Learner Beliefs on L2 Attitudes and Motivation: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

This small-scale exploratory study investigated a group of French university students' beliefs about the English language and English language learning, and the impact these beliefs had on the learners' L2 attitudes and motivation. The study employed a three-phased research paradigm. The first phase consisted of a mind-showering activity and group discussions, which aimed to elicit the initial information. The second phase comprised a questionnaire whose items were formulated by using the information elicited during the first phase. Finally, focus-group interviews were employed to provide in-depth information and, explain and cross-check the questionnaire data. The data obtained indicated that, although these learners had fairly negative dispositions towards the English language and English language learning, the great majority perceived English as a requisite for their studies and for their future careers. The findings also suggested that the participants mostly had lower perceived L2 competence and lower perceived willingness to communicate in the L2.

Keywords: attitudes; beliefs; learner perceptions; motivation; willingness to communicate

1 Introduction

It is commonly argued that understanding language learners' beliefs is vital in order to be able to adopt appropriate language education policies and plan and implement consistent language instruction (Benson and Lor, 1999; Castellotti and Moore, 2002; Horwitz, 1999; Riley, 1997; Sakui and Gaies, 1999; Wenden, 1999). Horwitz (1988) maintained that classroom realities that contradict learners' expectations about learning may lead to disappointment and ultimately interfere with learning. She suggested that teachers draw on findings to facilitate more effective instructional planning and implementation. She also added that classroom practices which take learner beliefs into consideration have the potential to change learners' (dysfunctional/incorrect) beliefs.

2 Literature review

In the SLL/FLL literature language learners' beliefs have appeared under different rubrics (e.g. learner representations, conceptions, metacognitive knowledge and so forth) and definitions (e.g. see Barcelos, 2003; Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005; Gabillon, 2005). However, in spite of conceptual differences and theoretical perspectives most researchers have described beliefs as 'psychologically held views about the world that individuals feel to be true' (e.g. Benson and Lor, 1999; Pajares and Schunk, 2002; Williams and Burden, 1997; Zeldin and Pajares, 2000). A review of the learner belief literature indicates that learner beliefs are 'context-based'; therefore, they should not be viewed independently of context (see e.g. Alanen, 2003; Benson and Lor, 1999; Dufva, 2003; Wenden, 1999; White, 1999). It is also maintained that learners' beliefs are shaped by their 'prior experiences' (Benson and Lor, 1999; White, 1999). Learner beliefs are identified to be either 'functional' or 'dysfunctional' (see Benson and Lor, 1999), or either 'correct' or 'incorrect' (see Horwitz, 1988; Riley, 1997). According to Wenden (1999) beliefs are 'value-related' and are 'held tenaciously' (Wenden, 1999, p. 436). However, recent L2 belief research studies (which have examined L2 learner beliefs mostly from sociocultural perspectives) have shown that learner beliefs can also be 'flexible; therefore, they can be mediated' (e.g. Alanen, 2003; Dufva, 2003).

Attitudes are considered to be closely linked to individuals' beliefs and to be based upon their experiences. They are usually regarded as a positive or negative disposition toward an object, situation, or behavior. According to Ajzen, attitude refers to the degree of the individual's favorable or unfavorable evaluation of the behavior in question (Ajzen, 2001, 2002). Simply put, attitude concerns individuals' evaluation of their experience or the learning situation/outcome before they actually engage in the learning experience. Thus, it is assumed that aggregates of negative beliefs, as a rule, lead to negative attitudes and aggregates of positive beliefs lead to positive attitudes towards the behavior or object in question.

Motivation, which 'gives rise to people's actions', is considered to be directly linked with people's beliefs, attitudes, and goals. Ryan and Deci (2000) defined motivation as "…to be moved to do something…impetus or inspiration to act…" Thus an individual who feels "…no impetus or inspiration to act…" is considered unmotivated (p. 54). Ryan and Deci (2000) maintained that motivation is not a 'unitary phenomenon' and that individuals have 'different amounts' and 'different types' of motivation. To define motivation, Deci and Ryan's self determination theory (1985) offers two broad types of motivation: intrinsic (doing something because it is inherently interesting and enjoyable) and extrinsic (doing something for its instrumental value such as to get good grades, a job etc.). Intrinsic motivation has been considered a catalyst which results in high-quality learning. Extrinsic motivation, on the other

hand, has been regarded as inefficient. Ryan and Deci (2000) asserted that certain forms of extrinsic motivation can be active and effective. They argued that extrinsic motivation, where learners appreciate the value and usefulness of a task, can be effective. In the same vein, Gardner (2001) asserted that motivation can be determined by instrumental factors and that individuals can be interested in learning the L2 for pragmatic reasons. Gardner (2001), and Csizér and Dörnyei, (2005) referred to the influence of these instrumental factors as instrumental motivation (instrumentality). This concept, like extrinsic motivation, is mainly used to refer to perceived usefulness of L2 proficiency (e.g. to get a job).

It is commonly argued that learners' beliefs, which are formed through their prior experiences, guide them in their conceptualizations of language learning and influence the approaches they adopt to L2 learning (Benson and Lor, 1999; White, 1999). Riley (1997) stated that subscription to any of these beliefs will have a direct consequence on the way learners learn. He maintained that although some of these beliefs can be considered 'wrong' by specialists in second language learning (SLL) and foreign language learning (FLL) they are still meaningful because they reflect the 'subjective reality', the 'truth' from the learners' point of view (Riley, 1997). Benson and Lor (1999) maintained that language teachers need not only know what beliefs learners hold about learning but they also need to know whether these beliefs are 'functional' or 'dysfunctional' in order to be able to influence learners' attitudes and behaviors.

Relevant research on student learning has asserted that the beliefs that learners develop and hold to be true about their capabilities and skills they possess have an immediate impact on their attitudes and motivation. Pajares and Schunk (2002) suggested that research should focus on learner beliefs in order to understand why learners prefer certain activities and not certain others. Zeldin and Pajares (2000) asserted that learners who believe that they do not have the required skills will not be motivated to engage in tasks in which those skills are required and these beliefs about their competencies will affect "…the choices they make, the effort they put forth, their inclinations to persist at certain tasks, and their resiliency in the face of failure." (Zeldin and Pajares, 2000, p. 215). Similarly, Wenden (1995) maintained that learners choose to engage in activities when they believe that they have sufficient competence to fulfil the task. Empirical findings have also demonstrated that beliefs that language learners hold about target foreign language and its culture affect their attitudes towards that language and together with other variables play a role in their L2 motivation (Csizér and Dörnyei, 2005; Gardner, 2001; Gardner, Masgoret, Tennant, and Mihic, 2004; Masgoret and Gardner, 2003).

Dörnyei and Otto (1998) in their process model of L2 motivation emphasized the influence of L2 learners' beliefs and attitudes on their motivations. They explained that before engaging in any task learners weigh the feasibility of their potential actions based on a number of factors such as self-efficacy beliefs, perceived goal difficulty, perceived anxiety and perceived L2 competence. MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, and Noels (1998) argued that the ultimate goal of any L2 learning situation should be to produce learners who seek out communication opportunities and who are willing to communicate in L2. Clément, Baker, and MacIntyre (2003) claimed that high perceived L2 competence and low anxiety increase willingness to communicate (WTC).

Conducting L2 learner belief research proved to pose some problems as regards the research methodologies used. Some SLL/FLL scholars have been highly critical of using questionnaires and quantitative means of data analysis in this area (e.g. Alanen, 2003; Barcelos, 2003; Benson and Lor, 1999; Dufva, 2003). These scholars maintained that questionnaires ask participants to choose from ideas which are not theirs. According to these

scholars research based on questionnaires and surveys aim at explanation and generalization and would not be sufficient to understand the complexity of learners' beliefs and what each belief means to different individuals. Thus many scholars recommend the use of various research tools and both qualitative and quantitative means of data analysis. Sakui and Gaies (1999) claimed that the questionnaire data provides limited information on learners' beliefs. Thus in their study they used interviews to complement and explain the questionnaire data. They discovered that the interviews allowed the learners to reveal the reasons behind their beliefs which were not addressed in the questionnaire. They also asserted that the interview data complemented the questionnaire data and provided them with the necessary data triangulation.

3 Aim of the study

This small-scale exploratory study aimed to investigate a group of French university students' beliefs about the English language and English language learning. The study also further sought to find out possible links between the beliefs the learners held and the impact these beliefs might have on: a) the learners' attitudes towards the English language and English language learning; and b) the motivational compositions the learners used.

4 Methodology

4.1 Participants

Sixty-two L2 learners participated in the study. The participants, except for one female, were all male French students who were studying at a two-year technical university program in an IUT (Institut Universitaire de Technologie) to become technicians. The participants' ranged from 18 to 22 years of age, from six to nine years of English language learning experience, and from lower intermediate to intermediate levels of English. No special selection procedures were applied. Joining the groups was done on voluntary basis.

4.2 Research instruments and data processing

The study comprised three phases: a) Phase one comprised a mind-showering activity--listing what comes to mind about a theme or topic -- and group discussions. 28 students participated in the mind-showering and group discussion activities (these 28 students also accepted to participate in Phase two and Phase three); b) Phase two consisted of a questionnaire. 62 participants (including the 28 students from Phase one) participated in the second phase; c) Phase three comprised focus-group interviews. 28 students who were also the members in Phase one and three participated in this last phase, as well.

4.2.1 Mind-showering activity and group discussions (n= 28)

The mind-showering activity and group discussions took place in November 2004. This phase aimed to elicit initial information on the participants' beliefs about the English language and English language learning. The data obtained in this phase is used to construct the belief questionnaire used in this study. At this stage the participants were asked to write either in French or English; and write down anything they thought would be relevant to the topic. The activity continued as far as the learners had something to write about.

Right after the mind-showering activity, during the same session, the group discussions took place. The participants were set into smaller groups (4-5 participants) and were asked to express their opinions and feelings about learning English and the English language (a tape recorder was placed by each group). The data gathered through the mind-showering activity and group discussions were analyzed qualitatively. A coding technique was used to organize the data into categories. That is, the group discussions were transcribed and the recurring themes (at least four occurrences) were grouped under categories. Similar procedure was applied to the written data gathered via the mind-showering activity. The information obtained through the mind-showering activity and the group discussions provided the initial data on some beliefs the learners had. After the coding the following broad categories emerged:

- The participants' beliefs about the English language.

- The participants' beliefs about English language learning.

- The participants' motives for learning English.

- The participants' beliefs about the L2 language skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) and the other components of L2 learning (vocabulary and grammar).

- The participants' beliefs about using L1 in the classroom.

4.2.2 Questionnaire (n= 62)

In the second phase, which took place in May 2005, a 23-item Likert type scale questionnaire was designed by using the formerly elicited data. That is, the themes obtained during the mind-showering activity and the group discussions were formulated and the final scale items were selected from this pool to devise the questionnaire.

Although the questionnaire used in this study kept to the participant's stated beliefs and the themes obtained from these beliefs (see Phase one above), the format and content of Horwitz's BALLI (Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory--1988) was also studied before constructing the questionnaire. Thus the relevant items from the BALLI (the items which shared similarities with the participant learners' stated beliefs) were adapted and included in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was piloted to check whether the format and the items of the questionnaire were clear to the participants. After the piloting the revised final copy of the questionnaire was administered.

The questionnaires were distributed to sixty-two students who accepted to be the respondents. The students filled out the questionnaires in class with the researcher present to answer any questions and collect questionnaires (all 23 items were responded by all). The data obtained through the questionnaires were analyzed with the aid of descriptive statistics. The total percentages of responses to the items were calculated and the results were presented as bar charts.

4.2.3 Focus-group interviews (n= 28)

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) asserted that using focus-group interviews (interviewing more than one person at a time) provides more in-depth information and offers significantly greater coverage than an interview with one individual. They maintained that topics such as perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes are better discussed in smaller groups of people who know each other.

Focus-group interviews were conducted in June 2005 after the questionnaire data were analyzed. For the focus-group interviews the participants were arranged into small groups (5-6 participants). The focus-group interviews used the themes obtained during the mind-showering activity and group discussions (the questionnaire used the same themes). During the interviews further on-the-spot questions were asked to elicit in-depth information, clarify points and understand what each belief meant to different individuals, and how these beliefs related to one another. During these focus-group interviews the researcher asked questions, encouraged participation, and took notes (the interviews were also recorded). She also let the discussions continue as long as the participants had something to say, and interfered only when she needed further clarification or information on the topic or to encourage group dynamic and to keep the pace when there was a pause. From time to time she also checked whether all the group members shared the same beliefs, and whether these beliefs meant the same to different individuals.

The data gathered through the focus-group interviews were analyzed qualitatively. The focus group interviews were transcribed and the recurring themes (at least four occurrences) were grouped under relevant categories. The same data then reorganized under subcategories (such as 'perceived significance of different L2 skills', 'perceived L2 competence' etc.). The focus-group interviews served a threefold purpose: a) to cross-check and explain the questionnaire data; b) to provide in-depth information on these learner's stated beliefs; c) and to understand what each belief might meant to different individuals.

5 Findings

The overall data--the written records from the mind-showering activity, the explanations given by the participants during the group discussions and the focus-group interviews, and the questionnaire data--and relevant EFL/ESL literature were used to interpret the results.

5.1 Section one: The participants' beliefs about the English language and English language learning

The responses to the questionnaire overtly indicated that the great majority of the participants (92 %) believed that spending some time in an English speaking country (Figure 1-Question 1) would contribute to the betterment of their English (see Figure 1). The focus-group interview data revealed that the underlying reason for this (positive sounding) belief was actually linked to the learners' perceptions that formal classroom learning is not adequate for language learning. Many participants stated that one could learn a foreign language well only in a country where the language is spoken. The following extracts (the original extracts were in French), which were taken from the focus-group interviews, may help explain what this belief represented to some participant learners (see Extract 1):

Extract 1

S1: I've been learning English for eight years and I still can't speak it. Some people spend a year or two in a foreign country and master the language completely.

S2: When you live in a foreign country you can learn the language even in the streets. The language is everywhere.

S3: For us English is not as important as other subjects. To learn it we need to go to the country where it is spoken."

S4: English for one or two hours a week!! Not enough to learn it.

Figure 1. The participants' beliefs about the English language and English language learning (n= 62)
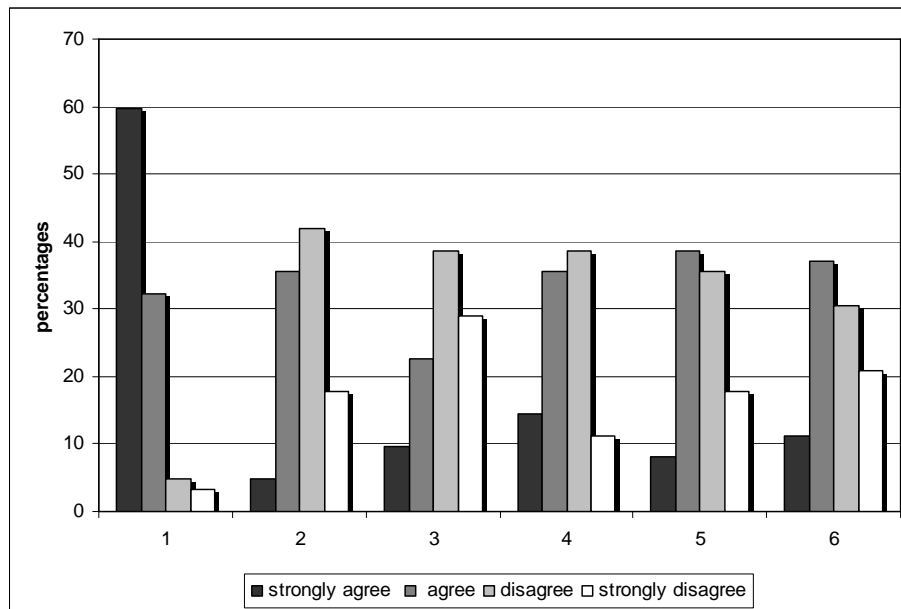
Note: Questions: 1) Spending some time in an English speaking country would be useful for me; 2) English sounds nice to the ear; 3) I learn English because it is a compulsory part of my school's curriculum; 4) Speaking to an English speaking person is a pleasure; 5) Speaking in English is a pleasure; 6) Learning English is a pleasure.

The questionnaire data indicated that among these learners many did not perceive English as a nice language (60 %) (English pronunciation, rhythm, sounds etc.) (see Figure 1-Question 2). Some participants presented this belief as a reason for their dislike for English language learning. Some others, on the other hand, expressed their preference for other foreign languages (see Table 1).

Table 1.

The participants' beliefs about the English language (n= 28)

Perceived indisposition	Perceived difficulty
English doesn't sound nice (n= 10)	The English accent (rhythm) is difficult to understand (n= 8)
The English language sounds strange (n= 4)	
I don't like English. I prefer Spanish, Italian, (French) etc. (n= 5)	(I don't like the English language) I find the pronunciation very difficult (n= 4)

However, 68 % of the participants asserted that they were not learning English just because it was a compulsory part of their school curriculum (Figure 1-Question 3). During the focus group interviews the majority of the participants claimed that learning English was not a matter of choice, but a matter of necessity for them. Many expressed extrinsic interest and maintained that English is an international language and it would be useful for them to succeed in their studies and to find a job (see also Section two-Questions 1 and 2). A few students also expressed intrinsic interest in the English language itself and a few others expressed intrinsic interest in the L2 learning tasks used in their classes (see Table 2).

Table 2.

The participants' positive beliefs about learning English (n= 28)

Extrinsic interest	Intrinsic interest in the L2
English will be useful for my career (n= 10)	I like talking in English (n= 4)
English is useful for my studies (n= 10)	I want to be able to talk in English (n= 5)
English is an international language (n= 6)	I want to understand English songs (n= 6)
Learning English is a must for everybody (n= 4)	I want to understand the English speaking people (n= 7)
English is the language of technology (n= 9)	**Intrinsic interest in L2 tasks**
	We do computer assisted language learning activities (e.g. the internet, online dictionaries, online activities etc.) (n= 7)
	We have the opportunity to talk in English (n= 6)

The questionnaire data illustrated that more than half of the participants (52 %) had fairly negative dispositions and attitudes towards English language learning (Figure 1-Question 7). Different participants attributed these negative beliefs to different reasons. The most significant attributions centered mainly on perceived L2 difficulty, lower perceived L2 competence, L2 task enjoyment, and perceived lack of task relevance. Heavy course load and progress also appeared to be important factors contributing to these negative beliefs (see Table 3).

Questions 4 and 5 asked about the participants' willingness to communicate in English [Figure 1-Question 4: Speaking to the English speaking people is pleasure (71 %); Figure 1-Question 5: Speaking in English is pleasure (47 %)]. The focus-group interviews revealed that these participants believed that speaking to a native speaker of English (outside of the classroom) would be more enjoyable (although only five out of 28 had ever talked to an English speaking person).

Table 3.

The participants' negative beliefs about learning English (n= 28)

Perceived difficulty	Perceived lack of competence
English is difficult to understand (n= 5)	I make a lot of mistakes (n= 6)
English is difficult to speak (n= 7)	I'm not good at English (n= 8)
English pronunciation is difficult (n= 8)	My pronunciation is awful etc.(n= 9)
Lower perceived L2 task enjoyment	**Perceived lack of relevance**
Learning English is not interesting, enjoyable etc. (n= 7)	Languages can be better learnt in a country where they are spoken (n= 4)
I don't like learning (English) (n= 4)	Technical school students need technical English (n= 6)
I don't like speaking in English (n= 5)	Our major subjects are more important than English (n= 4)
Perceived lack of progress	
(I have been learning English for more than eight years and…) my English has not progressed much (n= 6)	I don't think I'll really need English after I finish school (I'll work and live in France) (n= 4)
Heavy course load	There are not many English speaking people in France (we don't really need to use English very often) (n= 4)
We have a lot of courses and just not enough time to learn English (n= 4)	

Thus, the data obtained during the focus-group interviews suggested that formal language learning context, perceived difficulty, perceived L2 anxiety, lower perceived L2 competence, perceived importance of correct L2 performance are interconnected and interacting features contributing to the learners' lower perceived L2 enjoyment and their decreased L2 willingness to communicate (WTC) (see Extract 2 and also Table 3).

Extract 2

S1: (I don't like talking in English)…because I cannot. I cannot say what I want to say. I don't know enough vocabulary. My grammar is awful. [Group agreement]

S2: When I talk others make fun of my pronunciation.

S1: Me, as well… I sound funny too.

S3: I don't like talking in the classroom.

R: Why?

S3: I make a lot of mistakes. I care less about my mistakes when I talk to someone elsewhere.

S4: I always try to use the vocabulary and grammar I am sure of but I still sound stupid.

The focus-group interviews also revealed that this particular group of learners had strong inclinations towards risk avoidance. Many of the interviewed participants revealed that they did not feel comfortable when they made mistakes. In the light of the findings we can assume that, combined with other factors, risk avoidance might cause hindrance in learners' advancement and enjoyment of language learning (see Oxford and Shearin, 1994). Thus,

these learners' risk avoidance can also be considered a dysfunctional L2 attitude affecting the learners' L2 performance and enjoyment. Ely (1986) found that risk-taking positively affected learner participation. Empirical studies have also illustrated that risk-takers, in terms of language learning, progress more quickly.

5.2 Section two: The participants' motives for learning English

In the previous section more than half of the participant learners appeared to have fairly negative beliefs regarding the English language and English language learning (e.g. not liking English, not enjoying English classes and talking in English, etc.) (see Figure 1). However, in this section the great majority of the participants perceived learning English as useful for their studies (98 %) (Figure 2-Question 1) and for their future careers (90 %) (Figure 2-Question 2 see also Table 2 in Section one). Some of the participants attributed their lower perceived motivation mainly to having a lot of courses to study, not having enough time to learn English and perceived lack of task relevance (not studying enough technical learning materials) and significance of learning this language. Some participants explained that, although in most cases English is a prerequisite to get a job, after admission to a post the language is rarely used (e.g. 'I will rarely use English in the future') (see also Table 3 in Section one).

Figure 2. The participants' motives for learning English (n= 62)
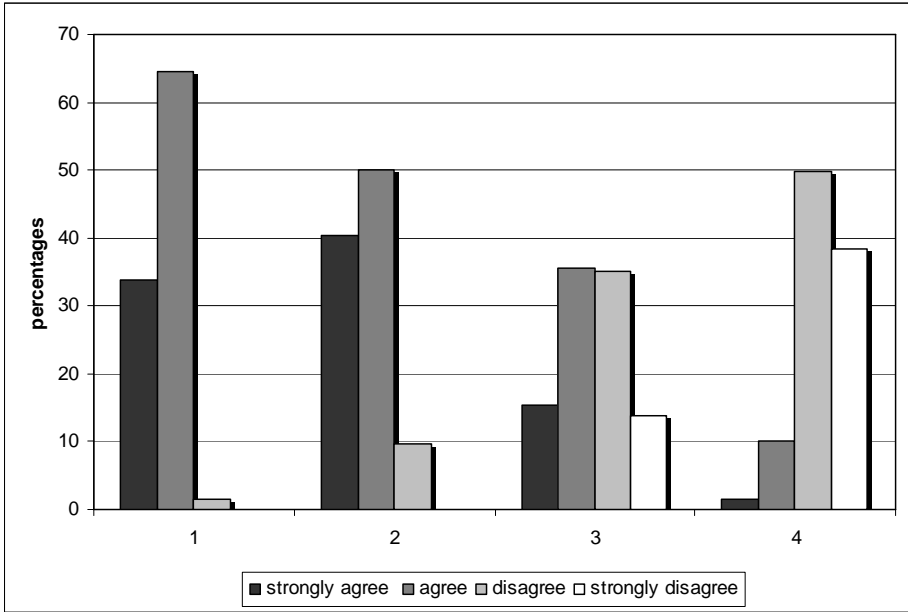
Note: Questions: 1) English is useful for my studies. 2) English will be useful for my future career. 3) English might be useful during my travels. 4) English is important to me because I would like to know about English speaking people.

Half of the participants claimed that English might be useful during their travels (Figure 2-Question 3). However focus-group interviews revealed that none of the participants perceived this as a significant motive to learn English (e.g. 'Well!! Yes it (English) is, of course, useful (when you travel) but no one wants to learn English just because of this.'; 'Yes, it's very useful… but I want to learn English because it's difficult to get a job if you don't know English.'). Only very few (12 %) appeared to be interested in English because they wanted to know more about the English speaking people (Figure 2-Question 4).

The findings suggested that despite the lack of intrinsic interest in their English language classes the majority of the participants strongly perceived that learning English was important for them. This may be explained by the fact that this particular group of learners, who were preparing to finish their studies and to start work in a year or two, perceived English as an instrument to achieve their future goals (e.g. succeeding in their studies, getting a job etc.) rather than anything else. Ryan and Deci (2000) claimed that, especially after early childhood, social demands necessitate individuals to assume responsibility for tasks which might not be intrinsically interesting for them. They maintained that learners might choose to fulfill school tasks for their instrumental value rather than because they find them interesting and/or enjoyable.

## 5.3 Section three: The participants' beliefs about L2 skill/component difficulty

The data obtained from this section illustrated that 78 % of the participants found understanding written English (reading) easier than understanding spoken English (listening). 76 % of the participants stated that writing in English is easier than speaking in English. 57 % of the participants stated that English grammar was difficult to learn. 56 % of the students maintained that the English language was difficult to pronounce. 51 % perceived the English language as being a difficult language to learn (see Figure 3).

Regarding the outcomes on the learners' perceived L2 skill/component difficulty, parallel results were also obtained via the focus-group interviews. The fact that speaking and listening skills were perceived as difficult skills to master, compared to other language skills (such as reading and writing), was emphasized with the results obtained through the focus-group interviews, as well. During the focus-group interviews one of the participant learners said that even if he was familiar with all the language items he still had a lot of difficulty to understand listening tasks (see Extract 3 and Table 4).

Extract 3

S: I find it very difficult to understand the listening tasks we do in the multimedia room (CALL lab). I listen to the recordings several times and try to understand. I understand almost nothing. Then I read the text script and see that I know all the vocabulary. Then I understand everything.

Figure 3. The participants' beliefs about L2 skill/component difficulty (n= 62)
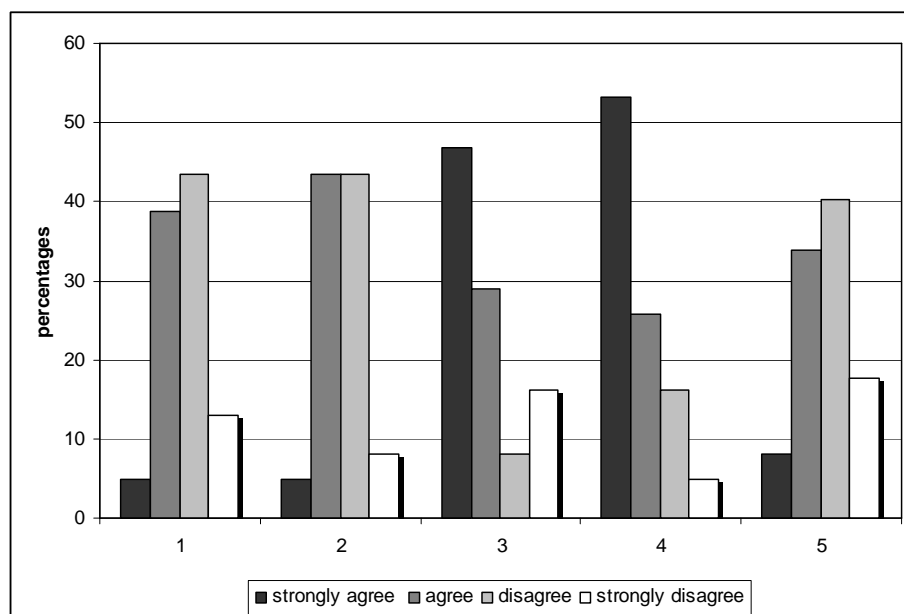
Note: Questions: 1) English is easy to pronounce. 2) English is easy to learn. 3) Writing in English is easier than speaking in English. 4) Reading comprehension is easier than listening comprehension. 5) English grammar is easy to learn.

Table 4.

The participants' beliefs about L2 skill/component difficulty (n= 28)

Perceived ease	Perceived difficulty
Reading is not difficult (n= 11)	Listening and speaking skills are the most difficult (n= 11)
Reading is easier than, listening, speaking, and writing (n= 10)	I cannot understand the English speaking people (n= 10)
	I find listening very difficult to understand (n= 10)
	Grammar is difficult to learn (n= 5)

Related research in SLA has demonstrated that listening skills are difficult skills to acquire in a foreign language (Graham 2006). Research on speech segmentation has illustrated that adult listeners are language-specific perceivers thus when the target L2 language uses a different rhythmic structure listening skills are the most difficult to acquire (see Cutler, Murty and Otake, 2003; Field, 2003; Goh, 1997). Cutler *et al*. (2003) maintained that listeners have a tendency to apply native language procedures to non-native speech during listening. Because rhythmic units differ across languages, using a native strategy can lead to inefficiency in listening to a non-native language (e.g. English uses stress based rhythm whereas French uses syllable-based rhythm).

5.4 Section four: The participants' beliefs about L2 skill/component significance

The participants' responses to this section confirmed how strongly the learners perceived the significance of listening and speaking skills and the vocabulary learning in their L2 classrooms (see Figure 4). Although the overall agreement on the importance of vocabulary learning (53 % strongly agree and 45 % agree) slightly exceeded the perceived importance of listening, the highest percentage of the participants chose to strongly agree on the importance of listening skills. In short, with a high percentage of strong agreement (69 % strongly agree-27 % agree) the importance of listening was emphasized (97 %) in this section, as well (see Table 5). The responses to the questionnaire also indicated that the learners had a tendency to express strong agreement concerning the importance of speaking (53 % strongly agree--34 % agree). Reading, with 85 % of perceived importance, was considered to be the forth most important L2 learning component.

Figure 4. The participants' beliefs about L2 skill/component significance (n= 62)
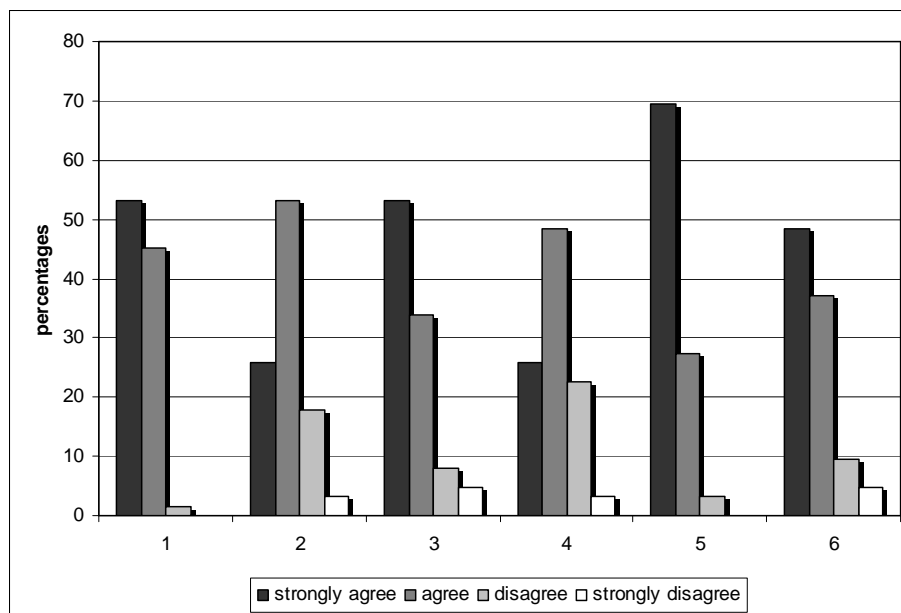
Note: Questions: 1) Vocabulary learning is very important; 2) Grammar learning is very important; 3) Speaking is very important; 4) Writing is very important; 5) Listening comprehension is very important. 6) Reading is very important.

Table 5.

The participants' beliefs about L2 skill/component significance (n= 28)

Perceived significance/ usefulness	Perceived lack of significance/usefulness
Listening and speaking are the most important skills (n=12)	Grammar is not as useful/important as vocabulary, listening comprehension, and speaking (n= 7)
Understanding native speakers is very important (n= 6)	Writing is not very important (n= 4)
Vocabulary is important (n= 11)	
Vocabulary is more useful than grammar (n= 10)	
Learning technical vocabulary is necessary (n= 10)	

The data obtained during different stages of the study revealed different and conflicting beliefs regarding the perceived importance of grammar learning. During the focus-group interviews (and also during the group discussions) the learners expressed negative beliefs about grammar learning claiming that they had repeatedly received grammar teaching in their past L2 learning contexts and perceived this procedure to be unsuccessful and not to be contributing to their L2 learning. Some participants also attributed their lower (perceived) L2 competence (especially in listening and speaking) to the overemphasis on grammar teaching during their past L2 learning experiences (see Extract 4).

Extract 4

S1: We think learning grammar does not contribute much to learning English.

S2: We did a lot of grammar exercises (activities) when we were at the lycée (high school). Most of us still don't know how to use the tenses correctly.

S1: We don't want to say that it is not important but it is not the most important. We have been learning English for more than eight years and we still cannot speak it correctly and have a lot of difficulty in understanding it.

However, the questionnaire results illustrated that the learners perceived grammar learning/ teaching as being significant in L2 learning (79 % of the participants agreed on the importance of grammar learning). Perhaps this conflict was the result of the general belief in the importance of grammar learning and at the same time expression of discontent towards the way these learners had experienced grammar learning/teaching. However, the results indicated that the majority of the participants avoided expressing strong agreement regarding the significance of grammar learning (26 % strongly agree and 53 % agree). A similar tendency for choosing to 'agree' rather than to 'strongly agree' was also observed regarding the writing skill. The data indicated that the participants perceived this skill as the least important among the six L2 learning/teaching components.

5.5 Section five: The participants beliefs about using the L1

The questionnaire data illustrated that the majority of the participants believed that English could be better learnt when explanations were given in French (see Figure 5-Question 1). The results also indicated that the participants valued translation exercises (see Figure 5-Question 2). Thus, the findings pointed out that the majority of the learners favored their mother tongue in their L2 classes. The data obtained during the focus-group interviews also suggested existence of similar tendencies for L1 reliance (see Table 6).

Figure 5. The participants' beliefs about using the L1 (n 62)
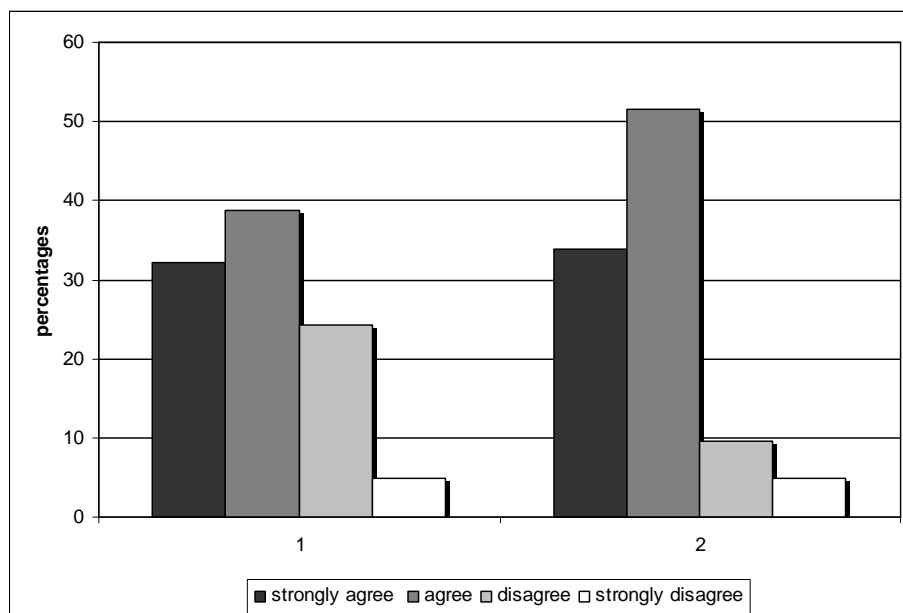
Note: Questions: 1*)* It is easier to learn English when explanations are given in French. 2) Translating texts helps learning English.

Table 6 The participants' beliefs about using L1 in the classroom (n= 28)

Perceived usefulness of the L1

I learn/understand better when teachers give explanations, definitions etc. in French (n= 9)

English language teachers should understand French (n= 7)

I always think in French and then I speak, write etc. in English (n= 6)

Translating texts (English to French, and French to English) is useful and helps learning (n= 4)

Sociocultural approaches, which are increasingly establishing new paradigms in SLA (Second Language Acquisition) research, argue for L1 use in L2 classrooms. The scholars taking the social psychological standpoints claim that learners use their culture and mother tongue as a point of reference when learning a foreign language (Antón and DiCamilla, 1998; Castellotti, 2001).

However, many scholars, although most of them agree on the legitimacy of L1 in L2 classrooms, claim that successful language learning requires extensive L2 input. They, therefore, emphasize inevitable disadvantages of extensive L1 reliance in the L2 classrooms.

These specialists' argue that, especially in cases when the learners have little or no L2 contact outside the classroom environment, foreign language teachers should aim to maximize L2 use in their classes (Chaudron, 1988; Ellis, 1984, 2003; Turnbull, 2001).

Some EFL researchers attribute strong learner tendencies for using the L1 in L2 classrooms to traditional orientations to language learning and traditional learning/teaching backgrounds (e.g. Sakui and Gaies, 1999). Although some elements within the data pointed to a learning tradition, which the learners acquired through their past L2 instruction, the information obtained was insufficient to attribute the learners' strong favor for the L1 use solely to the learners' L2 experiences.

6 Conclusion and implications

This study has some data to suggest that these learners' attitudes and orientations of motivation were directly linked with their beliefs (perceived goals, expectations etc.). In the case of these learners, who had specific goals and expectations regarding learning English (such as its instrumental value to succeed in their studies and to get a job), the beliefs regarding course expectations, course content, and goals for studying English appeared to be factors influencing their attitudes towards learning this language; and therefore, their levels of motivations and motivational orientations. The data obtained via this study indicated that majority of these learners had fairly negative attitudes, lower motivations and mainly extrinsic motivational orientations towards learning English. The findings illustrated that these learners expected to see language tasks directly linked to their goals (e.g. technical learning materials). Apparently, only very few were interested in learning English for intrinsic purposes.

One significant outcome of this study is the participants' common belief about the importance of listening and speaking skills which they also perceived as difficult skills to acquire. Perhaps, when the students claimed that they could not understand listening despite their complete familiarity with the language items involved in these tasks, they were partly referring to the problem they were facing with speech segmentation. However, not having enough L2 exposure (both in and outside of the classroom), and lack of appropriate listening skill training might also be some of the contributing factors.

The results also indicated that the participants perceived language learning as mainly for communication (e.g. perceived importance of listening and speaking skills). However, this perception appears to be contradicting the fact that these learners, in general, had decreased L2 willingness to communicate (WTC). The data obtained suggest that perceived L2 difficulty, lower perceived L2 competence, perceived importance of correct L2 performance, and task relevance appear to be interconnected and interacting features contributing to the learners' lower perceived L2 enjoyment and decreased L2 WTC.

The overall data obtained also indicated that the great majority of the participant learners believed that using their mother tongue during their English language classes was useful (e.g. doing translations, receiving explanations in the L1 etc.). Although this research provides some data indicating that during their prior L2 instruction these learners did some translation activities, were allowed to use the L1 and received explanations in the L1, there was limited information on 'when the L1 was used' and 'how much L1 was allowed'. In other words, it was difficult to judge whether this tendency represented dependency and/or insufficient L2 strategy use (a dysfunctional belief which might be an obstacle for their progress in the L2); or an unavoidable psychological need; and/or a means to work out meaning during the L2 tasks. Hence, this area remains to be further investigated.

In short, the overall data indicated that these learners see language learning as a means rather than as an end itself. Thus, on the basis of the findings obtained, I suggest that the curriculum be designed in collaboration between the subject matter teachers and the language teachers to include content relevant to these learners' subjects of study and interests. Content-based instruction (CBI), where topics are primarily chosen to accommodate the learners' needs and interests, provides some useful ideas on how language skills proficiency and content learning are developed in parallel (see Richards and Rodgers 2001). In content-based instruction (CBI) teaching is organized around the content (or themes) rather than a linguistic syllabus. CBI is grounded in the theory that: a) people learn a second/foreign language more successfully if they use the language as a means of acquiring information; b) people learn best if teaching is based on their prior experiences; c) people learn best if instruction addresses their needs, interests and goals (see Richards and Rodgers 2001).

It is commonly argued that having prior knowledge about a topic promotes better comprehension (e.g. listening) and also provides useful input before fulfilling a task (e.g. speaking). A theme-based approach (see CBI in Richards and Rodgers 2001) might help these learners to get the necessary input and preparation (relevant to their needs and interests) before they get engaged in a speaking/listening task. Thus organizing language instruction around themes relevant to these learners' needs (and interests) and introducing listening/speaking tasks on the same topics may help these learners: a) to understand listening content better; b) to get the necessary input before speaking and consequently; c) to increase their willingness to communicate. Communicative language tasks (see Ellis 2003) such as role-plays and interviews (related to students' subjects of study-- e.g. resolving technical problems, giving technical advice etc.) might also be used within a CBI framework to help the learners develop necessary communication strategies. It also seems to be necessary to direct these students' attention to 'meaning' rather than 'correct performance of language structures'. If corrective feedback is perceived to be indispensable, this procedure, I believe, needs to be delayed until the learners complete their speaking tasks.

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