it will be hard to get rid of them later on. Lastly, 54.5% disagreed that you should not say anything in the language until you can say it correctly. Table 6 shows more information about this category.

Table 6 Learning and communication strategies

Belief	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	Std. Dev.
It's important to speak a foreign language with an excellent accent	47.0	34.0	9.5	2.5	7.0	1.88	1.135
It's important to repeat and practice a lot.	55.5	32.0	4.5	2.5	5.5	1.70	1.055
You shouldn't say anything in the language until you can say it correctly.	8.0	10.5	27.0	37.0	17.5	3.46	1.138
I feel shy about speaking English with other people.	5.5	41.5	26.5	18.0	18.0	2.83	1.063
It's important to practice with audio and YouTube videos.	36.0	42.5	14.5	2.0	5.0	1.97	1.020
If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning, it will be hard to get rid of them later.	13.5	30.5	31.0	18.0	7.0	2.75	1.116

Note: * 1 = Strongly agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly disagree

4.5 Motivation and expectations

Finally, respecting the motivation and expectations category, the most important responses are students agreeing with all the statements. For example, 74.5% believe that they will learn to speak English, and 85.5% of them have this desire to speak English very well. Maybe because of that, we have that 80.5% said that they would like to have English native speakers' friends. Consequently, 46% said they like to practice the language with a native speaker. However, only 54.5% agreed that Ecuadorian citizens think that it is important to speak a foreign language. This goes against the findings that 81.5% of the learners think that learning a foreign language will help them find better job opportunities and believe that learning a foreign language can help them get to know a different culture, 71.5%. Table 7 portrays each statement better.

Table 7 Motivation and expectations.

Belief	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	Std. Dev.
I believe I will learn to speak English very well.	28.5	46.0	17.5	3.0	5.0	2.10	1.012
I like to practice the language with a native speaker.	13.0	33.0	42.0	4.5	7.5	2.61	1.022
I would like to learn a foreign language so that I can get to know a different culture.	34.0	37.5	19.5	4.5	4.5	2.08	1.058
Ecuadorian citizens think that it is important to speak a foreign language.	20.0	34.5	30.0	6.5	9.0	2.50	1.152
If I learn to speak English very well, I will have better job opportunities.	45.0	36.5	11.5	2.0	5.0	1.86	1.039
I want to learn to speak English very well.	57.0	28.5	5.5	2.5	6.5	1.73	1.115
I would like to have English native speakers friends.	43.0	37.5	11.5	2.0	6.0	1.90	1.078

Note: * 1 = Strongly agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 4 = Disagree; 5 = Strongly disagree

This present-day study applied the questionnaire BALLI to identify the students' beliefs about learning a foreign language. However, as it was only used one quantitative survey as a data collection instrument, it was not the purpose of the research. We were not able to understand these beliefs. For this reason, in the next section, we try to compare the most salient findings with other studies conducted around the world.

5. Discussion

The BALLI questionnaire helped identify the students' beliefs about learning a foreign language; the results facilitated a landscape of some tertiary Ecuadorian beliefs. The most salient responses were found in the motivation and expectations category. Many students agreed with almost all the statements. The second category with more agreed answers was on aptitude for learning the language. Then we have the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and finally, with less agreed on answers, difficulty in learning the language belief.

Most of the students, 81%, believed that it is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent accent. This result showed that the teacher needs to try to deconstruct this idea of the native speaker as a role model for language learning (Schmitz, 2012; Anjos, 2016). More questions about what an accent is should be done in class or why native speakers' accents are considered better than mine. When students have this misconception that good English is native English, they do not practice in class and get demotivated to learn (Anjos, 2016). In the same way, 51% of them think that it is better to learn a foreign language in a foreign country. These results are aligned with the study of Bernat and Lloyd (2007). These two beliefs are very common among students. One alternative for teachers is showing their learners examples of people that learned English without going abroad. By doing this, students can see that learning English in their country is possible.

Briones and Ramírez (2011) demonstrated that the teaching methodology is still traditional in Ecuador. These might be the reasons why 67.5% of the students agreed that the most important part of learning a foreign language is learning to translate from Spanish to a foreign language. In the same way, 61% agreed that the most important part of learning a foreign language is learning grammar. These results go against Mohebi and Khodadady (2011) results because their participants, 72.3%, disagreed that translating from English into Persian played the most important role in English learning. Some teachers in some countries are still using the traditional methodologies such as the audio-lingual. Intending to change this situation, the teachers need to update their teaching skills by participating in some continuing education courses or talking with their coworkers and starting exchanging experiences.

Similar to the findings of Abdolazadeha and Niab (2004), learners tended to believe that it is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language, and some people are born with a special ability that helps them learn a foreign language. The participants in this study and some others (Abdolazadeha, & Nia, 2014, Bernat & Lloyd, 2007; Daif-Allah, 2012; Gómez, 2017; Liu & Rutledge, 2020; Mohebi & Khodadady, 2011; Nikitina & Furuoka, 2014, Ormeño & Rosas, 2015; Peacock, 1999) believe that learning English might help them in the labor market. 81.5% of the students in this research agreed that if they learn to speak English very well, they will have better job opportunities. This is the type of motivation that the EFL teachers should foster in their students. They need to help them see the importance of English for their lives, but not only in the working context but also in all the settings of our lives.

6. Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to identify the students' language learning beliefs in a public university in Ecuador. The findings suggested the importance of teachers getting to know their students' beliefs to make them successful learners. It is the role of the Ecuadorian teacher to try to deconstruct these beliefs in class. Students need to understand that there is nothing wrong with having an accent while speaking English, or to speak good English is necessary to travel abroad. Maybe because of these beliefs of the necessity to have the perfect English to speak that hinder student's participation in class. So, to change these erroneous beliefs, teachers can create situations in class in which students can share and discuss their beliefs with their classmates. These will help students to see that they are not alone. Consequently, learners will be encouraged to have positive language learning beliefs.

So, for that reason, several pedagogical implications can be grasped from the research. We believe that the findings will be a good starting point for Ecuadorian teachers to plan and create an effective syllabus for their classes in furtherance of avoiding mismatches between classroom practices and learners' beliefs.

Despite the criticism on the validity of using BALLI (Kuntz, 1996), this questionnaire has been demonstrated to be a powerful tool to identify students' beliefs. However, during the application of the questionnaire, we found some limitations. Firstly, as answering surveys is not common for most of the students, and reflecting on their beliefs as well, we had many neutral responses. So, we suggest not using the option neutral in the Likert scale for future research. Secondly, given the complexity of beliefs, we agree with Bernat & Lloyd (2007) when they said that "no attempt will be made to generalize the findings of this study beyond the local context" (p.89). For this reason, we recommend doing a qualitative study to deeply understand the reason for each one of the most salient beliefs and more studies in different areas of Ecuador.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding: This research received no external funding

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