Lebanese EFL Teachers' Beliefs about Language Learning

Rula L. Diab

Lebanese American University, Beirut, Lebanon

Although it seems intuitive that learners come to language classes with certain beliefs about language learning, researchers have only recently attempted to identify and examine such beliefs in a systematic manner. Horwitz (1987) defines beliefs about language learning as preconceptions about the nature of the language learning task, and based on her surveys of both English as a Second Language (ESL) students' beliefs and Foreign Language (FL) students' beliefs, Horwitz (1987, 1988) argues that learners' beliefs about language learning may influence the way they use learning strategies and approach the whole language learning process; therefore, exploring such beliefs can guide us to better meet these students' needs, expectations, and goals.

Just as importantly, language teachers themselves may hold certain beliefs about language learning that will have an impact on their instructional practices and that are likely to influence their students' beliefs about language learning (Harrington & Hertel, 2000; Horwitz, 1985; Peacock, 2001; Richards & Lockhart, 1996; Yang, 2000). Indeed, language teachers, particularly those with little experience, may hold misconceptions or unrealistic beliefs about language learning that may be transmitted to their students, either explicitly or implicitly through their instructional practices.

According to Horwitz (1985), addressing the beliefs of prospective FL teachers should be "the first step in their development as foreign language teachers" (p.333). In order to help teacher education methods instructors accomplish this goal, she describes two instruments, the Foreign Language Attitude Scale (FLAS) and the teacher version of the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), which elicits beliefs about second/foreign language learning in four major areas: foreign language aptitude, the difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, and appropriate language learning strategies. Horwitz presents responses to the BALLI from prospective FL teachers enrolled in her methods class and concludes that prospective teachers enter the methods class with many preconceived ideas about language learning and teaching, some of which may be unrealistic ones that can interfere with their understanding of and receptivity to the information and techniques presented in class. Therefore, she suggests that a systematic assessment of such beliefs would increase learning and satisfaction in the foreign language methods class.

Before reviewing the literature on teachers' beliefs about language learning, it is important to briefly mention what the research suggests concerning the validity or truthfulness of some beliefs about language learning. Unrealistic beliefs may include over-optimistic expectations about the time required to become proficient in a second language, certain notions about the importance of accuracy and having a "nativelike" accent when speaking a foreign language, and various beliefs about the role of individual differences in second language acquisition such as age and the use of language learning strategies.

Many FL learners and even some FL teachers may hold unrealistic views about the time required to become proficient in a foreign language. In the BALLI, Horwitz (1985, 1987, 1988) includes an item asking respondents to choose how long it would take learners to become fluent in a language if they spend an hour a day learning it. Among the choices are less than a year, 1-2 years, 3-5 years, and 5-10 years. According to Horwitz, even though various factors are interrelated and play a role in a learner's acquisition of a foreign language, it is generally unrealistic to expect fluency in a foreign language in two or even three years under the conditions described. Thus, learners or teachers who have unrealistic expectations regarding the time required to become proficient in a foreign language may face frustrations when the language development does not meet their expectations.

Regarding the role of age in second language acquisition, it is commonly accepted that children are better language learners than adults and that the younger learners are, the easier it will be for them to acquire a foreign language. Research evidence, on the other hand, is not so conclusive. In their comprehensive book on the topic, *Language Acquisition: The Age Factor*, Singleton and Ryan (2004) conclude that the available evidence does provide some support for the hypothesis that learners who begin learning a language during childhood become more proficient in the long run than those who begin later in life; however, the available research evidence does not support the claim that younger learners are generally more efficient or successful than older learners. Thus, the popular belief that children are more successful language learners than adults is an unrealistic one that may discourage many adult language learners.

Moreover, most FL teachers have certain beliefs about the importance of having a "nativelike accent" when speaking a foreign language. According to Tarone (2005), "the goal of 'nativelike accent' has always been problematic, and is increasingly being questioned by researchers and educators alike" (p. 494). When considering a global language such as English, the issue of *which* native speaker accent to use as a target is also important to consider (Cook, 2001). Jenkins (2000) focuses on the uses of English as an international language and on intelligibility among non-native speakers of English who do not share the same native language. Based on her research, she argues that in teaching pronunciation it may be more realistic to aim for mutual intelligibility rather than a native speaker model.

Finally, many FL learners and most FL teachers hold various beliefs about the importance of accuracy as opposed to communicative fluency and about the relative effectiveness of various language learning strategies. For instance, the notion that if learners are allowed to make mistakes it will be difficult to get rid of them later on and that learners should not say anything in the target language until they can say it "correctly" may inhibit the learner from taking necessary risks or making guesses. Byrd (2005) points out that based on the needs of each learner, the goals for accuracy and communicative fluency may be different. For example, a tourist obviously has different aims in using a foreign language than a student whose goal is to pass a foreign language exam. Nevertheless, researchers and educators today generally agree that an emphasis on communicative fluency is crucial; however, maintaining the balance between developing such fluency while minimizing learners' errors and maximizing accuracy at the same time may be challenging (Byrd, 2005). Attempts to do so include focus on form(s), implicit and explicit grammar teaching, and using recasting, among other teaching techniques. The interested reader may refer to Cook (2001) and Byrd (2005) for a thorough discussion of these pedagogical issues, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Teachers' Beliefs About Language Learning

Despite the importance of research investigating language teachers' beliefs about language learning, which might have implications for the design and content of second language teacher education programs worldwide (Peacock, 2001), relatively few studies have followed-up on Horwitz's (1985) groundbreaking survey of prospective FL teachers' beliefs about language learning (Allen, 2002); indeed, according to Peacock (2001), there is a "shortage of research" in this area (p. 178). One study that attempted to further the work initiated by Horwitz is Yang's (2000) survey of the beliefs about language learning of 68 prospective EFL primary school teachers in Taiwan. Based on the results, Yang concluded that teacher education programs should pay attention to any erroneous or unrealistic beliefs prospective teachers may hold and confront such beliefs with new information.

Fox (1993) also examined the beliefs about language learning of 147 FL teaching assistants and concluded that trainers should require teaching assistants to explore their beliefs. Along the same lines, Johnson (1994) examined prospective ESL teachers' beliefs by analyzing narrative statements made about their beliefs and by exploring their perceptions of their instructional practices during the practicum teaching experience. Based on the findings, Johnson concluded that teacher education courses must create opportunities for prospective teachers to explore their beliefs about language learning and teaching.

In addition, Harrington and Hertel (2000) administered the FLAS and BALLI to 20 prospective FL teachers at the beginning and the end of two foreign language teacher education methods courses. Results revealed that many of the beliefs remained consistent throughout the courses while some beliefs changed significantly, perhaps

largely due to the ideas presented and discussed in the methods course, according to the researchers. Based on the survey data as well as qualitative data from student belief statements, the authors recommend that language teacher educators provide an opportunity for prospective teachers to examine their implicit beliefs about language learning. On the other hand, Peacock (2001) also investigated changes in 146 prospective ESL teachers' beliefs about language learning by tracking developmental changes over a period of three years, but discouragingly, no significant changes were found. Based on the results of this study, Peacock also concluded that considerable efforts should be made to eliminate any unrealistic beliefs prospective teachers may hold before they start teaching.

The Present Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the beliefs about language learning of EFL university teachers and prospective EFL teachers in Lebanon. More specifically, the study aimed at addressing the following research questions:

1. What are the beliefs of EFL university teachers and prospective EFL teachers in Lebanon about foreign language aptitude, the difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, and the effectiveness of various learning strategies?

2. What other major belief areas are held by EFL university teachers and prospective EFL teachers in Lebanon?

Procedure

Participants

The 31 participants in this study were teachers of English courses ($n = 12$) and prospective EFL teachers enrolled in the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) Teaching Diploma program at an American private institution of higher learning in Lebanon ($n = 19$). The demographic background of the instructors and prospective teachers are summarized in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

Instrument and Data Collection

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. First was a 9-item background questionnaire designed by the researcher in order to obtain background information about the teachers. And second was a 28-item questionnaire (see Appendix), which was an adapted version of the BALLI (Horwitz, 1985). Data was obtained by distributing the questionnaire to 30 English teachers, 12 of whom returned completed questionnaires, and administering it to the 19 prospective EFL teachers. In addition, teachers from both groups were also invited to participate in semi-structured interviews, and two teachers from each group volunteered to participate. The interviews lasted from approximately 50 to 75 minutes.

Table 1

Teachers of English Courses (n = 12)

Gender	Male 0%	Female 100%		
Age	20-29 25%	30-39 17%	40-49 33%	50+ 25%
Teaching Experience	No prior exp. 0%	1-4 yrs. teaching EFL 17%	5-10 yrs teaching EFL 17%	11+ yrs. teaching EFL 67%
Educational Background	B.A. in English language and Teaching Diploma in TEFL 0%	M.A. in English language, literature, or in TEFL 42%	M.A. and Teaching Diploma in TEFL 58%	

Table 2

Prospective EFL Teachers (n = 19)

Gender	Male 0%	Female 100%		
Age	20-29 84%	30-39 11%	40-49 5%	50+ 0%
Teaching Experience	No prior experience 32%	1-4 yrs. teaching EFL 53%	5-10 yrs. teaching EFL 16%	11+ yrs. teaching EFL 0%
Educational Background	B.A. English language and Teaching Diploma in TEFL 100%	M.A. in English language, literature, or TEFL 0%	M.A. and Teaching Diploma in TEFL 0%	

Data Analysis

After summarizing and tabulating the information obtained from the background questionnaire, descriptive statistics (percentages, means, and standard deviations) were computed for the BALLI items. The teachers' responses to the two free response items were also categorized and summarized. In addition, the interview data supplemented the responses obtained from the BALLI in an effort to triangulate the study. Interview transcripts were analyzed qualitatively by developing coding strategies and trying to identify concepts and categories in the data. After preliminary coding categories were established, the transcripts were examined further in order to identify more categories or subcategories. Finally, a set of codes was established and the data were scrutinized and labeled accordingly.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Analyses of the BALLI

In order to allow for a comparison of answers among logically related groups of items, the frequencies of responses, means, and standard deviations are presented according to the four major belief areas outlined by Horwitz (1985): (1) foreign language aptitude, (2) the difficulty of language learning, (3) the nature of language learning, and (4) language learning strategies.

Foreign Language Aptitude

Consistent with a belief about language learning popular in many countries, the overwhelming majority of the teachers surveyed (97%) either agreed or strongly agreed that it is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language, as shown in Table 3. Since in the Lebanese context, the first foreign language learned, typically either English or French, is first taught to students around age six, these Lebanese teachers seem to believe that this language policy adopted by most Lebanese private schools is an effective one. Moreover, many of the teachers also agreed with the statements that everyone can learn to speak a foreign language (87%) and that Lebanese people are good at learning foreign languages (68%). However, about half (55%) of the teachers agreed and only 19% disagreed that some people have a special ability for learning a foreign language, a belief that can obviously influence teachers' expectations of student success in language learning. As will be seen in the section discussing the influence of teaching experience on teachers' beliefs, more experienced teachers were more likely to hold this belief than novice teachers.

Moreover, only 13% of the teachers agreed with the statement that people who speak more than one language are very intelligent, while 52% were neutral, as shown in Table 3. In addition, most of the teachers (72%) disagreed with the statement that people who are good at math or science are not good at learning foreign languages. Finally, concerning beliefs about the relative aptitude of males and females in language learning, 55% of the teachers disagreed while only 13% agreed with the statement that females are better language learners than males.

Table 3

Responses to Questions about Foreign Language Aptitude

ITEMS	1 SD	2 D	3 N	4 A	5* SA	M	SD
1. It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.	0	3	0	36	61**	4.55	0.68
2. Some people are born with a special ability which helps them learn a foreign language.	0	19	26	42	13	3.48	0.96
16. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.	16	39	32	13	0	2.42	0.92
22. People who are good at math or science are not good at learning foreign languages.	23	49	23	7	0	2.13	0.85
24. People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.	10	26	52	10	3	2.71	0.90
25. Lebanese people are good at learning foreign languages.	0	0	32	55	13	3.81	0.65
26. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	0	0	13	58	29	4.16	0.64

Notes:
* 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree. Numbers in table are percentages for each response.
** Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number, and thus may not add up to 100.

The Difficulty of Language Learning

Most teachers (84%) either agreed or strongly agreed that some languages are easier to learn than others, and half of them rated English as an easy or very easy language while the other half rated it as a language of medium difficulty, as shown in Table 4. Interestingly, none of the teachers surveyed seem to believe that English is a difficult language. Moreover, most of the teachers (61%) agreed and few (7%) disagreed with the statement that it is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one. Since in the Lebanese context the majority of students study two foreign languages, namely English and French, this finding suggests that these teachers believe learning English or French as a foreign language facilitates learning the second foreign language later on.

In order to discuss these findings more effectively, a comparison will be made to a study investigating Lebanese students' beliefs about learning English and French. In a survey of 284 Lebanese EFL students, Diab (2006) also found that the overwhelming majority (96%) of the students surveyed believe in the concept of a language learning difficulty hierarchy. Moreover, 66% of the students rated English as an easy or very easy language, while only 1% of the students surveyed rated it as a difficult language. According to Diab, since almost all of these students have studied at least two foreign languages, mainly English and French, this finding indicates that these students hold strong beliefs about the relative difficulty of learning these two foreign languages. Eighty-one percent of the students in Diab's study agreed that it is easier to learn French before learning English, a belief consistent with the popular view in Lebanon that learning the "difficult" language of French at an early age and later learning the "easy" language of English is likely to guarantee proficiency in both French and English. Thus, it is also likely that the Lebanese teachers in the present study believe that learning French before English is "easier" or "better"; consequently, these teachers would have different expectations for students coming from an English-medium versus a French-medium background. Indeed, as revealed in the responses to the open-ended items, one teacher pointed out that French-educated students perform differently than their English-educated counterparts; more specifically, they outperform them in the English class. In the interview, this teacher commented that "it's annoying that most French-educated students do better in communication skills courses than English-educated students."

Finally, the majority of the teachers surveyed (80%) disagreed that it is easier to develop speaking skills than listening comprehension, as shown in Table 4; consistently, 68% agreed while only 13% disagreed that it is easier to read and understand a language than to speak and write it.

Table 4

Responses to Questions about the Difficulty of Language Learning

ITEMS	1 SD	2 D	3 N	4 A	5* SA	M	SD
3. Some languages are easier to learn than others.	0	0	16	45	39**	4.23	0.72
4. English is: 1) a very difficult language, 2) a difficult language, 3) a language of medium difficulty, 4) an easy language, 5) a very easy language.	0	0	50	37	13	3.63	0.72
8. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.	0	7	32	58	3	3.58	0.67
11. If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take him/her to become fluent? 1) less than a year, 2) 1-2 years, 3) 3-5 years, 4) 5-10 years, 5) You can't learn a language in 1 hour a day.	3	23	37	10	27	3.33	1.21
17. It is easier to speak than understand a language.	32	48	10	7	3	2.00	1.00
21. It is easier to read and understand a language than to speak and write it.	0	13	19	55	13	3.68	0.87

Notes:

* Unless otherwise stated in the item, 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree. Numbers in table are percentages for each response.

** Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number, and thus may not add up to 100.

In response to the question, "If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take them to speak the language very well?", teachers' responses ranged from less than a year (3%) to the assertion that one can not learn a language in one hour a day (27%). Discouragingly, 23% of these teachers believe that it would take one to two years to become proficient in a language under the conditions described and 37% believe it would take three to five years. Thus, some of these teachers seem to underestimate the time required in learning a foreign language, implying that they might expect students to become proficient in a foreign language in an unreasonably short period of time. Taken together with the finding that half of these teachers believe that English is an easy or very easy language and none of them rated it as a difficult language, these results suggest that some of these teachers may have unrealistic expectations concerning students' development and attainment of proficiency in their English classes.

The Nature of Language Learning

The teachers surveyed are employed in a private institution and had themselves probably attended private English- and French-medium schools in Lebanon, which are known to provide strong foreign language programs and generally use communication-based approaches to language teaching. Therefore, it was not surprising that they revealed encouraging views of the nature of language learning. For example, as shown in Table 5, most of them disagreed that learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning vocabulary words (75%), grammar rules (68%), or translating from Arabic (97%). Moreover, 61% agreed and only 13% disagreed that learning a foreign language is different from learning other academic subjects. Finally, about half of the teachers surveyed believe it is necessary to know the foreign culture in order to speak a foreign language, while 23% were neutral, and 29% disagreed with this statement.

It is also worth mentioning that three (out of eight) teachers who responded to the open-response items emphasized the importance of exposure to the language and interaction with others in foreign language learning: "It is all about exposure and immersion. If learners have to speak (or read or write or listen to) the language and if they are exposed to it in its different forms they will learn it." One teacher also stressed that it is necessary for students to know about the foreign culture: "It's not enough to learn a foreign language. One has to keep oneself up-to-date with the foreign culture that is changing and emerging so quickly these days. It's cultural literacy that one has to enhance and encourage."

Since teachers who believe that vocabulary words, grammar, and translation are very important parts of language learning are likely to devote much of their teaching time to vocabulary lists, grammar rules, and translation, it is encouraging that most of these teachers did not express such limited views of the nature of language learning, suggesting that they would endorse language learning strategies that are commonly associated with communication-based approaches to language learning.

Table 5

Response to Questions about the Nature of Language Learning

ITEMS	1 SD	2 D	3 N	4 A	5* SA	M	SD
6. It is necessary to know the foreign culture in order to speak a foreign language.	0	29	23	39	10**	3.29	1.01
12. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words.	10	65	10	16	0	2.32	0.87
15. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules.	10	58	16	16	0	2.39	0.88
18. Learning a foreign language is different from learning other school subjects.	0	13	26	58	3	3.52	0.77
19. Learning English is a matter of translating from Arabic.	52	45	3	0	0	1.52	0.57

Notes:

* 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree. Numbers in table are percentages for each response.

** Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number, and thus may not add up to 100.

Language Learning Strategies

As revealed in Table 6, the teachers surveyed generally minimized the importance of accuracy and emphasized communicative fluency instead. For example, 93% of the teachers disagreed that students should not say anything in the target language until they can say it correctly, 84% agreed that it is ok for students to guess if they do not know a word in the foreign language, and 64% disagreed that if students are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning it will be difficult to get rid of them later on. Most of these teachers (77%) also believe that it is better to learn a foreign language in the foreign country.

Table 6

Responses to Questions about Language Learning Strategies

ITEMS	1 SD	2 D	3 N	4 A	5* SA	M	SD
5. It's important to speak a foreign language with an excellent accent.	3	29	32	32	3**	3.03	0.95
7. You shouldn't say anything in the language until you can say it correctly.	32	61	3	0	3	1.81	0.79
9. It is better to learn a foreign language in the foreign country.	0	10	13	48	29	3.97	0.91
10. It's o.k. for students to guess if they don't know a word in the foreign language.	0	3	13	61	23	4.03	0.71
13. It's important that students repeat and practice a lot.	3	0	0	45	52	4.42	0.81
14. If students are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning it will be difficult to get rid of them later on.	16	48	13	19	3	2.45	1.09

Notes:

* 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree. Numbers in table are percentages for each response.

** Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number, and thus may not add up to 100.

Nevertheless, as shown in Table 6, the teachers overwhelmingly (97%) agreed that it's important that students repeat and practice a lot, and they were fairly divided in their opinion regarding the importance of speaking a foreign language "with an excellent accent," suggesting that some of them seem to place great value on pronunciation. Finally, it is important to mention that three (out of eight) teachers who responded to the open-response items emphasized the importance of reading as an essential strategy or skill that we need to foster in students: "Reading is one of the best ways to learn, the earlier one starts the better – a language grows on you!" Interestingly, one teacher highlighted the importance of reading in one's native language in foreign language learning: "I believe that cultivating the habit of reading in one's own native language will facilitate embracing the 'other culture' and therefore learning its language. I therefore encourage learners of English to expose themselves to different kinds of readings in their native and non-native languages." This particular insight falls in line with research evidence emphasizing the importance of native language literacy in predicting and even promoting proficiency in a second language (Dornyei, 2006).

Analyses of the Interview Data

The five major categories or belief areas developed from the qualitative analyses of the interview data were: (1) the importance of learner variables in language learning, (2) the difficulty of language learning, (3) the influence of environmental factors in language learning, (4) the importance of accuracy in language learning, and (5) characteristics of successful language learners and teachers.

Importance of Learner Variables in Language Learning

The teachers who participated in the interviews seemed to agree that motivation is an important variable influencing language learning while gender and intelligence are unimportant ones. However, as shown in the following excerpts from the interviews, the teachers were divided in their opinions on the importance of age, aptitude, and personality.

- *Age, no* [it doesn't play a role in language learning]!
- *I have to agree that the earlier one starts the better but I have no explanation.*
- *Not aptitude, because it's like saying we should give up on the ones who don't have it.*
- *Aptitude*, yes [plays a role]! *I think that some people are endowed with this flair for learning languages, but it's not a big factor.*
- *It* [Personality] *can* [play a major role in language learning], *confidence plays a major role…*
- [Personality may play a role], *definitely more than gender, but not a very important factor.*

Moreover, interestingly, one practicing teacher pointed out that knowing about one's own native language helps in learning a foreign language while one prospective teacher stated that one's native language may hinder foreign language learning, more specifically may prevent the learner from attaining the right "accent."

- *If you know a lot about your native language, syntax, diction, this helps in learning the new language, even when the two languages are not similar, like English and Arabic.*
- *Arabic can hinder learning the right accent in English. I've often heard students say "I can never have the right accent because I'm a native speaker of Arabic."*

Difficulty of Language Learning

As shown in the following excerpts from the interviews, the teachers who participated in the interviews were not in agreement regarding either the existence of a language learning difficulty hierarchy or, in contrast to the survey data, whether English is an "easy" or "difficult" language. Interestingly, the prospective teachers believed that that some languages are more difficult than others while the practicing teachers refused this belief. One teacher also pointed out that the difficulty of a foreign language depends on what languages the learner already knows.

- *Yes* [some languages are more difficult than others]! *I cannot learn French, because of the verbs, how to conjugate… English is not that hard.*
- *No, not really* [some languages are not more difficult than others]… *different, but not more difficult.*
- *English, which is considered one of the easiest languages, is very difficult. There's a non-existing threshold for English: it undergoes so many cultural and idiomatic changes, the threshold is always beyond reach. I sometimes discuss this with my [English] 100 students, how the language is always changing.*
- *Not in the absolute* [we cannot generalize that some languages are more difficult than others], *because they're all acquired as native languages by children, but for a given individual, of course there are easier languages to learn, for example Spanish will be easy for me, [because] French in this community is used a lot.*

Influence of Environmental Factors in Language Learning

As shown in the following excerpts from the interviews, the teachers unanimously believed that language input and exposure is essential for foreign language learning, and one practicing teacher emphasized the importance of reading, in either the native or the target language, as an essential strategy for improving the latter.

- [Language input] *is important, the more they've exposed to the language, the better. NOT necessarily in an immersion program!*

- *Reading is most effective… reading literature, reading comics, anything…*
- *Having books at home, in either the native language or target language, and cultivating a habit of reading and discussing mature things from personal experience not from teaching…* [can help language learning]

Moreover, the teachers emphasized that practice, particularly oral communication outside the classroom, is essential in language learning:

- *Oral communication, practice with peers, friends* [is very important for language learning]…
- [Practice is] *important, if they talk to people in English themselves, it would be very beneficial.*
- [Practice is] *very important … communication, everyday, watching movies, listening to English songs… Beyond class, they should integrate it with their lifestyle…*

Finally, as shown in the following excerpts, the teachers also discussed the role of error correction in language learning. One prospective teacher believed that error correction is inappropriate outside the classroom, and the practicing teachers stated that it could be either positive or negative inside the classroom, depending on the classroom activity and the purpose of the utterance. One prospective teacher also pointed out that students generally prefer and expect that corrections come only from the teacher, an important observation since it implies that these teachers are not likely to use peer correction for fear that their students may have negative attitudes towards receiving feedback from peers.

- *It* [error correction] *can be helpful in the classroom, outside the classroom a person may be offended…others may put you down and that may influence your learning negatively.*
- *It should be up for the teacher to decide whether it's positive or negative to correct; if it's negative for emotional reasons, you can wait until later. Every time there is assessment of the situation…*
- *Some of it* [error correction] *is inevitable and it's related to the purpose. If they're brainstorming, I don't care about errors then. If we're having a class discussion, I don't care about their pronunciation, because I'm interested in WHAT they're saying. In presentations, 3-4 minutes, we comment on delivery and the language. I think it's important then, to show what they're doing wrong. In written work, I keep the errors until the end. If the error interferes with meaning, I correct it. If it's a high frequency mistake, I correct it, for example, "informations," many times I correct it.*
- *And many times I try to involve the whole group, so the correction doesn't come only from the teacher, but often they want it ONLY from the teacher. Again, I think it's cultural in terms of school culture and maybe home culture, authority figure…*

Importance of Accuracy in Language Learning

Data from the interviews also revealed that the teachers, particularly the instructors, hold realistic and encouraging beliefs about the importance of having "an authentic accent" and the emphasis on communicative fluency as opposed to accuracy. The prospective teachers who participated in the interviews, however, believed that "accent" is not important "at the beginner level" and may therefore expect students at higher levels to attain an "authentic" accent.

- *At the beginner level it* [accent]*'s not so important. You have to make mistakes to learn from them.* [Students say] *"I want an authentic accent," but content is more important than accuracy.*

- [Accent is] *not as important as fluency, getting your message across, less or more important in certain situations. For example in social or academic settings it's more important than ordering a hamburger! It becomes accuracy for image, not just for grammatical accuracy.*

- *I think it* [the importance of "accent"] *is a matter of how you see yourself, related to your identity and how others see you. Do you want to be a native speaker of English or not? It also depends on how you're going to use the language. In a professional business context, as a tourist…If I want to act, I need voice training, accent training. From the perspective of students and the community, that's the first thing they see, the easiest aspect to detect, but again, which accent? I think there's more tolerance now for different accents.*

Characteristics of Successful Language Learners and Teachers

The final category that emerged from the qualitative analyses is the teachers' beliefs about the characteristics of successful language learners and teachers. Regarding learners, the teachers emphasized that motivation, flexibility, risk-taking, exposure to the target language—culture and literature in particular—and hard work and practice are all essential ingredients in making a learner successful. As for successful language teachers, the prospective teachers stated that they should be patient and fair, general characteristics that could apply to teachers of any subject. The practicing teachers pointed out several interesting characteristics they believe a good language teacher should possess:

- [A good language teacher should be] *sensitive to students' needs, not to have any fixation in any language learning strategy, be flexible… Be up to date in linguistic requirements, exposure to the language, how language is changing as a living creature… Be knowledgeable!*

- [A good language teacher] *should love languages. Open-mindedness! I believe that mistakes of students are very educational for the teacher, they could open the teachers' eyes as to what to do differently. Creativity, some imagination, and definitely always* hard work!

Limitations

Before drawing conclusions based on the findings of this study, a number of limitations should be mentioned. First, findings based on this sample of Lebanese prospective and university EFL teachers obviously cannot be generalized to all EFL teachers, and the response rate of the practicing teachers (12 out of 30) may not be sufficient to make generalizations. Secondly, the general shortcomings of self-report measures should be mentioned, mainly the ability and willingness of participants to respond accurately and conscientiously to questionnaire items and interview questions. Finally, it is important to point out that the four interviewed teachers were self-selected; nevertheless, based on their background variables, they seem to be typical members of each group. More specifically, the two practicing teachers both had more than 11 years of experience teaching EFL, one was in her forties and the second older than 50, and one had an M.A. degree in English language and the second an M.A. degree in literature along with a teaching diploma in TEFL. As for the prospective teachers, both were in their twenties, one had no prior experience teaching EFL, and the second had two years experience. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, these background variables make the four teachers fairly good representatives of each group.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the beliefs about language learning of EFL university teachers and prospective EFL teachers in Lebanon. Keeping in mind the above mentioned limitations of the study, three main conclusions can be drawn based on the findings. First, the Lebanese teachers in this study hold a variety of beliefs about language learning, some of which may be conducive to the language learning and teaching situation, such as the teachers' beliefs about the nature of language learning, while others may constitute an impediment to successful language learning and teaching, such as some of their beliefs about the difficulty of learning a foreign language. In addition to the descriptive analyses based on the teachers' responses to the BALLI, qualitative analyses of the interview data revealed five major belief areas. Thus, the findings of this study support the general contention that language teachers may hold certain beliefs about language learning that may have an impact on their instructional practices (Harrington & Hertel, 2000; Horwitz, 1985; Peacock, 2001; Richards & Lockhart, 1996; Yang, 2000).

Therefore, language teachers should make an effort to become aware of their beliefs about language learning and of the influence such beliefs may have on language learning and teaching situations. Activities such as completing the teacher version of the BALLI followed by holding informal discussions concerning various beliefs about the nature of language learning and what constitutes successful language learning and teaching may provide a valuable opportunity for EFL teachers, particularly those with less teaching

experience, to become aware of different opinions. For instance, some teachers in this study seemed to underestimate the time required to become proficient in a foreign language, and one prospective teacher stated during the interview that students prefer and expect that corrections come only from the teacher. Therefore, future teacher education workshop sessions for the particular teachers in this context should address these particular beliefs. If teachers' responses are discussed openly, those holding unrealistic beliefs or expectations concerning students' learning and preferences will realize that some beliefs they have taken for granted may not be held by other teachers.

Similarly, in line with previous research investigating teachers' beliefs about language learning (Fox, 1993; Harrington & Hertel, 2000; Horwitz, 1985; Johnson, 1994; Peacock, 2001; Yang, 2000), the findings of this study suggest that teacher education programs encourage prospective teachers to explore their beliefs, pay attention to any unrealistic beliefs or misconceptions prospective teachers may hold, and confront such beliefs with new information and knowledge. The interview data in this study revealed that prospective teachers believed that advanced language learners should have an "authentic" accent; such an unrealistic belief can be easily addressed if language teacher education programs and language teacher-training workshops include a session addressing prospective teachers' beliefs. TEFL methods class instructors can also use instruments such as the BALLI, preferably at the beginning of the semester, as a teaching instrument and a discussion tool in order to systematically assess prospective teachers' beliefs about language learning. Ideally, methods instructors can use the information obtained about the prospective teachers' beliefs to modify the course content and presentation most effectively for that particular group, focusing on any particular unrealistic beliefs teachers may hold and confronting such beliefs with new information.

References

Allen, L. (2002). Teachers' pedagogical beliefs and the standards for foreign language learning. *Foreign Language Annals, 35*, 518-29.

Byrd, P. (2005). Instructed grammar. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 545-562). London: Routledge.

Cook, V. (2001). *Second language learning and language teaching* (3rd ed.). London: Arnold.

Diab, R. L. (2006). University students' beliefs about learning English and French in Lebanon. *System, 34*(1), 80-96.

Dornyei, Z. (2006). Individual differences in second language acquisition. *AILA Review, 19*, 42-68.

Fox, C. (1993). Communicative competence and beliefs about language among graduate teaching assistants in French. *Modern Language Journal, 77,* 313-23.

Harrington, S. & Hertel, T. (2000). Foreign language methods students' beliefs about language learning and teaching. *Texas Papers in Foreign Language Education, 5*, 53-68.

Horwitz, E. K. (1985). Using student beliefs about language learning and teaching in the foreign language methods course. *Foreign Language Annals, 18,* 333-340.

Horwitz, E. K. (1987). Surveying student beliefs about language learning. In A. Wenden & J. Rubin (Eds.), *Learner strategies in language learning* (pp. 119-129). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Horwitz, E. K. (1988). The beliefs about language learning of beginning university foreign language students. *Modern Language Journal, 72*, 283-294.

Jenkins, J. (2000). *The phonology of English as an international language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Johnson, K. (1994). The emerging beliefs and instructional practices of pre-service English as a Second Language teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 10*, 439-452.

Peacock, M. (2001). Pre-service ESL teachers' beliefs about second language learning: A longitudinal study. *System, 29*, 177-195.

Richards, J. & and Lockhart, C. (1996). *Reflective teaching in second language classrooms.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Singleton, M. & Ryan, L. (2004). *Language acquisition: The age factor* (2nd ed.). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Tarone, E. (2005). Speaking in a second language. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 485 -502). London: Routledge.

Yang, N. (2000). Teachers' beliefs about language learning and teaching: A cross-cultural comparison. *Texas Papers in Foreign Language Education, 5*, 39-52.

About the Author

Rula Diab is Assistant Professor of English at the Lebanese American University. She is interested in language learners' beliefs, preferences, and attitudes, particularly regarding second language writing. Her research has appeared in System, TESL Reporter, TESL Canada Journal, TESL-EJ, *and the* English Teaching Forum.

Appendix

Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory-Teacher Version
(Adapted from Horwitz, 1985)

Part II. Below are beliefs that some people have about learning foreign languages. Read each statement and then decide if you: (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) disagree, or (5) strongly disagree. Questions 4 and 11 are slightly different and you should mark them as indicated. There are no right or wrong answers. We are simply interested in your opinions.

REMEMBER:

(1) strongly agree   (2) agree   (3) neither agree nor disagree

(4) disagree   (5) strongly disagree

1. It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.

   1   2   3   4   5

2. Some people are born with a special ability which helps them learn a foreign language.

   1   2   3   4   5

3. Some languages are easier to learn than others.

   1   2   3   4   5

4. English is:

   a) a very difficult language

   b) a difficult language

   c) a language of medium difficulty

   d) an easy language

   e) a very easy language

5. It's important to speak a foreign language with an excellent accent.

   1   2   3   4   5

6. It is necessary to know the foreign culture in order to speak a foreign language.

   1   2   3   4   5

7. You shouldn't say anything in the language until you can say it correctly.

   1   2   3   4   5

8. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.

    1   2   3   4   5

9. It is better to learn a foreign language in the foreign country.

    1   2   3   4   5

10. It's ok for students to guess if they don't know a word in the foreign language.

    1   2   3   4   5

11. If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take him/her to become fluent?

    a) less than a year

    b) 1-2 years

    c) 3-5 years

    d) 5-10 years

    e) You can't learn a language in one hour a day.

12. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words.

    1   2   3   4   5

13. It's important that students repeat and practice a lot.

    1   2   3   4   5

14. If students are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning it will be difficult to get rid of them later on.

    1   2   3   4   5

15. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules.

    1   2   3   4   5

16. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.

    1   2   3   4   5

17. It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language.

    1   2   3   4   5

18. Learning a foreign language is different from learning other school subjects.

    1   2   3   4   5

19. Learning English is a matter of translating from Arabic.

    1   2   3   4   5

20. If students learn to speak English very well, it will help them get a good job.

    1   2   3   4   5

21. It is easier to read and understand a language than to speak and write it.

     1   2   3   4   5

22. People who are good at math and science are not good at learning foreign languages.

     1   2   3   4   5

23. Lebanese people think that it is important to speak a foreign language.

     1   2   3   4   5

24. People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.

     1   2   3   4   5

25. Lebanese people are good at learning foreign languages.

     1   2   3   4   5

26. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.

     1   2   3   4   5

27. Do you have any other opinions regarding foreign language learning and teaching?

28. Do you have any other opinions regarding learning and teaching English as a foreign language?