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## Foreign Language Learners' Beliefs and Use of Language Learning Strategies

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**Adel Abu Radwan**

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Associate Professor  
Department of English  
Sultan Qaboos University  
radwan@squ.edu.om

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## Abstract

Variation in individuals' success in learning a foreign/second language is often attributed to a host of cognitive, psychological and socio-cultural factors. Learners' language learning strategies and preconceived beliefs have been explored as possible factors contributing to this variation. Research suggests that successful language learners usually utilize, whether consciously or subconsciously, more effective strategies than less proficient learners (Chamot, 2004). Similarly, learners' beliefs are thought to shape the course of their linguistic development and their whole language learning experience (Debreli, 2012). Thus, any mistaken beliefs could have prolonged detrimental and negative effects on the learners' learning experience (Peacock, 2001). Hence, this paper investigates the intricate relationship between learners' beliefs and their strategic preferences. The study uses two questionnaires to collect data from 173 students in the English Department at SQU, Oman. Inferential statistical analysis shows an overall medium use of learning strategies, with metacognitive strategies occupying a top position. The results about learners' beliefs reveal that learners' motivation and expectations are the strongest set of beliefs held by language learners. Learners seem to accord less significance to the traditional role of grammar and vocabulary in language learning. As for the relationship between strategies and beliefs, the findings show that students' beliefs intricately correlate with different categories of strategies. In specific, foreign language aptitude and learners' motivation and expectations strongly correlate with almost all sets of strategies. From a pedagogical perspective, the findings of this investigation are of a great significance for both learners and instructors. To ensure a successful language learning experience, instructors need to give special attention to helping learners overcome any preconceived negative beliefs and providing them with proper training on how to use appropriate strategies.

Keywords: beliefs; strategies; correlation; metacognition; strategy training.

## معتقدات متعلمي اللغة الأجنبية واستخدامهم لاستراتيجيات تعلم اللغة

عادل أبو رضوان

### المخلص

إن التباين في نجاح الأفراد في تعلم لغة أجنبية يُعزى في كثير من الأحيان إلى مجموعة من العوامل المعرفية والنفسية والاجتماعية والثقافية المختلفة. ولقد تم اعتبار استراتيجيات تعلم اللغة لدى المتعلمين ومعتقداتهم بوصفها عوامل محتملة تُساهم في هذا الاختلاف، إذ تشير الأبحاث إلى أن متعلمي اللغة الناجحين عادة ما يستخدمون سواءً بوعي أو بغير وعي استراتيجيات أكثر فاعلية من الطلاب الأقل كفاءة، وقد يُظن أن معتقدات المتعلمين حول تعلم اللغة تشكل إلى حد كبير مسار تطور لغتهم وخبرتهم في تعلم اللغة؛ ومن ثم، فإن أية معتقدات خاطئة يمكن أن يكون لها آثار ضارة وسلبية مطولة على تجربة التعلم عند الطلاب. إن هذه الدراسة تهدف - بناء على ما تقدم - إلى بحث طبيعة العلاقة المعقدة بين معتقدات تعلم اللغة المسبقة للمتعلمين واختياراتهم لاستراتيجيات التعلم المختلفة. وفي سبيل ذلك تستخدم الدراسة استبياناً لدراسة معتقدات الطلاب وآخر لدراسة استراتيجيات التعلم لجمع البيانات من ١٧٣ طالب في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة السلطان قابوس. ولما كان الأمر على نحو ما تقدم فقد أظهر التحليل الإحصائي، استخداماً متوسطاً لاستراتيجيات التعلم، وخاصة استراتيجيات ما وراء المعرفة. أما نتائج البحث فقد أظهرت أن دوافع الطلاب وتوقعاتهم أقوى المعتقدات التي يتبناها متعلمو اللغة. وبدا من النتائج أن المتعلمين يولون أهمية أقل للدور التقليدي للقواعد والمفردات في تعلم اللغة. أما بالنسبة للعلاقة بين الاستراتيجيات والمعتقدات، فتظهر النتائج أن معتقدات المتعلمين مرتبطة بشكل معقد بمجموعات مختلفة من استراتيجيات التعلم، وعلى وجه التحديد، ترتبط الكفاءة اللغوية الأجنبية ودوافع المتعلمين وتوقعاتهم ارتباطاً وثيقاً بجميع الاستراتيجيات تقريباً. ومن منظور تربوي، تعتبر نتائج هذه الدراسة ذات أهمية كبيرة لكل من الطلاب والمعلمين، فلكي نضمن تجربة تعلم لغة ناجحة، يجب إيلاء اهتمام خاص لمساعدة الطلاب على التخلص من أية معتقدات سلبية وضمان تدريبهم على اتخاذ الخيارات الاستراتيجية المناسبة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المعتقدات؛ الاستراتيجيات؛ ما وراء المعرفة؛ التدريب الاستراتيجي.

## Introduction

Since the 1980s, research in foreign/second language acquisition has witnessed a significant shift from teacher- to learner-centered approaches, thus focusing on learners' perspective in the language learning process (Nunan, 1988; Brown, 2000). In their effort to help learners acquire a foreign language more efficiently, researchers have examined a wide range of variables that contribute to learners' performance in a foreign language. They found that variation in individual learners' achievement could be attributed to a host of personal, cognitive, psychological, and socio-cultural factors (Breen, 2001; Horwitz, 1988, 1999). The learners' socio-cultural background and previous foreign language experiences are found to inculcate in them a set of beliefs about foreign/second language learning (Horwitz, 1987; Radwan, 2019). These preconceived beliefs, according to many researchers (see, e.g., Horwitz, 1987; Peacock, 2001; Radwan, 2019), influence their overall learning experience, determine the actions they may take during the learning process, shape how they learn a foreign language, and can possibly affect the language learning strategies they utilize during the learning process (Chang & Shen, 2010; Hong, 2006; Horwitz, 1999; Li, 2010; Yang, 1999), all of which might ultimately have an impact on their final achievement. Hence, exploring the relationship between learners' beliefs and their strategic preferences can, according to Hong (2006) and others, provide us with deeper insights into the nature of the learning process and is likely to assist instructors in having a better perspective of students' "expectations of, commitment to, success in, and satisfaction with their language classes" (Horwitz, 1988, p. 283). This understanding will likely contribute positively to students' final attainment in language learning in a learner-centered approach. Though there is a plethora of research on learners' beliefs (see e.g., Erkmen, 2012; Horwitz, 1987; Mattheoudakis, 2007; Radwan, 2019) and learning strategies (see, e.g., Chamot, 2004; Hong-Nam & Lavell, 2006; Oxford, 1990, 2013; Radwan, 2011), there is a noticeable gap in research examining the complex relationship between beliefs and strategy preferences, especially in non-western settings. Understanding this relationship, according to Horwitz (1999), is critical for

the design and planning of appropriate instructional practices. Hence, this paper seeks to investigate the nature of this relationship among university students majoring in English in the Sultanate of Oman.

## Literature Review

### Learners' beliefs and foreign language learning

Recently, research has extensively examined the role of beliefs in language learning in both the second and foreign language contexts (see e.g., Debreli, 2012; Horwitz, 1987; Peacock, 2001; Radwan, 2019). Language learning beliefs are defined as "general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning, and about the nature of language learning and teaching" (Victori & Lockhart, 1995, p. 224). Analysis of learners' beliefs shows that learners, "influenced by their previous language learning experiences and cultural background", often hold certain beliefs and assumptions about language learning that are likely to guide them through the learning process and shape how they approach a learning task (Mattheoudakis, 2006). Influenced by Flavell (1979), Wenden (1991) examined learners' beliefs as part of metacognitive knowledge which basically encompasses knowledge which learners hold about how language learning operates and the components of communicative competence and language skills.

Work on learners' beliefs was first initiated by Horwitz's (1985) seminal work investigating learners' beliefs and how they influence the language learning experience. Horwitz (1988, p. 283) maintains that "If beliefs about language learning are prevalent in the culture at-large, then foreign language teachers must consider that students will bring these beliefs with them into the classroom". In support of his position, he designed an instrument, Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALI), to "assess student opinions on a variety of issues and controversies related to language learning" (p. 284) and raise awareness about their possible impact on learners and the ultimate outcome of the language learning process. Horwitz (1988), followed by other researchers (see, e.g., Chang & Shen, 2010; Daif-Allah, 2012; Li, 2010), classifies learners' beliefs into five major categories: "foreign language aptitude", "difficulty of language learning", "nature of language learning", "learning

and communication strategies”, and “motivation and expectations.”

Horwitz (1988) and others (see, e.g., Bernat, 2006; Samimy & Lee, 1997) contend that some learners' preconceived beliefs can be detrimental during the language learning process. This is mainly a result of learners' extensive engagement in less efficient and effective language learning tasks and activities such as the study and memorization of grammar rules influenced by a misconception about the significance of grammar in language learning. This issue raises a serious question about the possibility of eliminating such beliefs. While many studies suggest that learners' beliefs are “deeply entrenched and resistant to change” (see., e.g, Peacock, 2001; Radwan, 2019; Tatto, 1998), other researchers maintain that these beliefs are amenable to change though the change is likely to be gradual and cumulative and is influenced by individual learners and the nature of particular beliefs (Mattheoudakis, 2007; Nettle, 1998).

Language learning strategies (LLS), in contrast, are “conscious thoughts and actions that learners take in order to achieve a learning goal” (Chamot, 2004, p. 14). Within the language learning context, they are behaviors and thought processes utilized by learners to enhance foreign/second language learning and achieve communicative competence (Li, 2010). Oxford (1990, p. 8) defines them as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferrable to new situations.” Wenden (1991, p. 31) suggests that learners' previous knowledge of the subject matter and “the nature of the materials to be learned and the product or outcome that the learner or teacher has in mind” regulate strategic choices, i.e., the types of learning strategies to use in different learning contexts. Due to their significance in assisting language learners during the learning process, Chamot (2004) advocates strategy-based instruction as a means to assist less efficient language learners achieve higher levels of success.

Research into LLS is rooted in the work of Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975) who investigated the characteristics of good language learners to teach them to less successful ones to improve their ultimate attainment in a foreign language. Early research in LLS focuses on the description and classification of LLS, resulting in different taxonomies such as O'Malley and Chamot's

(1990) and Schmidt and Watanabe's (2001). However, Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of strategies, known as “Strategy Inventory for Language Learning” (SILL), is the most systematic classification of strategies. This inventory was used in a multitude of studies in various contexts with high reliability levels (Radwan, 2011).

Oxford (1990) classifies strategies into two major groups: (1) “direct strategies (memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensatory strategies) and (2) indirect strategies (metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, social strategies)”. The former set of strategies “requires mental processing of the language”, and the latter “provides indirect support for language learning through focusing, planning, evaluating, seeking opportunities, controlling anxiety, increasing cooperation and empathy and other means” (Oxford, 1990, p.151). While memory strategies help learners with “remembering, storing and retrieving information”, cognitive strategies involve analyzing, reasoning, practicing and summarizing. Compensatory strategies, in contrast, help learners overcome gaps in their knowledge of the target language. On the other hand, metacognitive strategies assist learners by maximizing learning through evaluating one's progress, searching practice opportunities, planning language tasks, etc. Affective strategies, conversely, help learners control psychological factors affecting the learning process such as anxiety, stress and motivation. In contrast, social strategies help learners in their interaction with others.

Many researchers (see e.g., Abraham & Vann, 1987; Chang & Shen, 2010; Horwitz, 1988; Li, 2010; Yang, 1999) suggest that learners' beliefs and their usage of language learning strategies are intricately correlated. Horwitz (1988), for instance, maintains that while certain negative beliefs might restrict learners' strategy use, positive beliefs will lead to proper strategic choices. Similarly, Li (2010) shows that learners' beliefs and strategy use are moderately related, which means that learners with positive beliefs are more likely to adopt more successful strategies than learners with inappropriate and negative beliefs. Yang (1999) also found a strong connection between certain learners' beliefs including self-efficacy and all categories of learning strategies. He suggests the existence of a cyclical and reciprocal relationship between beliefs and strategy preferences.

## The Study

This study investigates the relationship between Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) learners' preconceived beliefs about foreign language learning and their language learning strategy preferences. In particular, it examines the following research questions:

1. "What beliefs do students in the English Department at SQU hold about English language learning?"
2. "What are the most frequent language learning strategies used by students in the English Department at SQU?"
3. "What is the relationship between learners' beliefs about language learning and their use of language learning strategies?"

## Participants

A total of 184 students from the English Department at SQU participated in this study, but only 173 of them returned the instrument completely answered. These students were part of intact classes. Of these students, 86% were females and 14% were males. The discrepancy in the numbers of participants in these two groups is attributed to the demographic nature of the English Department where female students constitute at least 70% of its student population. The students belonged to different years of study: Freshmen (16%), sophomores (21%), juniors (30%) and seniors (33%).

## Instrument

The study uses two questionnaires with high levels of reliability and content validity. The first questionnaire is based on Horwitz's BALLI which comprises 35 statements and uses a scale ranging from (1) "strongly disagree" to (5) "strongly agree". Horwitz's inventory has been used in numerous studies to collect information about learners' beliefs (see, e.g., Altan, 2012; Radwan, 2019; Wenden, 1998; Yang, 1999). The second questionnaire is taken from Oxford's (1990) SILL. This inventory consists of 50 statements and uses a five-point scale ranging from (1) "Never true of me" to (5) "Always true of me". The SILL questionnaire is used to collect information about learners' levels of strategy usage and students' strategy preferences. Identifying levels of strategy use is based on a scale developed by Oxford with

three levels: (1) "high usage (3.5-5.0), medium usage (2.5-3.4), and (3) low usage (1.0-2.4)".

## Data collection

The instrument was distributed to the students during their regularly scheduled classes to ensure the participation of students from different years of study. The classes' instructors took full responsibility for distributing the questionnaire and explaining the nature of the task. The questionnaires, which were administered under complete conditions of confidentiality, took an average of 30 minutes to complete. The questionnaires that were not completely answered were discarded. SPSS was used for data analysis to obtain inferential and descriptive statistics about students' beliefs and their strategy use. In addition, Pearson product-moment correlations were performed to explore the relationship between students' beliefs and their strategy preferences.

## Results and analysis

The first research question examines the students' most commonly held beliefs about foreign language learning. First, analysis was performed on the different categories of beliefs. The results show that the means for all categories of beliefs are above 3.0, with "learners' motivation and expectations" (LME) occupying the top position (mean = 4.38) followed by "nature of language learning" (NLL, mean = 3.81), "learning and communication strategies" (LCS, mean = 3.76), "foreign language aptitude" (FLA, mean = 3.65) and finally the "difficulty of language learning" (DLL, mean = 3.10). Table 1 presents the results for all categories.

**Table 1. Means and SD of learners' beliefs**

	LME	NLL	LCS	FLA	DLL
Mean	4.38	3.81	3.76	3.65	3.10
SD	.536	.316	.371	.464	.422

These results show that students generally believe that LME beliefs are the strongest predictors of high achievement in foreign language learning. The results concur with Chang and Shen (2010), who reveal that



LME and NLL occupy the top two positions among all categories of beliefs. They are also in line with Yang (1999) who adopts a slightly different classification of beliefs. Yang demonstrates that beliefs about “self-efficacy and expectations” about language are the strongest beliefs among language learners followed by beliefs about “the value and nature of learning spoken English.”

As for specific beliefs, the findings reveal that the students give a great significance to the role of practice in learning a language (mean = 4.55), followed by the belief “it is better to learn English in a country where English is a native language” (mean = 4.52), see Table 2. These two beliefs seem to complement each other as students consider the original country where the language is spoken to be the best environment to practice a foreign language. The students' other results also emphasize the role of practice as beliefs 23 and 24 occupy the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> position and both relate to practicing the language and seeking opportunities to use it. These results seem to divert from the results obtained by Horwitz (1985) which show that learners have more interest in learning grammar and vocabulary. In the present study, learners' responses to the questionnaire reveal considerably less interest in the role of these two components as vocabulary comes in 7<sup>th</sup> place, followed by grammar in 13<sup>th</sup> place. The results also divert from Radwan (2019) who shows that the top two beliefs relate to the role of grammar and vocabulary. It seems that students in this study reject the traditional formal approaches to teaching and learning language which emphasize the role of vocabulary and grammar in learning a language and are in favor of a more communicative approach that emphasizes interaction and communication. The current findings are similar to Yang (1999) who also emphasizes the importance of learning spoken language and practicing in learning a foreign language. In his study, 92% of the respondents rejected the statement that “we should not say anything in English until we can speak it correctly.” In addition, 90% of them agreed that “it is better to learn English in a country where English is a native language.” Moreover, only 45% of the respondents agreed with the importance of grammar in learning a foreign language and a smaller percentage (23%) emphasized the role of vocabulary.

**Table 2. Top-ranked and bottom-ranked beliefs**

Rank	Belief	Mean	SD
1	“In learning English, it is important to practice a lot.”	4.5	.667
2	“It is better to learn English in a country where English is a native language.”	4.52	.825
3	“If I learn to speak English very well, it will help me get a good job.”	4.48	.643
4	“It is important to practice English in the language classroom.”	4.47	.759
5	“If I get to speak English very well, I will have many opportunities to use it.”	4.45	.810
32	“In learning English, it is easier to speak than understand what people say.”	2.66	1.031
33	“People who are good at math and science are not good at learning foreign languages.”	2.55	1.163
34	“We should not say anything in English until we can speak it correctly.”	2.40	1.275
35	“English is a difficult language to learn.”	2.20	.882
36	“English is structured in the same way as Arabic.”	2.17	1.031

Surprisingly, the bottom-ranked beliefs are identical to the findings obtained by Radwan (2019). Students strongly believe that Arabic and English are structurally different languages, which in fact is an accurate reflection of the structural properties of the two languages. In addition, they, despite having different proficiency levels in English as reflected in their GPAs and self-efficacy beliefs, almost unanimously believe that English is not a difficult language to learn. These bottom-ranked beliefs concur with the Yang's

ranking as well. Yang (1999) shows that only 2% of the respondents agree with the statement that “English is a difficulty language to learn.” This essentially explains why LME beliefs are ranked as the top set of beliefs. These beliefs shape students’ motivation, expectations and commitment to language learning. The results show that the majority of students (M= 4.31) “believe that they ultimately learn to speak English well.” Ease of language learning motivates students to put extra effort in the learning process, believing that their efforts will eventually pay dividends in terms of mastery of the language and ultimately having better job prospects.

The second research question explores the most

frequent strategies used by learners. Using Oxford’s classification mentioned above, analysis of results shows that overall students in the English Department fall within the medium level of strategy usage (M = 3.392). As for the various categories of strategies, only metacognitive strategies (M = 3.62) and cognitive strategies (M = 3.52) show high usage, and the other categories reveal a medium use, see Table 3 below. This is somewhat in line with Radwan (2011) and other researchers (see, e.g., Chang and Shen, 2010; Magogwe & Oliver, 2007) who also have metacognitive strategies as the top used category followed by compensatory, cognitive, social, affective, and memory strategies respectively.

**Table 3. Descriptive statistics of language learning strategies**

	Metacognitive Strategies	Cognitive Strategies	Compensatory Strategies	Social Strategies	Memory Strategies	Affective Strategies	Total
Mean	3.622	3.526	3.379	3.248	3.208	3.161	3.392
S D	.629	.519	.606	.724	.521	.656	.451

As for the individual strategies, Table (4) shows their ranking by their mean score. Of the top ten strategies five are metacognitive, two cognitive “I watch English Language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English” (M = 4.08), and “I use the English words I know in different ways” (M = 3.77), one compensatory “If I can’t think of an English word, I use a word or a phrase that means the same thing” (M = 3.99), one memory “I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English” (M = 3.80), and finally one affective, “I encourage myself to speak in English even when I am afraid of making a mistake”. The top ranked strategy for all learners was a metacognitive strategy, “I pay attention when someone is speaking English” (M = 4.18), and among the least preferred strategies three are memory strategies occupying

places in the last four strategies with “I use flashcards to remember new English words” (M = 2.18) being the least frequently used strategy. Overall, these results almost replicate Radwan (2011) where six of the top ten strategies were metacognitive. They are also similar to the results obtained by other researchers (see, e.g., Magogwe & Oliver, 2007; Nisbet, Tindall & Arroyo, 2005). This noticeable presence of metacognitive strategies among the top ten strategies and the fact that overall they are the top used strategies show the importance students accord to these strategies. Oxford (1990) points out that these strategies can play a significant role in learners’ success in language learning because they help learners control their language learning through planning, evaluating and monitoring learning, and “seeking opportunities to use the language”.

Table 4. Ranking of top 5 and bottom 5 individual learning strategies

Rank	Strategy no.	Strategy category	Strategy statement	Mean
1	32	MET	"I pay attention when someone is speaking English."	4.18
2	33	MET	"I try to find out how to be a better learner of English."	4.17
3	15	COG	"I watch English Language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English."	4.08
4	40	AFF	"I encourage myself to speak in English even when I am afraid of making a mistake."	4.03
5	29	COM	"If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or a phrase that means the same thing."	3.99
46	46	SOC	"I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk."	2.69
47	7	MEM	"I physically act out new English words."	2.66
48	5	MEM	"I use rhymes to remember new English words."	2.62
49	43	AFF	"I write down my feelings in a language learning diary."	2.58
50	6	MEM	"I use flashcards to remember new English words."	2.18

These results are also similar to Yang (1999) who showed that 94% of his respondents prefer the top ranked strategy in this study and 90% of his respondents also seek better ways to learn the target language. Additionally, only about 50% of his respondents approve the use of "flashcards to remember new English words", which is the lowest

ranked strategy in this study.

The final research question examines the correlations between the five categories of beliefs and the six categories of language learning strategies. The data were submitted to a Pearson product-moment correlation analysis. The results are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Correlations between beliefs and strategies

		Metacognitive Strategies	Cognitive Strategies	Compensatory Strategies	Social Strategies	Memory Strategies	Affective Strategies
LME	r	.288	.338	.281	.207	.106	.159
	p	.000	.000	.000	.006	.164	.037
NLL	r	.047	.050	.106	.296	.046	.064
	p	.543	.512	.029	.000	.544	.406
LCS	r	.088	.103	.151	.073	.216	.157
	p	.250	.179	.047	.342	.004	.040
FLA	r	.158	.226	.232	.180	.236	.163
	p	.038	.003	.002	.018	.002	.032
DLL	r	-.076	.001	-.052	.201	-.016	.138
	p	.321	.997	.501	.008	.831	.070



Results of the correlations between the different sets of beliefs and the six categories of strategies reveal noticeably complex relationships. Foreign language aptitude beliefs (FLA) strongly correlate with all six groups of strategies. A similar pattern is observed for “learners’ motivation and expectations beliefs” (LME) which correlate closely with all strategies except for memory strategies ( $p = .164$ ). On the other hand, a less robust correlation is found between “learners’ communication strategies” beliefs (LCS) and language learning strategies with only three categories showing a significant relationship (compensatory strategies,  $p = .047$ ; memory strategies,  $p = .004$ ; affective strategies,  $p = .04$ ). Beliefs about the “nature of language learning” (NLL) correlate significantly with only two categories of strategies namely compensatory strategies ( $p = .029$ ) and social strategies ( $p = .000$ ). The final set of beliefs, “difficulty of language learning” (DLL), shows a significant correlation with only social strategies ( $p = .008$ ), and it has a negative correlation with metacognitive strategies ( $r = -.076$ ), compensatory strategies ( $r = -.052$ ) and memory strategies ( $r = -.016$ ). This suggests that students’ belief that English is not difficult to learn is likely to discourage them from using all types of strategies except for social strategies. They seem to think that merely interacting and communicating in the foreign language are sufficient to master it. This behavior is explained by Radwan (2019) who contends that learners’ beliefs usually shape their learning experiences and often guide their prospective teaching practices. Similarly, Horwitz (1988) argues that certain learners’ beliefs might negatively affect learners’ usage of different types of strategies. In contrast, working in a different language context with Chinese vocational training students, Li (2010) found that DLL beliefs correlate positively with metacognitive, cognitive strategies and affective strategies. This conflicting result is due to these learners’ perceptions that English is a relatively difficult language to learn. Therefore, to overcome this difficulty, the learners seemed to put extra effort into language learning mediated through the use of various strategies.

The previous findings demonstrate that students strongly believe in a role for aptitude in foreign language learning. In general, this belief drives them to use all six categories of strategies. This ultimately suggests that FLA might be one of the strongest

predictors of higher levels of attainment in language learning as it correlates with higher levels of strategy use. This means that learners who have strong FLA beliefs are likely to use all categories of strategies, which might ultimately lead to higher achievement in the target language. Using the Attributive Theory to explain a similar result, Li (2010) maintains that these students believe in possessing a special language ability which drives them to use a wide range of y of strategies to foster language learning. This is consistent with general research findings which predict that more strategic learners often achieve higher levels of success in language learning than less strategic learners (see, e.g., Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Radwan, 2011).

Similarly, learners’ motivation and expectations beliefs encourage learners to use all strategies with the exception of memory strategies. Other researchers (see, e.g., Chang & Shen, 2010; Li, 2010) also show that LME is closely related to more categories of learning strategies than any other set of beliefs. This result also concurs with overwhelming research findings which suggest a positive correlation between the two (see e.g., Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Xu, 2011). For instance, investigating the relationship between motivation and Chinese graduates’ use of language learning strategies, Xu (2011) finds that learners with higher levels of motivation are often more strategic than less motivated ones. Moreover, he shows that motivation strength and expectations are highly correlated with the overall strategy use. Similarly, Oxford and Nyikos (1989, p. 295) indicate that “motivation has a pervasive influence on the reported use of specific kinds of strategies, as well as on the degree of active involvement in language learning as reflected in the overall frequency of strategy use in general.” Li (2010) explains this by saying that when learners have high expectations of better job opportunities due to mastering a foreign language, they tend to be more instrumentally motivated to use various strategies to achieve that goal.

An interesting finding is the relationship between LCS beliefs and usage of various strategies, especially social strategies. One would expect that having strong beliefs about the importance of communication and interaction in language learning would lead to an increase in the use of social strategies, which “help learners to interact, communicate and empathize

with others". However, this is not the case, as social strategies occupy the fourth position among all strategies ( $M = 3.24$ ) and they show no significant correlation with LCS beliefs ( $p = .342$ ). Interestingly, despite believing in the importance of communication in the target language, the respondents did not translate this belief into actual strategies that involve interaction, cooperation and communication in the target language. The only plausible explanation for this finding is that the data were collected in February 2020 at a time when, due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments around the globe, in their efforts to control the spread of the pandemic in its early stages, have encouraged switching to online learning and started enforcing social distancing which involves staying at home in addition to other precautionary measures that limited social contact. These measures constrained social relationships, which might have negatively impacted the students' perception of the importance of direct communication and interaction. In an article in *Journal of Public Health*, Routen (2020) shows a noticeable decrease in people's satisfaction with their social relationships as a direct impact of the pandemic. This is confirmed in the UNESCO report (2020, cited in Yaghi, 2021, p. 5) which emphasizes that "online education deprived many university students of cognitive growth and social development as students became passive learners in an up-down learning equation that mostly made them recipients rather than active participants in knowledge building"

## Conclusion

Results of this study offer a multitude of perspectives into the nature of the language learning process and the complex interaction between learners' beliefs and learning strategies. When it comes to learners' beliefs, the findings reveal that learners have strong LME beliefs. These beliefs emphasize the rewarding and practical nature of learning a language. Students seem to be instrumentally motivated to learn English, knowing that it opens to them the door for good paying job opportunities. In addition, many of the top beliefs reported by the learners emphasize the importance of practicing the target language as a means to master it. Interestingly, students accord less importance to traditional beliefs that emphasize the role of grammar and vocabulary in learning a

language. This contrasts with the results obtained by Radwan (2019) which show that these two traditional components are believed to be integral for success in learning a foreign language.

The findings also show that students are aware of the significance of language learning strategies in learning a foreign language. Considering their importance, students used them with a medium to high frequency, according a more significant role to metacognitive strategies which emphasize the role of planning, evaluating and monitoring learning and seeking opportunities to communicate in the target language. These strategies enhance the learner's declarative knowledge of the target language, which is essential at least in the early stages of language learning. Similar to Radwan (2011), the least favored strategies are memory and affective strategies respectively, which shows the students' disregard for traditional strategies that emphasize remembering vocabulary and grammatical rules and retrieving them later on.

The interaction between beliefs and strategy usage reveals a complex and robust set of relationships. The results show a strong correlation between FLA and LME and the use of almost all categories of strategies. Despite having strong LME beliefs, the students did not translate them into actual use of affective strategies, which are the lowest ranked set of beliefs. Students overall demonstrate a strong preference for strategies that give them control over their learning process and strategies that help them understand and produce language through interaction and practice with other speakers of the language.

Overall, the results of the present study highlight the importance of language learning beliefs and strategies in the process of language learning. Strong evidence shows that learners' beliefs shape their language learning experiences and practices and often influence their choice of strategies. Despite this, in the process of teaching the target language, and as they focus on the formal and non-formal properties the language, instructors tend to ignore the role of these beliefs in language learning and how they can contribute to effective and successful use of learning strategies. These two noticeably overlooked aspects of language learning need to be deliberately attended to by instructors. This can be achieved through encouraging positive and appropriate language learning beliefs

and eliminating any misconceptions about language learning and at the same time training students in the use of the most effective language learning strategies (Yang, 1999). This can be done by incorporating these beliefs and strategies within the English language curriculum and conducting special strategy training within the classroom environment, *Strategy-Based-Instruction (SBI)*.

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