

Foreign Students' Beliefs about Learning Arabic as a Foreign Language

By Khaled Hussien Muhareb Alharahsheh

Abstract

This study aimed to investigate foreign students' beliefs regarding learning Arabic as a foreign language (AFL). To achieve this objective, five dimensions were examined, namely, AFL aptitude, difficulty of AFL learning, nature of AFL learning, AFL learning and communication strategies, and motivation toward AFL learning. A 34-item questionnaire was distributed to obtain students' beliefs. Findings revealed that these dimensions were significant and that they contributed to successful AFL learning. Positive attitudes toward the language and its speakers together with high motivation enhanced learner achievement. The study showed that the subjects were religiously, integratively, and instrumentally motivated. Cognitive and metacognitive strategies contributed to successful language learning and proficiency.

Keywords: AFL aptitude, attitudes toward Arabic, beliefs about Arabic, motivations

Introduction and Related Literature

Beliefs are generally defined as "psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true" (Peacock, 2001, p. 178). Accordingly, beliefs about Arabic are defined in the present study as psychologically held insights, premises, or propositions about Arabic that are felt to be true. Several factors affect the mastery of foreign or second language, such as age, language aptitude, socio-psychological factors, cognitive style, personality traits, learning strategies, environment, and prior experience. All humans can acquire a foreign language regardless of their age, attitude, and motivation. Learners are the focus of the language learning process; thus, these variables are currently viewed as crucial for study and analysis. This study aims to describe the subjects' beliefs and discuss the possible effects of these beliefs on the learning and teaching situation of Arabic as a foreign language (AFL). A common belief in the field of language acquisition is that positive attitudes toward the target language and its speakers improve learning and achievement in that language. According to Smadi and Al-Abed Al-Haq (1998), language attitudes toward AFL are crucial because of their potential influence on language learning in addition to the decision on planning the acquisition process.

Rashed (2013) investigated the evolution of interest in and beliefs about AFL. The findings revealed that negative beliefs about Arabic difficulty shifted to positive ones over the course of study. Interest in Arabic became highly diversified and detailed. Moreover, the subjects of the study exhibited instrumental and integrative motivations toward learning Arabic.

Taha (2007) explored the attitudes, perceptions, and motivations of American and international graduate and undergraduate students regarding the teaching/learning of AFL. The results indicated that most of the respondents agreed that learning Arabic was instrumentally important; however, they differed in their general perceptions of the Arabic language and culture.

Truitt (1995) investigated university students' beliefs about English as a second language in Korea. The students' beliefs were determined to be correlated with background factors, such as academic major and experience living in an English-speaking country. The study provided evidence that learners' beliefs about language learning might vary based on cultural background and previous experience.

Kingsley and Maria (1997) analyzed the causes and effects of Chinese students' beliefs about foreign language learning and the mismatches between teachers' and students' beliefs, and compared students' and teachers' beliefs across cultures. The analysis of the results indicated that in language learning, females used more cognitive strategies to manipulate the target language and tended to achieve at a higher level compared with males. Moreover, in contrast to other language learners, the good ones felt less anxious, spent more effort, regarded the foreign language as less difficult, and used more language learning strategies. Students' beliefs affected their motivation, attitudes, motivational intensity, strategy use, anxiety, and English achievement.

Foreign Students' Beliefs about Learning Arabic as a Foreign Language

Khaled Hussien Muhareb Alharahsheh

Patricia (1997a) noted a general agreement among the subjects that learning a second language was easier for children than adults, second languages were learned best in the target foreign country, and some languages were easier to learn than others. In another study, Patricia (1999b) reported that students' beliefs slightly changed over the course of their language learning experience.

Baty et al. (1993) studied the relationships among individuals' foreign language learning experiences, their beliefs about the effectiveness of language learning strategies, and their definitions of the learning task. Their results confirm that language learning experience is related to strategy beliefs.

Smadi and Al-Abed Al-Haq (1996a) investigated Saudi university students' attitudes toward learning English and revealed the lack of a correlation between the use of English and westernization. They also argued that learning English did not corrupt religious commitment. In another study, Al-Abed Al-Haq and Smadi (1996b) introduced a new type of motivation that they referred to as "religious motivation." Religiously committed Saudis considered learning English a religious duty.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

This study aimed to investigate the foreign students' beliefs regarding learning AFL. The study intended to portray these beliefs and examine whether they affect language learning. To achieve this objective, five major dimensions related to AFL learning were discussed, namely, AFL aptitude, difficulty of AFL, nature of AFL learning, AFL learning and communications, and motivations toward AFL learning. The study attempted to describe the subjects' beliefs and discuss the possible effects of these beliefs on the learning and teaching situation of AFL.

The field of AFL has been inadequately examined; thus, the significance of the study lies in filling this research gap. Awareness of students' beliefs enables teachers and curriculum designers to identify student aptitudes and ideas toward AFL learning. Consequently, teachers can identify the misconceived ideas toward AFL learning, thereby helping them develop positive attitudes among language learners.

Methodology

Sample

The sample of the study consists of 35 students (20 males and 15 females) who study AFL at Al-Albait University in Jordan. The subjects are between 22 and 25 years old. The sample is presented in Table 1.

| Sex | Number | Length of study in years | | | Nationality | | | |
|--------|--------|--------------------------|-----|-----|-------------|------------|---------|---------|
| | | 1-2 | 3-4 | 5-6 | Malaysian | Indonesian | Chinese | Zambian |
| Male | 20 | 3 | 11 | 6 | 16 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Female | 15 | 4 | 7 | 4 | 10 | 5 | 0 | 0 |

Table 1
Distribution of the subjects of the sample according to gender, length of study, and nationality

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Two tools were used in collecting data. The first tool was a questionnaire, which was developed by Smadi and Al-Abad Al-Haq based on Horwitz's inventory of beliefs about language learning to assess the subjects' opinions on several issues related to Arabic language learning. The questionnaire consisted of 34 Likert-scale items concerning the five dimensions for the purpose of the study. Notably, answers to the items were considered to be neither right nor wrong. The second tool was a one-question interview in which the subjects were asked to answer the question "Why do you study Arabic language?" The responses of the subjects were computed, and frequencies and percentages were calculated.

Foreign Students' Beliefs about Learning Arabic as a Foreign Language

Khaled Hussien Muhareb Alharahsheh

Findings and Discussion

The items in Table 2 address the presence of a basis for language learning and the characteristics of language learning.

Table 2
Percentages of students' responses to the items related to AFL aptitude

| Item | *SA% | A% | N% | D% | SD% |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|
| 1.It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language. | 17.1 | 68.6 | 2.9 | 11.4 | -- |
| 2. Some people have a special ability for learning a foreign language. | 20.0 | 71.4 | -- | 8.6 | -- |
| 6.people from my country are good at learning foreign languages | 8.6 | 34.3 | 28.6 | 28.6 | -- |
| 15. I have a special ability for learning a foreign language. | 11.4 | 57.1 | 8.6 | 22.9 | -- |
| 32. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language. | -- | 14.3 | 22.9 | 37.1 | 25.7 |
| 19.people in my country feel that it is important to speak Arabic. | 8.6 | 42.9 | 31.4 | 14.3 | 2.9 |
| 9. It is easier for someone who speaks another foreign language to learn another one | 8.6 | 11.4 | 40.0 | 28.6 | 11.4 |
| 10. People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages. | 14.3 | 31.4 | 28.6 | 25.7 | -- |
| 18. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages | 20.0 | 65.7 | 8.6 | 5.7 | -- |

The students' responses clearly indicate that the majority of respondents (85.7%) agree that some people have a special ability for foreign language learning and (91.4%) believe that children are better than adults in learning foreign languages. These results concur with those of other studies (Altan, 2012; Donato, Antonek, and Tucker, 1996) that young age has a positive effect on language acquisition, particularly on pronunciation. Approximately half of the respondents (51.5%) believe that they have a special ability for learning foreign languages. The majority of respondents (85.7%) believe that all humans are capable of learning foreign languages regardless of their age, gender, and other factors. These responses indicate that the respondents have a positive assessment of their own language abilities. The respondents also believe that they do not have superiority over others in learning foreign languages.

The findings of this study support the common belief that bilinguals are better learners of languages than monolinguals, and that trilinguals are better than monolinguals and bilinguals. Roughly 68.5% of the respondents believe that learning another language is easier for bilinguals than monolinguals. Similar results were confirmed by Patricia (1997). As Table 2 illustrates, 62.8% of the subjects do not support the general notion that students in literary fields are better at learning languages than students in scientific ones. Furthermore, 40.0% disagree with the notion that females are generally more skillful at learning languages than males. However, related research highlights that females use more cognitive strategies to manipulate the target language and achieve at a higher level compared with males (Kinsley and Maria, 1997). Up to 45.7% of the respondents regard bilingualism as an indication of intelligence; this result concurs with that of Smadi and Al- Abed Al-Haq (1998).

The items in Table 3 focus on the difficulty of learning AFL and relative difficulty of different language skills.

Table 3
Percentages of students' responses to the items related to the perceived difficulty of AFL learning

| Item | SA% | A% | N% | D% | SD% |
|------|-----|----|----|----|-----|
|------|-----|----|----|----|-----|

Foreign Students' Beliefs about Learning Arabic as a Foreign Language
Khaled Hussien Muhareb Alharahsheh

| | | | | | |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|
| 3. Some languages are easier than others | 57.1 | 28.6 | -- | 14.3 | -- |
| *4. Arabic is: a. very difficult b. difficult c. medium difficulty d. easy f. very easy | 77.1 | -- | 11.4 | -- | 11.4 |
| 5. I will speak Arabic very well | 65.1 | 8.6 | -- | 14.3 | -- |
| *14-if someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take him/her to learn it very well? | 11.4 | 5.7 | 28.6 | 31.4 | 22.9 |
| 24. it is easier to speak than understand a foreign language | 20.0 | 2.9 | 11.4 | 60.0 | 5.7 |
| 33. it is easier to read and write Arabic than to speak and understand it | 45.3 | 17.1 | 2.9 | 25.7 | -- |

Items*4 and *14 have specific answers

Up to 85.7% of respondents believe that some languages are easier to learn than others, whereas 77.1% regard Arabic as a language of medium difficulty. However, 74.2% of respondents believe that they will learn to speak Arabic very well. This result suggests that the respondents have a positive assessment of their abilities and high expectations of success. Regarding the time necessary to learn Arabic and to speak it extremely well, 31.4% of respondents indicate that they need one to two years, whereas 28.6% claim that they require three to four years.

This estimate can be explained as follows. Some students started learning Arabic in their countries as a foreign language; then, they travelled to Jordan where they started learning it as a second language (SL). Their previous knowledge of Arabic helps them. Therefore, they need less time than those who have no previous exposure to Arabic. Previous research revealed that language learning experience has a positive effect on learning a SL/FL (Baty et al., 1993). In terms of learning Arabic language skills, 60.0% contend that comprehension is easier than speaking, whereas 22.9% believe the opposite. The majority (71.4%) believe that reading and writing are easier than speaking. This result can be explained in light of the fact that comprehension is a receptive skill, thus requiring less effort than the other skills.

The items in Table 4 discuss some issues relevant to the nature of language learning, the role of culture contact and language, and the learners' conception of the focus of the language learning task, whether it is vocabulary, grammar, or translation oriented.

4

Table 4
Percentages of students' responses to the items related to the nature of AFL learning

| Item | SA % | A% | N % | D% | SD % |
|---|------|------|-----|------|------|
| 15.It is necessary to know about Arabic speaking cultures in order to speak | 51.4 | 28.6 | 2.9 | 17.1 | -- |
| 16.It is best to learn Arabic in Arabic speaking country | 25.7 | 74.3 | -- | -- | -- |
| 17.The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary items | 51.4 | 34.3 | 2.9 | 11.4 | -- |
| 18. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning grammar | 54.3 | 25.7 | 5.7 | 14.3 | -- |
| 19.Learning a foreign language is different from learning other academic subjects | 65.7 | 8.6 | 5.7 | 17.1 | 2.9 |
| 20. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning how to translate from my native language | 31.4 | 2.9 | 5.7 | 54.3 | 5.7 |

The majority of respondents (80.0%) believe that knowledge about the culture of Arabic-speaking countries is necessary to learn the language. All of the subjects of the study believe that Arabic is best learned in its native environment. This result supports the principle that language acquisition is enhanced by the natural environment. Language learning requires linguistic and cognitive abilities; thus, this type of learning differs from learning other academic subjects. Language learning is perceived as a matter of learning grammatical rules and vocabulary items or translating from one language to another. In this study, 60.0% of

Foreign Students' Beliefs about Learning Arabic as a Foreign Language

Khaled Hussien Muhareb Alharahsheh

respondents disagree that translation is the focus of the learning task, although the majority of respondents consider vocabulary and grammar as the major foci of the learning task (80.0% and 85.7%, respectively).

The respondents' beliefs concerning learning and communication strategies are presented in Table 5.

Table 5
Percentages of students' responses to the items related to AFL learning and communication strategies

| Item | SA% | A% | N% | D% | SD% |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|
| 7.It is important to speak Arabic with an excellent pronunciation | 25.7 | 62.9 | -- | 11.4 | -- |
| 12.I enjoy practicing Arabic with the Arabs I meet | 48.6 | 34.3 | 5.7 | 11.4 | -- |
| 13.Guessing is O.K | 8.6 | 28.6 | 17.7 | 3.43 | 11.4 |
| 17. it is important to repeat and practice a lot | 37.1 | 60 | -- | 2.9 | -- |
| 20.I feel timid speaking Arabic with other people | 25.7 | 2.9 | 5.7 | 60 | 5.7 |
| 21.If beginning students are permitted to make errors in Arabic ,it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on. | 34.3 | 5.7 | 14.3 | 34.3 | 11.4 |
| 25.It is important to practice with cassettes or tapes | 42.9 | 5.7 | 8.6 | 37.1 | 5.7 |
| 34.The process of learning Arabic should go through the following consecutive stages: knowledge- comprehension- application- analysis | 60 | 28.6 | 8.6 | -- | 2.9 |

Learning and communication strategies are the focus of this dimension. Up to 88.6% of respondents agree that speaking Arabic with accurate pronunciation is important. Moreover, 97.1% believe that repetition and practice are essential components of the language learning and teaching process because they enhance the ability to use the language being learned. Roughly 45.7% of respondents agree that errors are inevitable and part of the learning process. Errors cannot be avoided and they will not increase the difficulty of the language learning process. The respondents acknowledge that teachers should expect errors and treat them appropriately and that students should not be embarrassed by their errors. The majority of respondents (88.6%) agree that the learning process of AFL should involve the following consecutive strategies: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, and synthesis evaluation. With regard to communication strategies, 82.9% of respondents agree that they enjoy practicing Arabic with its native speakers, whereas 65.7% disagree that they feel timid when speaking Arabic. Table 6 discusses the foreign students' desires that are associated with learning AFL.

Table 6
Percentages of students' responses to the items related to motivation toward AFL learning

| Item | SA% | A% | N% | D% | SD% |
|---|------|------|------|------|-----|
| 28.People in my country feel that it is important to speak Arabic. | 51.4 | -- | 8.6 | 34.3 | 5.7 |
| 29.I want to learn to speak Arabic well. | 42.9 | 8.6 | 2.9 | 45.7 | -- |
| 30.I would like to learn Arabic, so I can get to know Arabs better. | 28.6 | 22.9 | 22.9 | 22.9 | 2.9 |
| 31.If I learn Arabic well, I will have better opportunity for a good job. | 32.4 | 68.6 | -- | -- | -- |
| 32. I would like to have Arab friends | 60 | 37.1 | -- | 2.9 | -- |

Table 6 shows that the sample is highly motivated in a religious, integrated, and instrumental manner. The subjects were interviewed individually and in groups. All of the subjects agreed that they studied Arabic because it is the language of the holy Quran and that knowing Arabic enables them to effectively understand the instructions of Islam. These results were confirmed by Smadi and Al-Abed Al-Haq (1998) who noted that learning Arabic was driven by religious motivation. Furthermore, 51.5% of the subjects associated the ability to speak Arabic with enhanced job opportunities.

Conclusion

Foreign Students' Beliefs about Learning Arabic as a Foreign Language

Khaled Hussien Muhareb Alharahsheh

The findings of this study indicate that aptitude, attitude, personality traits, learning, and communication strategies are important because they help determine successful language learning. The examination of learners' beliefs is important because it reveals the misconceptions about language learning. It also facilitates the introduction and creation of a positive learning atmosphere.

REFERENCES

Al-abd-al-haq,fawwaz and Smadi, oqla(1996a)."spread of English and westernization in Saudi Arabia", world englishes.vol25,no.3,p.307-317.

Al-abd-al-haq,fawwaz and Smadi, oqla(1996b)."the status of English in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia(KSA), 1940-1990.in(in eds)post-imperial English.

Altan, M. Z. (2012). Pre-service EFL teachers' beliefs about foreign language learning. *European Journal Of Teacher Education*, 35(4), 481-493. doi:10.1080/02619768.2011.643399

Banaya, Kingsley and Cheng, Maria(1997). Beliefs About Foreign Language Learning: A Study Of BELIEFS Across Cultural settings. A Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Teachers of English to Speakers of other Languages(31st ,Orlando,Fl,March11-15,1997).

Elbaum, B. E., Berg, C. A., & Dodd, D. H. (1993). Previous learning experience, strategy beliefs, and task definition in self-regulated foreign language learning. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 18(3), 318-336.

Kuntz, P. S. (1997). Beliefs about Language Learning Held by Students and Their Teacher (A Pilot Study).

-----, P. S. (1999). Secondary Students' Beliefs about Language Learning. Expanded version of a paper presented at the Conference on Foreign Languages and Literatures (Youngstown, OH, October 24, 1998).

Peacock,M.(2001). Pre-service ESL teachers' beliefs about second language learning: A longitudinal study. *System*,29,177-197.

Rashed, H. (2013). The evolutions of interest and beliefs about Arabic as a foreign language: a case study on three Western learners. *Education*, 134(1), 50+. Retrieved from <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA346808446&v=2.1&u=sdl&it=r&p=AONE&asid=d0f05946677218cc71b9d56556e3bac1>

Taha, T. A. (2007). Arabic as "a critical-need" foreign language in post-9/11 era: A study of students' attitudes and motivation. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 34(3), 150-160. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/213906991?accountid=142908>

Larsen –Freeman, Diane and Log, Micheal(1992). *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research*. London : Longman

Smadi, Oqla and Al Abed Al- Haq, Fawwaz(1995). An Analysis AFL Expository Discourse. *Al-Arabiyya*,vol 28,p.95-114

American University Students' Beliefs About Arabic Language Learning. *Abhath Al- Yarmouk*,Vol 16,No.1,P75-91

Foreign Students' Beliefs about Learning Arabic as a Foreign Language

Khaled Hussien Muhareb Alharahsheh

Truitt, S. N. (1995). Anxiety and beliefs about language learning: A study of Korean university students learning english (Order No. 9534977). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (304246027). Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/304246027?accountid=142908>