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北美汉语学习信念的考察：师生间之差异

Beliefs about Chinese Language Learning in North America: Some Surprising Discrepancies between Teachers and Learners

Yanping Cui, Delroy L. Paulhus
(University of Victoria, University of British Columbia)

Introduction

Language learning is a complicated process that involves cognitive, metacognitive, and affective factors. In the metacognitive area lie learners' beliefs about language learning. Over the last decade, research on beliefs about language learning has been gaining momentum in second language (L2) and/or foreign language (FL) acquisition.

Individual differences in learner beliefs have been identified as a factor with a profound influence upon the language learning process (Dornyei, 2005; Horwitz, 1988, 1989). Positive yet realistic beliefs can help learners overcome frustration and sustain motivation, thus facilitating language learning. By contrast, unrealistic beliefs or misconceptions can result in decreased motivation and increased frustration, which becomes an impediment to successful language learning (Bernat, 2008; Horwitz, 1988, 2001). Learner beliefs have been found to be shaped by a number of variables, one of which is culture (Kern, 1995; Yang, 1999). Nevertheless, the relationship of learner beliefs to culture is still inconclusive (Dornyei, 2005; Horwitz, 1999). By the same token, teacher beliefs play a major role in guiding teachers' such educational practices as designing instructional tasks and organizing the knowledge and information needed to implement the tasks (Nespor, 1987).

A number of researchers have found that, in some domains of L2/FL learning and teaching, mismatches exist between teachers' and learners' belief: Such mismatches can lead to classroom tension, learners' dissatisfaction, anxiety, and undermine learning outcomes (Bernat, 2007; Brown 2009; Siebert, 2003). For that reason, awareness and investigation of the nature of learner beliefs about language learning, and similarities and differences between learners' and teachers' beliefs is central to understanding and improving L2/FL learning and teaching. Given the role that culture plays in shaping beliefs, it is also important to investigate whether those teacher-learner discrepancies vary across students of different cultural backgrounds.

The present study seeks to: (1) compare the beliefs of learners from three ethnically different subgroups (learners from non-Asian backgrounds, Chinese background, and non-Chinese Asian backgrounds), and (2) compare and contrast learner and teacher beliefs.

Method

Participants consisted of teachers of Chinese and beginning learners at universities and colleges in both Canada and the United States. The teacher sample consisted of a total of 62 teachers of Chinese who were teaching elementary Chinese at the time of the survey or had taught first-level Chinese. Of these, 91 percent were ethnically Chinese and nine percent were non-Chinese. Included were teachers from 35 post-secondary institutions: 17 in Canada and 18 in the US.

The learner sample was composed of a total of 216 learners studying first level Chinese at 26 post-secondary educational institutions in North America: 12 in Canada and 14 in the US. Among the 216 learners, 123 (63%) reported non-Asian backgrounds, 47(24%) reported Chinese origin, and 26 (13%) reported non-Chinese Asian backgrounds.

Instruments

Four survey instruments were used in this study. The Beliefs About Language Learning Inventories (BALLI, Horwitz, 1985, 1988) came in two versions -- one for learners, and a slightly different version for teachers. Similarly, the Individual Background Information Questionnaires (IBIQ) was slightly different for learners and teachers respectively. The BALLI inventories were adapted to the context of learning Chinese in North America.

The BALLI for learners contained 34 items that included the 27 items in the teacher version. Finally, 14 additional items were added to the two BALLI inventories. They addressed specific features and existing issues of Chinese learning and teaching and were adapted from the BALLI Plus described by Le (2003).

Beliefs About Language Learning Inventories (BALLI). This popular instrument was developed by Horwitz, (1985) to assess learner and teacher opinions on a variety of issues and controversies surrounding language learning. Using logic rather than statistical analysis, Horwitz categorized beliefs into five groups for assessment: (1) Foreign language aptitude; (2) The difficulty of language learning; (3) The nature of language learning; (4) Learning and communication strategies; (5) Motivations and expectation. The BALLI has been used extensively to examine the nature of learner beliefs, their relationship to language learning strategies, and to determine where language and learner beliefs might be in conflict (Horwitz, 1985; Peacock, 2001; Samimy & Lee, 1997).

The additional items in the BALLI Plus were intended to examine the Chinese learner beliefs about specific features of Chinese language learning and teaching: For example, what aspect of Chinese is perceived to be the most difficult to learn, when Chinese characters should be introduced into teaching, and what is it that sustains learners' motivation to continue learning Chinese.

Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 20 was employed for the quantitative analyses in this study. Procedures included descriptive statistics, factor analysis, analysis of variance (ANOVA), independent sample t-tests, and chi-square tests.

Results

The 34-item BALLI was subjected to a factor analysis: principal components extraction with promax rotation. Results revealed four conceptually interpretable and statistically valid dimensions underlying learner beliefs regarding Chinese language learning: (1) *Motivation* (e.g., "If I learn Chinese very well, it will help me to get a good job."), (2) *Formal language learning strategy* (e.g., "Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words."), (3) *Communication oriented*

learning strategy (e.g., "It's O.K. to guess if you don't know a word in Chinese."), and (4) *Difficulty of language learning* (e.g., "Some languages are easier to learn than others.").

Composite belief variables were formed from the top loading items of each factor. The mean percentages of agreement with each belief factor are presented in Table 1. Participants were considered to agree with a BALLI item if they gave a 4 or 5 on the 5-point rating item. Then the percentages were averaged across the items in the composite. Comparisons of the factor composites were organized around two central questions. Chi-square tests were used to compare mean percentages.

Question 1. Do Chinese learner beliefs differ depending on their ethnical backgrounds?

Application of ANOVA revealed significant differences among the four factor composites. Although Chinese language learners in general were highly motivated to learn Chinese, those of Chinese origin reported significantly stronger motivation than non-Asian learners. Although learners of Chinese overall reported substantial agreement with formal language learning strategies, significant inter-group differences were observed. In contrast to non-Asian learners, those of Chinese origin and non-Chinese Asian learners expressed significantly greater agreement with formal language learning strategies ($p < .05$). Additionally, non-Asian learners expressed significantly higher agreement with communication oriented learning strategies than did learners of Chinese origin ($p < .01$).

Question 2. How do Chinese teacher beliefs compare with beliefs of Chinese learners in general and the respective three ethnic groups?

Again, the four factor composites were used to compare teacher and learner beliefs: A series of independent sample t-tests revealed significant differences in all four factors: Motivation ($p < .001$), Formal language learning strategy ($p < .001$), Communication oriented learning strategy ($p < .001$), and Difficulty of language learning ($p < .01$).

The pattern of differences is displayed in columns 1 and 4 of Table 1. Learners overall were more likely to endorse the motivation-related statements than did teachers. With formal language learning strategies, learners reported significantly more agreement than did teachers. In contrast, teachers agreed more with communication oriented strategies. Not surprisingly, learners tended to see Chinese language learning as more difficult than teachers did.

At the item-level, some interesting differences appeared. For example, learners agreed more than teachers did with the statement "It is important to speak Chinese with excellent pronunciation" (91.4% vs. 66.1%, $p < .001$). Teachers were more likely than learners to accept the statement "Non-Asian students will maintain their commitment to learning Chinese if their classmates in the Chinese class are not almost all from Chinese background" (71.0% vs. 32.5%, $p < .001$). Moreover, learners displayed significantly greater disagreement with the statement "As long as students can recognize Chinese characters, it does not matter very much whether they are able to write them" (61.9% vs. 43.5%, $p < .001$).

Table 1. Distribution of Belief Scores on the Four BALLI Factors

	Learners Overall (N=216)	Non-Asian Learners (n=123)	Learners of Chinese Origin (n=47)	Non-Chinese Asian Learners (n=26)	Teachers (N=62)
	Agreement (%)				
Motivation	57.5	55.4	62.5	58.3	48.4
Formal language learning strategy	40.6	33.1	50.0	58.3	19.4
Communication-oriented language learning strategy	55.5	58.4	48.1	56.9	76.9
Difficulty of language learning	82.9	82.1	83.3	86.1	75.3

Note. Each value is the percent of respondents who agreed with the factor items.

Discussion and Implications

We organize our discussion around five key findings. Some of these findings were more surprising than others.

1. Learners tended to agree with formal language learning strategies more than did teachers.

It may surprise some readers to hear that learners, but not teachers, endorsed the formal 'rote-learning' approach. This tendency was clear whether learners were asked about language-learning in general or Chinese in particular. For example, more than half the teachers agreed with the statement "Students will maintain their commitment to learning Chinese if Chinese teachers spend less time on pronunciation and grammar exercises but more time on fun communicative language learning activities". But only one in four learners agreed.

For decades, in the SLA literature, formal language teaching approaches have received much criticism; the teachers in our study seemed equally critical. However, a substantial number of learners still believe in the prevailing importance of grammar, vocabulary, and accuracy in speaking. Perhaps they want to build their confidence with formal learning before they try the more socially challenging communicative approaches.

However, learners' preference may not correspond to what actually benefits them. As Horwitz (1988) warned, a focus on grammar and vocabulary could lead to pure memorization of grammatical rules and vocabulary lists, which is known to be detrimental to language learning. Instead, teachers should correct learner beliefs in this regard and make learners aware that language learning is not mere learning of grammar and vocabulary.

Of course, grammar instruction is still deemed important in contemporary SLA literature. But there is debate with regard to how grammar should be taught. Instead of pure memorization, the current pedagogical approach is that grammar instruction requires task-based approaches or should be treated as a dynamic process that involves meaningful

interaction or context rather than as a static set of prescribed rules to be learned and memorized.

2. Asian learners endorsed formal learning strategies more than non-Asian learners did.

This may be the least surprising result. Our research adds to empirical evidence for cultural influences on learners' language learning beliefs and styles (Cortazzi, 1990; Le, 2004; Simpson, 2008). Our result is consistent with broader research indicating that Asians prefer a more formal approach to learning (e.g., Watkins & Biggs, 1996). The results bring further attention to the importance of teaching in a way that takes into account cultural influences to satisfy diverse learner needs.

3. Teachers agreed with communication-oriented learning strategies more than learners did.

Apparently, learners still have some reservations about and/or barriers to embracing or applying communication-oriented strategies. Perhaps the linguistic resources were still inadequate or unavailable for these novice learners of Chinese to capitalize on or turn to for assistance. Another possibility is that these learners lacked knowledge about how best to deploy communicatively oriented language learning strategies. If so, it is important for teachers of Chinese to build and expand learners' repertoires of efficient communicatively oriented strategies, create opportunities and situations for learners to practice more, and model effective communicative strategies to learn Chinese so as to develop learners' fluency in different aspects of using Chinese. In short, strategy instruction is necessary, particularly for beginning language learners. As well, teachers should make efforts to discover where learners' barriers lie, if any, and help learners to remove these barriers. Issues to discuss include the most effective way to guess unknown Chinese words, and how learners should handle the situation when guessing fails.

Although formal language learning matters, it is paramount for teachers to emphasize the equal importance of fluency and accuracy in language learning, and in practice effectively integrate the formal language instructional and communicative approaches into both teaching and assessment to promote learners' learning and progress. Fluency and accuracy in language learning and teaching should not be separated from each other; rather they should be inextricably linked in theories and practice. Apparently, this message has not yet reached the minds of the learners.

4. Non-Asian learners preferred having (at least some) fellow learners with an Asian background.

Teachers were more likely than learners to endorse the statement "Non-Asian students will maintain their commitment to learning Chinese if their classmates are not all from Chinese background". Contrary to what teachers believed, only one-third of learners agreed with the above mentioned statement.

Even more surprising is the comparison of the same statement between the learner groups: Although approximately two in five students of Asian ancestry (Chinese origin and non-Chinese Asian) agreed, only one in four non-Asian learners agreed. One would expect that non-Asian learners would be daunted by having other learners with an apparent advantage in learning Chinese. Instead, they may expect to learn more if their fellow

learners are more competent than they are. This counterintuitive result may point to one area that requires further investigation.

5. Learners were highly motivated to learn Chinese despite acknowledging the difficulty of learning that language.

The discrepancy in motivation between learners and teachers suggests that teachers may have underestimated learners' motivation. The pedagogical implication is that teachers should endeavor to make the best use of learners' high motivation. It is therefore advisable for teachers to conduct needs analysis and take into account learner needs in setting appropriate learning objectives and designing instructional activities. Teachers need to engage learners at a level that is one step beyond learners' linguistic competency: That way, the learning tasks can be sufficiently challenging to stimulate learners' interest and maintain their motivation. As well, teachers should ensure that each learner receives some "i+1" input that is appropriate for his/her current stage of linguistic competency (Krashen, 1982). Research has indicated that motivation is highly associated with learners' preference for challenging activities in the classroom (Schmidt & Watanabe, 2001).

Learners' strong motivation to learn Chinese sends an encouraging signal: They are determined to learn Chinese well regardless of the challenges they may encounter. Moreover, the non-Asian learners are happy to have classmates with an Asian background. At the same time, teachers should be supported and held accountable for developing resources necessary to retain learner motivation in order to help learners achieve their goals and especially to prevent them getting so discouraged that they give up and simply drop out of Chinese learning courses.

Conclusion

This article reported on some of the results from a study comparing responses of teachers of Chinese and Chinese language with those of beginning learners. The primary measurement instrument was the well-known BALLI-Plus and the samples were North American. Our results offer some important insights about discrepancies between teacher and learner beliefs about foreign language learning.

Pedagogically, we suggest that teachers of Chinese should be made aware of the possible disparities between the two sets of beliefs. Increased awareness will allow teachers to develop targeted strategies to assist learners to be successful by maintaining their motivation and confidence in tackling this challenging language. Clarification of the underlying dimensions of learner beliefs, particularly the Chinese language beginning learners' preference for the specific aspects of the Chinese language such as Chinese character learning and expectations of continuity of learning Chinese, should shed light onto not only the practice of the Chinese language teaching and teacher education, but also curriculum design and course materials development in North America.

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