

EFL Learners' Beliefs about Language Learning, Concern over Mistakes, and Language Achievement: Investigating Possible Relationships in an Iranian Context

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The present study was an attempt to explore any significant relationships among Iranian EFL learners' beliefs about language learning aptitude and the difficulty of language learning, their concern over mistakes, and their language achievement. 116 Iranian junior and senior EFL students majoring in English Translation and English Literature at Shahid Bahonar university of Kerman were chosen through available sampling technique to take part in this study. To obtain the required data, the following questionnaires were utilized: Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) developed by Horwitz (1987), and Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS) designed by Frost et al. (1990). The participants' GPAs of the basic courses were also used as a measure of their language achievement. Statistical test of Pearson Product-Moment Correlation and Independent T-Test were conducted to analyze the data. The findings of this study revealed that first, there were significant positive relationships between belief about language learning aptitude and language achievement, on one hand, and, belief about the difficulty of language learning and concern over mistakes, on the other hand; second, no significant relationship was found between these pairs: belief about language learning aptitude and concern over mistakes, belief about the difficulty of language learning and language achievement, and concern over mistakes and language achievement; third, regarding gender, it was revealed that females, in comparison with males, had higher scores on belief about language learning aptitude. Moreover, there were no significant differences between males and females regarding other variables. Finally, compared with belief about the difficulty of language learning, belief about language learning aptitude was

found to have the higher relationship with language achievement: the former did not predict language achievement.

Keywords: beliefs about language learning, perfectionism, concern over mistakes, language achievement

Traditionally, the focus of research in second language learning has been on issues relating to the cognitive domain (Shams, 2006). In recent years, however, language researchers have been investigating affective variables such as anxiety, motivation, and attitude, in the field of second language (L2) acquisition in an attempt to improve L2 teaching and learning.

One of the important facets of the area of individual differences is learners' beliefs about language learning. Researchers have found that second language learners come to the language class with some preconceived ideas or beliefs about language and language learning and that these beliefs can indicate what expectations the learners have and what actions in their language learning they will take (Abraham & Vann, 1987; Holec, 1987; Horwitz, 1987; Wenden, 1987).

Another dimension of individual differences is the concept of perfectionism, which has its roots in clinical studies but is a new construct in terms of its educational use (Hawkins, 2005). One of the dimensions of perfectionism is concern over mistakes which is characterized by negative reaction to mistakes, interpretation of mistakes as failure, and the belief that respect from others is compromised by failure (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990).

Although considerable research has been done on students' beliefs about language learning and their perfectionism, no single study has yet been conducted as to how the university students' beliefs about language learning and their state of perfectionism, including their concern over mistakes, influence their ultimate language achievement. Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap in the literature.

Beliefs about Language Learning

Second and foreign language learners come to class with ideas about the nature and process of the learning. These preexisting beliefs are claimed to have influential impacts on learner's approaches and behaviors in the learning process (Horwitz, 1987; White, 1999) and their language learning performance. According to Stevick (1980, p. 4), "success depends less on materials, techniques, and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom". Horwitz (1988) found that learners sometimes hold very unrealistic beliefs concerning language learning, which may lead to learner anxiety. According to Young (1991), "when beliefs and reality clash", anxiety is created (p. 428). For example, students who believe that learning another language is merely a matter of translation from English or learning grammar rules or new vocabulary words would encounter great frustration and stress in today's communication-oriented EFL/ESL classrooms.

The term beliefs about language learning has been defined in different ways by different researchers. Pajares (1992) stated that, "defining beliefs is at best a game of player's choice" (p. 309). Vibulphol (2004) defined beliefs as personal knowledge about second or foreign language learning. Cabaroglu and Roberts (2000) defined beliefs as "a set of conceptual representations which signify to its holder a reality or given state of affairs of sufficient validity, truth or trustworthiness to warrant reliance upon it as a guide to personal thought and action" (p. 388).

Among research investigating learner beliefs about language learning, Horwitz's research (1983, 1988) is credited as the first to attempt to identify learner beliefs about language learning in a systematic way. A questionnaire, called the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), was developed. Five major areas of beliefs emerged from the analysis of the responses to the 34 items on the BALLI: (1) difficulty of language learning, (2) foreign language aptitude, (3) the nature of

language learning, (4) learning and communication strategies, and (5) motivations and expectations. For this study, Horwitz's (1987) classification has been selected.

Wenden (1987) identified three major categories in learner beliefs: (1) the use of the language, (2) the learning of the language, and (3) the importance of personal factors.

In her classification, Tanaka (1999, as cited in Tanaka & Ellis, 2003) identified two broad dimensions of learner beliefs: (1) beliefs about self as a language learner, and (2) beliefs about approaches to language learning. The latter was subdivided into beliefs about analytic and experiential learning.

In another classification, Victori and Lockhart (1995) discussed differences between (1) insightful beliefs, which successful learners hold, and (2) negative or limited beliefs, which poor learners hold, and articulated that if students develop or maintain misconceptions about their own learning, they are not likely to adopt a responsible and active attitude in their approach to learning and may never become autonomous. For this study, Horwitz's classification has been selected.

A review of research literature suggests that beliefs about language learning are formed gradually through learners' experience in language learning. They may be influenced by agents in their learning process such as teachers or by factors such as individual differences, family/ home backgrounds (Price, 1992, cited in Wang, 2005; Young, 1991), or they may result from "the unthinking acceptance of popular wisdom" (Tudor, 1996, p. 53).

Concern over Mistakes

The study of perfectionism has a long history in both clinical research and personality psychology (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). One of the first researchers to define perfectionism was Hollender (1978) who regarded it as a neglected personality trait. Frost et al. (1990) defined perfectionism as

“the setting of excessively high standards for performance accompanied by overly critical self-evaluation” (p. 453). Such high standards are associated with specific fears about failure and making mistakes (Flett, Blankstein, Hewitt, & Koledin, 1992; Thompson, Davis, & Davidson, 1998). Such fear leads to avoidance behavior and avoidance behavior means that one must be constantly on the alert and on the defensive to avoid that which one fears (Hamachek, 1978). Frost et al. (1990) emphasized that these high standards are accompanied by tendencies for overly critical evaluations of one’s own behavior, expressed in overconcern for mistakes and uncertainty regarding actions and beliefs.

Research on perfectionism has evolved from a unidimensional construct (Burns, 1980) to the development of several multidimensional conceptualizations of perfectionism. Traditionally, perfectionism was a malady that needed to be remedied. In 1978, Hamachek described normal and neurotic perfectionist types.

In the early 1990s perfectionism turned out to be a multidimensional construct. While Hewitt and Flett (1991) identified three dimensions for perfectionism, Frost et al. (1990) designed a multidimensional scale with the following six subscales: Concern over Mistakes, Personal Standards, Parental Expectations, Parental Criticism, Doubts about actions, and Organization. The first subscale (CM) reflects negative reactions to mistakes, a tendency to interpret mistakes as failures, and the belief that failure inevitably results in a loss of respect from others (Flett, Sawatzky, Hewitt, 1995).

Literature Review

Ching-yi and Ming-chang’s (2010) study of Taiwanese EFL learners displayed a moderate association between participants’ beliefs about language learning and their use of learning strategies: learners who endorsed the beliefs of foreign language aptitude used compensation strategies most often, while learners who believed in a hierarchy of

language learning seemed to use memory, cognitive and affective strategies most frequently.

Wang (2005) carried out a research to investigate the relationship between foreign language anxiety and beliefs about language learning of university EFL students in China. The results indicated that those who believe English is not a very difficult language and perceive themselves as having higher language aptitude in language learning tend to have lower levels of language anxiety.

The results of Pearson-correlation analysis in Abedini, Rahimi, and Zare-ee's (2011) study of 203 Iranian undergraduate learners of English demonstrated that there were positive and significant correlations between belief scores and proficiency scores. This result is in line with Asbjorn's (2000), Huang and Tsai's (2003) and Peacock's (2001) results.

Pishghadam and Akhondpoor (2011) carried out a study to examine the role of learner perfectionism in foreign language learning success, academic achievement, and learner anxiety. The results indicated a negative significant relationship between skills of reading, speaking, listening, GPA, and perfectionism and also a positive significant relationship between learner perfectionism and learner anxiety. The findings of this study showed perfectionistic tendencies in language learners are associated with low academic achievement and poor performance in language skills.

Frost, Turcotte, Heimborg, and Mattia (2001) reported a laboratory study of reactions to mistakes in which participants with high (versus) vs. low levels of concern over mistakes (CM) were induced to do a language proficiency test. The results showed that participants with high CM did not make many mistakes in the difficult parts of the test and their proficiency test scores were high. They were also more likely to perceive that others would regard their performance as reflecting low intelligence. In contrast, the students with lower level of CM made more mistakes but they did not show high negative feelings toward themselves.

The purpose of this study was first to examine Iranian EFL learners' beliefs about foreign language aptitude and beliefs about the difficulty of language learning in relation with their concern over mistakes. Then, it aimed to determine whether or not these factors are related to the language achievement of EFL students. Finally, this study tried to investigate any significant differences between males and females with regard to all these factors. Therefore this study sought to find answers to the following research questions:

1. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' beliefs about foreign language aptitude and their concern over mistakes?
2. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' beliefs about foreign language aptitude and their language achievement?
3. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' beliefs about the difficulty of language learning and their concern over mistakes?
4. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' beliefs about the difficulty of language learning and their language achievement?
5. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' concern over mistakes and their language achievement?
6. Is there any significant difference between males and females regarding their beliefs about foreign language aptitude and the difficulty of language learning, concern over mistakes, and language achievement?

Method

Participants

A sample of 116 junior and senior students (29 females, 87 males) majoring in English Literature and English Translation at Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman (a city in Iran) formed the participants of this study. Available sampling technique was employed in the current study. In this procedure all the available members of the population have an equal and

independent chance of being included in the sample (Ary, Jacob, & Razavieh, 1972).

Instrumentation

The following instruments were used in this study:

1. Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (Horwitz, 1987)
2. Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Frost et al., 1990)

Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) contains 34 items designed to assess student beliefs in five different areas: (1) foreign language aptitude, (2) the difficulty of language learning, (3) the nature of language learning, (4) learning and communication strategies, and (5) motivations and expectations. The focus of the current study was on the first and the second areas, namely beliefs about foreign language aptitude and the difficulty of language learning based on the rationale that these two beliefs are more predominant among EFL learners in the context of Iran; thus, make stronger impacts on their final achievement in the process of language learning. Thirty-two items of the BALLI are scored on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), and the other two items (items 4, 15) call for students' ratings of the difficulty level of the target language, ranging from 1 (very difficult) to 5 (very easy), and of the amount of time needed to learn a foreign language, ranging from 1 (less than one year) to 5 (you can't learn language in one hour per day). According to Hair, Anderson, Tatham, and Black (1998), the BALLI has a Cronbach alpha of 0.79. The acceptable value of reliability index for scales in psycholinguistic research is at least 0.70.

The instrument used to measure the second variable of the study, concern over mistakes, was the MPS developed by Frost et al. (1990). MPS is a 35-item questionnaire designed to measure perfectionism and its dimensions. It is based on a Likert scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. There are six subscales in this questionnaire. They are scored by summing the scores given to the items. The subscales are:

Concern over Mistakes, Personal Standards, Parent Expectations, Parental Criticism, Doubting of actions, and the Organization. Hawkins (2005) reported the internal consistency alpha values of the overall perfectionism measure and Concern over Mistakes (CM) to be 0.90 and 0.88, respectively.

Data Collection

To collect the required data the scales, i.e., the BALLI and the MPS were distributed among the participants concurrently. Participants were given time (15-20 minutes) to answer these questionnaires. Also, the participants provided the grades of their basic courses, the average of which was used as the measurement of their language achievement. Moreover, the GPAs of their basic courses were also extracted from their records to ascertain the accuracy of their reports. The participants were also assured that the gathered information would be used only for research purposes.

Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of beliefs about language learning aptitude and difficulty, concern over mistakes, and language achievement.

To answer the first five research questions posed for this research project, Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used. The analysis of the collected data revealed significant correlations between some of the variables of the study. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of the Variables (FL Aptitude, FL Difficulty, CM, and LA)

Variables	Mean	SD	df
Beliefs about FL Aptitude	29.26	3.91	114
Beliefs about FL Difficulty	16.15	2.74	114
Concern over Mistakes	24.31	5.75	114
Language Achievement	16.24	1.31	114

Note: Beliefs about FL Aptitude (FL Aptitude)
 Beliefs about FL Difficulty (FL Difficulty)
 Concern over Mistakes (CM)
 Language Achievement (L A)
 N=116

- (1. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' beliefs about foreign language aptitude and their concern over mistakes?
2. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' beliefs about foreign language aptitude and their language achievement?
3. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' beliefs about the difficulty of language learning and their concern over mistakes?
4. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' beliefs about the difficulty of language learning and their language achievement?
5. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' concern over mistakes and their language achievement?)

Table 2**Correlation Matrix of the Variables** (FL Aptitude, FL Difficulty, CM, and LA)

Variables		FL Aptitude	FL Difficulty	CM	LA
FL Aptitude	Pearson Correlation	1	.037	-.020	.194*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.691	.831	.037
	N	116	116	116	116
FL Difficulty	Pearson Correlation	.037	1	.316**	-.091
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.691		.001	.332
	N	116	116	116	116
CM	Pearson Correlation	-.020	.316**	1	.145
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.831	.001		.121
	N	116	116	116	116
LA	Pearson Correlation	.194*	-.091	.145	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.037	.332	.121	
	N	116	116	116	116

*. Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

**. Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

Note: Beliefs about FL Aptitude (FL Aptitude)
 Beliefs about FL Difficulty (FL Difficulty)
 Concern over Mistakes (CM)
 Language Achievement (L A)
 N=116

As can be seen in Table 2, the results indicated that there was no significant relationship between FL Aptitude and CM ($p = .831$ and $r = -.020$). Pearson Product-Moment Correlation revealed a significant positive relationship between FL Aptitude and LA ($p = .037$ and $r = .194$). Moreover, Pearson Product-Moment Correlation showed a significant positive relationship between FL Difficulty and CM ($p = .001$ and $r = .316$).

The results of correlational analysis of the participants' scores on D and LA revealed no significant relationship between FL Difficulty and LA ($p=.332$ and $r= -.091$). Finally, Pearson Product-Moment Correlation indicated no significant relationship between CM and LA ($p= .121$ and $r= .145$).

With regard to the sixth research question asking about the relationship between gender and other variables of the study, there was just a significant relationship between males and females regarding their FL Aptitude scores. There were no other significant relationships regarding other variables.

In order to answer 6th research question, "Is there any significant difference between males and females regarding their beliefs about foreign language aptitude and the difficulty of language learning, concern over mistakes, and language achievement" and to investigate the

gender differences and FL Aptitude, an Independent T-Test was run. According to the results, since $P = 0.008$ is less than $\alpha = 0.05$, there is a significant difference among males and females regarding their FL Aptitude (Table 3). Furthermore, as the results indicate, in comparison with males, females have higher scores on FL Aptitude (Females' $M= 29.81$ and Males' $M= 27.62$).

Table 3
Independent T-Test for A between Males and Females

Gender	Male			Female			t	df	P
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD			
A	29	27.62	4.90	87	29.81	3.37	-2.68	114	.008S ^a

$\alpha= .05$, Significant

Discussion

A review of the literature reveals that most of the studies on perfectionism in the area of language learning have regarded perfectionism as a whole concept rather than examining each individual subscale in relation with language-related variables .

In the present study, the researcher examined exclusively the CM dimension of perfectionism based on the rationale that it is vitally important in the process of language learning because learners who are highly concerned over making mistakes often engage in overly critical self-evaluations and they often pay particular attention to their failures at the expense of their successes. Moreover, despite the fact that a great deal of studies have been carried out on language learners' beliefs, to the best knowledge of the researcher, no single study has been conducted exploring the relationship between perfectionism and its dimensions and learners' beliefs about language learning. Due to this scarcity, in the following sections discussing the answers to the first and the third research questions the finding of this study cannot be matched against the possible results of other studies.

The first five research questions of this study sought to explore the existence of any relationship between EFL students' A and CM, A and LA, D and CM, D and LA, and CM and LA. The results indicated that there was no significant relationship between A and CM. Therefore, the result of the present investigation shows that learners' concern over mistakes does not correlate with their belief about language learning aptitude. Such a finding indicates that concern over mistakes among the participants in this study is not predicted by belief about language learning aptitude. It could be hypothesized that learners' level of concern over mistakes is under the influence of personality characteristics such as motivation and attitude toward language learning, perception of classroom structure, psychological well-being, hemispheric dominance, etc. Thus, future research is needed to examine these sorts of relationship.

Concerning the second research question, the findings revealed that there was a significant positive relationship between learners' belief about language learning aptitude and their language achievement. This finding is in line with those reported by Samimy and Lee (1997), Asbjorn (2000), Peacock (2001), Huang and Tsai (2003). However, it is in contrast with the results of Mori's (1999) study which found out that learners with higher scores of achievement in Japanese tended to have lower scores on the belief that learning ability is innately fixed.

With regard to the third research question, the findings revealed that there was a significant positive relationship between learners' concern over mistakes and their belief about the difficulty of language learning. In other words, the more a learner believes that learning a foreign language is difficult, the more concerned they are over their mistakes.

Regarding the fourth research question, the findings revealed that there was no significant relationship between learners' belief about the difficulty of language learning and their language achievement. This finding is in contrast with that of Mori's (1999) study which reported a negative relationship between learners' belief about the difficulty of learning Japanese and their performance. It is also in contrast with the results of Abedini et al.'s (2011) study reporting a positive relationship between learners' beliefs and their language proficiency. However, the result of the present study is in line with the results reported by Üstünel and Samur (2010) showing that there is no significant relationship between learners' beliefs about language learning and their success.

Concerning the fifth research question, no significant relationship was found between learners' concern over mistakes and their language achievement. Such a finding indicates that language achievement among the participants in this study is not predicted by their level of concern over mistakes. The finding of this study is in contrast with all of the other studies which reported a positive correlation between CM and LA such as

Gregersen and Horwitz (2002), or negative correlation between them like Pishghadam and Akhondpoor (2011).

With regard to the sixth research question investigating any significant difference between males and females, there was just a significant difference between males and females regarding their A scores: in comparison with males, females had higher A scores. In other words, females hold a belief about language learning aptitude more than males do. There were no other significant differences concerning other variables. This finding is in line with that of Oz (2007) and Daif-Allah (2012) who found that female learners hold stronger beliefs about foreign language aptitude, but regarding the difficulty of language learning males and females hold similar beliefs. However, it is in contrast with the result of Siebert's (2003) study which showed that male students were more likely to respond that they have a special ability for learning languages. Also, male students were much more optimistic regarding the difficulty of language learning. It is also in contrast with the finding of Tercanlioglu (2005) which showed no significant differences between males and females in their beliefs about language learning.

This study had some limitations, including the reliance on self-report data in assessing the variables. Future researchers can make use of other means of data collection such as interviews, diaries, or observations to have a better understanding and assessing of each variable. Moreover, the accuracy of the findings in this study may be affected by some mediator factors such as culture, learners' strategies, anxiety, motivation, extraversion, and introversion, etc., that are not considered in this research but could be the focus of future research. Finally, considering the participants' size and the fact that they were EFL learners from only one university, generalizations from the provided data must be made with caution, because the findings of this study cannot be said to represent all EFL learners in Iran. Therefore, future research could be carried out with larger samples and in different educational contexts.

Conclusion

The present study attempted to determine how beliefs about language learning aptitude and the difficulty of language learning influence EFL students' concern over mistakes and how Iranian EFL learners' language achievement is influenced by all these factors. It was concluded that significant positive relationships exist between belief about language learning aptitude and language achievement, on one hand, and, belief about the difficulty of language learning and concern over mistakes, on the other hand. However, this study demonstrated that there was no significant relationship between these pairs: belief about language learning aptitude and concern over mistakes, belief about the difficulty of language learning and language achievement, and concern over mistakes and language achievement. Regarding gender, it was revealed that females, in comparison with males, had higher scores on belief about language learning aptitude.

What these findings imply is that English language teachers need to become more aware of different affective and psychological factors of their students as a means of explaining differences in one's ability to learn a new language. Concepts such as beliefs about language learning, perfectionism, and concern over mistakes are crucial in their students' behaviors, actions, feelings, and consequently, their ultimate language achievement. Understanding learner beliefs in the context of language learning is essential, since it has been noted in the literature that successful learners develop insightful beliefs about language learning process, their own abilities, and the use of effective learning strategies, which have a facilitative effect on learning. Students can hold negative beliefs about language learning, which may cause them to rely on less effective strategies, thus, bringing about poor performance. Thus, it seems important to help EFL students develop appropriate beliefs about language learning and teachers play a significant role in this regard.

Besides, teachers should identify concern over mistakes and provide students with strategies to overcome this concern. Not only should the teachers know about such concepts as language learning beliefs, perfectionism, and concern over mistakes, but they should also familiarize the learners with such concepts to raise their awareness about their psychological states and help them develop appropriate beliefs and learning strategies.

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