

Original Paper

Determinants of Saudi EFL Learners' Beliefs about Learning

EFL

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Abstract

Language learners' beliefs constitute an individual difference variable that profoundly influences language-learning behavior and significantly contributes to the process and ultimate success of language learning. This article identifies the beliefs Saudi learners hold about learning English as a foreign language (EFL). The analysis first addresses Saudi EFL learners' perceptions of English, followed by a discussion of Saudi EFL learners' experiences with learning English. The discussion also addresses these learners' expectations about studying English and concludes by pinpointing the importance of understanding the distinct language-learning beliefs of Saudi EFL learners and highlighting all factors that could affect these beliefs. Moreover, this conceptual article offers measures and progressive ideas to consider that will help Saudi EFL teachers reinforce more productive and insightful language beliefs that have a facilitative effect on language learning and keep Saudi EFL learners from developing debilitating conceptions of language-learning beliefs. This work also highlights several research directions and pedagogical implications.

Keywords

Language learners' beliefs, Saudi EFL learners, learners' perceptions of learning English, experiences with learning English, expectations about studying English

1. Introduction

Beliefs about language learning are inflectional affective variables and determine dimensions in the field of second language acquisition; the term “beliefs” in this context refers to “beliefs about the nature of language and language learning” (Barcelos, 2003, p. 8). Beliefs about foreign language learning, particularly those that students bring into the classroom and broader learning situations, are central constructs that play a major role in the success or failure of English learning. Indeed, the

perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge about the nature and process of language acquisition, the assumptions, experiences, and preconceived notions concerning the perceived nature of language learning, and the language-learning strategies, commitments, preconceived beliefs, and expectations that language learners bring to English classrooms are all significant contributing factors in the language-learning process, giving rise to the motivation that eventually results in the attainment of EFL proficiency.

Researchers attribute the crucial influence exerted by language-learning beliefs and the vital role they play in the process of learning a language to various factors. Ellis (2008) views the effect of language learners' beliefs as directing and fostering the kinds of learning strategies students employ when learning a new language. According to Horwitz (1999) and Benson and Lor (1999), language learners' beliefs not only influence the way language learners approach second language (L2) learning, but also affect their receptivity to various instructional practices and activities. Richards and Lockhart (1994) argue that beliefs can influence learners' motivation, their expectations about language learning, their perceptions about what is easy or difficult, and the strategies they choose for learning.

Horwitz (1987) further adds that language beliefs can indicate which expectations the language learners have, as well as which actions they take when learning EFL. Additionally, these beliefs have an influential impact on learners' approaches, success, English-learning practices, and learning behaviors throughout the process of learning EFL. The beliefs also shape EFL learners' perceptions of language learning and influence the learning process and experience. Likewise, misconceptions about the nature and difficulty of the language-learning task are likely to lead to frustration and ineffective language-learning practices. Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) maintain that language-learning beliefs substantially influence EFL learners' motivation and anxiety in the language acquisition process. Furthermore, such beliefs are regarded as determining factors that can affect EFL learners' competence and efficiency in English classrooms (Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011).

Learners of EFL worldwide hold many firm language beliefs and convictions; Saudi EFL learners are no exception. Language-learning beliefs are complex, interrelated constructs that are contextually conditioned and responsive to the surrounding environment or are context-specific. This assertion leads to having a variety of context-dependent language-learning beliefs that warrant close examination within each particular language-learning context. In this conceptual article, I will conduct a detailed examination of the deeply held, idiosyncratic language-learning beliefs that have adverse effects on the ability of Saudi EFL learners to learn English successfully. The complex array of these beliefs influences students' learning approaches and strategies and forms the guiding principles of student behaviors and performance, both in the classroom and throughout the English language-learning odyssey. Ultimately, misconceptions or erroneous beliefs undermine Saudi EFL learners' successful language acquisition. I hope this paper will enrich our understanding of Saudi EFL learners' beliefs about learning EFL.

2. Saudi EFL Learners' Beliefs about Learning EFL

Saudi EFL learners maintain certain inhibitive beliefs about learning EFL that are by-products of several internal and external contributing factors, including poor learners' attitudes and low motivation, both of which are governed by different determinants that adversely affect their classroom performance. These determinants include (a) students' perceptions of English, (b) their experiences with learning English, and (c) their expectations about learning English. Each of these elements will be thoroughly discussed in turn.

3. Saudi EFL Learners' Perceptions of English

As English is not immediately relevant to their daily needs, Saudi EFL learners usually do not devote serious attention to learning the language as an academic subject that is important in their lives which stands as the crux of the problems. Instead, their efforts are directed primarily toward acquiring the minimal English competency needed to pass and advance to the next grade level. Therefore, they pay less attention to the other aspects of learning and tend to simply memorize vocabulary, grammatical rules, and passages of written English (Al-Seghayer, 2021). After a close exploration of Saudi EFL learners' experiences in learning English, Unruh and Obeidat (2015) found that the learners lacked the motivation to absorb much more knowledge than restate on tests what their instructors expected from them. By the same token, Shah et al. (2013) and Alqahtani (2019) underscored that the majority of Saudi EFL students' demeanor regarding exams and assessments is primarily grade-driven. Furthermore, their ultimate learning goal is to obtain good grades, and they devote all of their vitality to this goal, paying little attention to real language learning. Al-Seghayer (2015) maintained that Saudi EFL learners are asked to memorize written passages as part of their preparation for their final written tests in English rather than to acquire a deep and meaningful understanding of the language. Similarly, Maherzi (2011) noted that Saudi EFL learners cannot yet see a meaningful link between their efforts and the desired goal of becoming competent in English. Indeed, they often ask themselves why they are even studying this foreign language as a subject. Some of them might even regard learning English as worthless both academically and socially and not necessary for achieving success in Saudi society. This attitude, then, contributes to their poor performance in English. Javid et al. (2017) investigated the perceptions of Saudi EFL toward learning English. The findings demonstrated that Saudi EFL learners, as represented by the participants of this study, do not consider studying English to be important. According to Al-Shlowiy (2014), Saudi EFL learners view English as a worthless subject because they do not use it in their lives.

As pointed out by Al-Seghayer (2017), perhaps the key missing ingredient for most Saudi students is the intrinsic motivation that will eventually result in them becoming proficient in EFL. Rather than being driven by their own personal interests, the fuel that feebly propels them through their English studies is the extrinsic influence and demands of the education system. As Saudi EFL learners learn English only in response to external pressures, their internal motivation is minimal, and their general

attitudes toward learning the language are negative (Khan, 2011; Shah et al., 2013; Holbah, 2015; Al-Rabai, 2018). It is not surprising, then, that Saudi EFL learners attending universities exhibit greater motivation than those in public schools (Javid et al., 2012).

Saudi students' lack of intrinsic motivation to learn and speak English also extends beyond the language classroom (Bani Younes & Albalawi 2016; Ali et al., 2019; Alsiyat, 2021). In their view, they have no real need to use English or any opportunities to practice it outside the classroom. Al-Rabai (2016) contends that using the Arabic language when teaching English undermines the value of English and leads Saudi EFL learners to assume that English is worthless or, to say the least, it is not important to learn English. Furthermore, Alzamil (2019) and Alqahtani (2021) found that Saudi EFL students have a positive attitude toward using Arabic as a facilitating tool in English classes rather than only English. To these students, English is not essential for survival in Saudi society, and from their perspectives, English is not considered to be the only means of survival and livelihood. Metaphorically, teachers are trying to teach their students to swim by placing them in pools and explaining many rules without providing enough water. Clearly, there is a considerable gap between the aims of policymakers to enable Saudi EFL students to communicate in English in social situations and as part of their education and the goals of the students, which are to learn just enough English to pass the required final English exam.

4. Saudi EFL Learners' Experiences with Learning English

There are additional internal factors that influence this extreme lack of motivation. For instance, in a study on motivational practices in Saudi English classes, Al-Rabai (2014) found that low levels of self-esteem, self-confidence, and motivational intensity are key factors that negatively affect Saudi EFL learners. Springsteen (2014) also observed that Saudi EFL students expected their English instructors to motivate them, which suggests that they do not expect their motivation to come from within. Khan (2011) and Al-Attar (2014) have made similar conclusions that many EFL students in Saudi Arabia are not only apprehensive about studying English but not motivated to learn the language or interested in the subject matter. They have not developed any enthusiasm for learning English. Approximately 85% of Saudi English teachers who participated in the Alyousif and Alsuhaibani (2021) study indicated that Saudi learners of English have low levels of motivation to learn the language. This result clearly shows that Saudi EFL learners lack motivation to learn English partly because of their misconceptions about the importance of learning it and their failure to see the immediate applications of the English they have already learned. A study conducted by Al-Dhafiri (2015) asked approximately 200 Saudi EFL learners about the factors that motivated them to learn English. The results revealed that the participants were motivated by the prospects of seeking further education (30.7 %; N=55), enhancing their knowledge (29.6 %; N=53), travelling (15.1%; N= 27), and pursuing their own interests (23.5 %; N=42). Ahmad (2015) and Alqahtani (2019) contend that some Saudis do not realize how important English is as a tool for success in educational and occupational careers, and that they believe that

English plays only a minor role in bringing prosperity and honor to their lives.

Therefore, although English teachers provide them with education, the students dutifully, but passively, assimilate their teachers' explanations, work through their textbooks, and read the texts verbatim. Within such an environment, the students become increasingly bored until they no longer have any enthusiasm or motivation to learn English.

Language anxiety is another crucial factor that has profound and negative effects on the feelings of Saudi students with regard to learning English. A significant number of these students anticipate the prospect of learning English with trepidation. They are afraid of English and carry this fear and reluctance with regard to learning the language into intermediate and secondary school, where they continue to believe that English is very difficult, if not impossible, to learn. Many of them see English as an obstacle in their educational journeys. Alzaharani (2016) conducted a study that aimed to examine the experiences that Saudi students had in learning English and found that some participants believed what they had heard: that English is difficult to learn.

Learners are rarely well oriented to learn English without anxiety. As a result, the prevalent high levels of language-learning anxiety among Saudi EFL learners have become a debilitating factor and are now among the most worrisome language-learning variables in the Saudi EFL context. It can be argued that, given the choice, a considerable number of Saudi EFL learners would not select English as a subject of study. Such a choice accurately reflects the fears and difficulties that Saudi students encounter when taking mandatory courses in English. Language anxiety is apparent in several of the behaviors that Saudi EFL learners exhibit in English classrooms, including considering English learning to be a key source of language anxiety and being reluctant to participate in classroom discourse. Unwillingness to participate actively in class discussions is another major cause of language anxiety for Saudi EFL learners, who may choose not to respond to questions consistently, rely on simple yes/no responses and nonverbal communication, and avoid expressing any ideas and feelings. Other factors that contribute to the high levels of language anxiety are apprehension about communication and comprehension and a fear of receiving negative evaluations and assessments that depend primarily on written tests (Al-Shahrani & Alandal, 2015; Gawi, 2020). The desire among students to learn English is also adversely affected by the lack of encouragement, engagement, and support that they receive from their parents. Parents do not attempt to increase their children's exposure to English and alternative learning paths, foster certain language-learning behaviors and beliefs, or instill positive attitudes toward learning English. Indeed, many Saudi parents, especially those who are not highly educated, fail to follow their children's academic progress, monitor their home assignments, provide parental-managed learning programs, communicate with teachers, help to solve academic and social problems, or provide their children with sufficient support for learning English systematically (Khan, 2012; Shah et al., 2013; Al Shlowiy, 2014). These attitudes and the inadequate support and encouragement that parents provide for their children's development as English language learners suggest that parents lack awareness of the importance of English for their children's futures. Instead, parents focus on passing grades in English courses and do

not try to enhance their children's interest or increase their confidence in learning English. In addition, parents do not take on roles in guiding and supervising their children's language-learning experiences. Bhuiyan (2016) observed that Saudi parents are mainly concerned with whether or not their children achieve good grades and have the preconceived idea that passing English exams with good grades is equivalent to having good English language skills. As a result, they are not worried about their children's English language proficiency and generally request that the teachers help their children achieve the minimum grade in their English courses.

Holbah (2015) explored the perceptions that relate to motivational factors affecting language learning within the Saudi Arabian context. These include the role of the learners, their families, their teachers, the schools, and Saudi Arabian society. One result of this study was that 36.7% of the participants indicated that their parents did not encourage them to study English. Ahmad (2015) has also pointed out that Saudi EFL learners are not properly prepared to learn English because neither their parents nor their English teachers enhance their motivation for learning the language. Furthermore, Ahmad adds that Saudi parents (especially those who do not have high levels of education) lack ambition for their children to achieve higher education, and this unconsciously affects the motivation of their children to learn English. Not only does this attitude cause students to be unenthusiastic about learning English, but it adversely affects their pace of learning. Approximately 90% of the Saudi EFL learners who were surveyed reported that their parents never motivated them to learn English at home.

Further hindrances to ongoing, enthusiastic English language study are the noticeable fluctuations in the concepts of those who are teaching English, including their school administrators, teachers, peers, and relatives. Engaging the students in learning the language is a positive attribute for successful English language learning, while a lack of engagement hampers students' progress in developing English proficiency. Consequently, environments in homes and schools that nurtured favorable attitudes toward learning English would be far more conducive to learning. Competitive and positive learning environments clearly help to motivate learners to acquire English. Furthermore, this can inspire learners to focus on their goals for learning, their efficacy, and their interests. Holbah (2015) also found that 60.53% of learners believed that their school contexts did not encourage them to learn English. This lack of support in schools was perceived to be attributable to the shortage of a range of resources, facilities, activities inside and outside the classroom, and incentives for Saudi EFL learners. There is also little cooperative language learning in EFL classroom environments. Furthermore, extracurricular activities that require students to use English are either absent or insufficient. In fact, approximately 68.61% of the participants indicated that Saudi Arabian society did not encourage them to learn English. The findings of Al-Rabai (2016) are similar, showing Saudi students to be less motivated, less satisfied, and less interested in their lessons or the activities because of the limited or complete lack of support and attention the teachers provided.

According to Khan (2011), Saudi EFL teachers do not follow up on their students' work to determine whether they have improved; indeed, the students are generally left alone without any guidance from

their teachers. Teachers do not seem to feel a strong sense of responsibility to motivate their students, and therefore fail to provide adequate incentives or strong platforms to ensure that students are engaged in the learning process. Saudi EFL teachers are neither experienced nor invested in providing strategies to help motivate their students. A substantial number of these teachers do not show their students that they care about their progress or recognize their efforts and achievements; nor do they make learning tasks fun or remind their students of the global use of English. The Saudi EFL participants in the study by Alzahrani (2016) reported that their teachers did not contribute significantly to their learning of EFL and were not motivated to teach the language. The findings of Alyousif and Alsuhaibani (2021) are similar, demonstrating that Saudi EFL teachers were the most demotivating factor for Saudi high school EFL students mainly because they were not competent in teaching EFL.

Al-Johani (2009) identified some of the Saudi EFL teachers' instructional behaviors that fail to motivate Saudi EFL learners, including not encouraging or praising students' participation, failing to correct students' mistakes immediately to ensure that they do not make more mistakes, and constantly criticizing their learning attempts. The Saudi EFL learners who participated in Alzahrani's (2016) study indicated that their teachers negatively affected their performance because they did not engage them in the subject, did not consider their language needs, and often had negative comments and reactions. These Saudi EFL learners also pointed out that their enthusiasm and desire to learn English were adversely influenced by the attitudes of their peers. Their classmates viewed practicing or attempting to speak English in EFL classrooms as ridiculous and did not appreciate it when some of them showed an interest in learning or played active roles during class activities. They also reported their classmates did not take learning English seriously and often laughed at those who tried to speak the language. Overall, the EFL classrooms in the Saudi context rarely have supportive atmospheres because of the negative discourse of the teachers regarding students' performances on assignments or exams (Alharbi, 2015). Unsupportive English learning environments such as this explain why the interest level levels of Saudi EFL learners with regard to English have continued to deteriorate over the year. Holbah (2015) proposed that Saudi EFL teachers are not able to motivate their students because they are inadequately trained and lack the tools necessary to implement successful motivational strategies inside their classrooms.

In addition, family members' attitudes toward English language learning can have a noticeable impact and hamper the language learning processes. Their negative attitudes toward English language learning can discourage learners within the family. Conversely, their positive attitudes toward English language learning can encourage family members to learn English (Al-Maiman, 2005). In the Saudi EFL context, what encapsulates the wide spectrum of the situation— that is, the overall lack of sufficient support Saudi EFL learners receive from their family members — teachers are not serving as language learning advocates, language learning facilitators, or language teachers' collaborators. Furthermore, they are not directly involved as English language learning advisors, English language learning coercers, and English language learning nurturers in their relatives' development. Overall, family members often fail to create learning discourses motivating or propelling them to learn English.

5. Saudi EFL Learners' Expectations about Learning English

A considerable number of Saudi students believe that learning English is beyond their reach or that they lack some capacity necessary to learn EFL. Several empirical studies have confirmed such beliefs. For example, the results of studies by Kassem (2013), Al-Malki and Javid (2018), and Al-Jasir (2022) showed that Saudi EFL learners believe that English is a difficult language to learn. In a related study, Al-Roomy (2015) found that Saudi EFL learners were uncertain about their foreign language learning aptitude. In the same vein, the findings of Al-Rabai's (2018), study revealed that Saudi EFL learners who participated in this study had very low estimations of their self-efficacy beliefs about learning the English language. Similarly, Massri (2019) also found that Saudi EFL participants in her study endorsed the difficulty of learning English. Along the same line, Al-Jasir (2022) found that Saudi EFL learners do not hold firm beliefs about their language learning capabilities.

It is not surprising, then that Saudi EFL learners consider English to be dry and boring, or a highly monotonous subject learned primarily for instrumental purposes; indeed, chiefly to pass an examination. According to the majority of Saudi students, English remains a largely academic exercise. They view English as a passive subject, as they do not use it or need it in their everyday lives. Students do not perceive an obvious communicative need facilitated by English. These learners believe that although what they have learned inside the classroom might have a future use, English remains confined to the four walls of the classroom for short periods during which they are studying to pass their English exams. In actual classroom practice, however, few interactions occur until the teacher asks a question or instructs the students to complete a grammar exercise.

According to Khan (2011), students also tend to experience feelings of incompetence and an inability to reach the desired outcomes of learning EFL. Often, Saudi EFL learners do not view themselves as good students of English. Indeed, 94% of the participants in Al-Roomy's (2015) study indicated that English was very difficult to learn. In the same vein, Alrasheed (2012) also noted that some Saudi EFL learners perceived mastering a foreign language to be an overwhelming task that requires special learning abilities and intelligence. Thus, Saudi students lack confidence and perseverance, as they do not believe that they can learn English well. Because of this sentiment, they fail to develop effective learning strategies or to take the initiative when learning English. They simply do not demonstrate any willingness to make the sacrifices that are necessary to attain the goals of EFL.

6. Implications

Several additional research directions and pedagogical implications arise for the process of learning EFL in the Saudi EFL context; these avenues must be explored to ensure that all related multifaceted EFL learning dimensions are positively fostered, thereby improving overall EFL teaching and learning practices in Saudi Arabia.

Given the complex and multidimensional nature of language-learning beliefs, research should examine this vital issue from the perspective of both cognitive psychology and sociocultural theory. Whereas the

former provides practitioners with valuable insights into the psychological mechanisms involved in creating, shaping, and guiding language beliefs, the latter enables researchers to examine how social contexts and specific instances of social interaction shape language learners' beliefs. Additionally, such research sheds light on the relationship between foreign-language learners and the foreign-language learning environment.

Several issues should be addressed in future attempts to investigate language beliefs with the potential impact on language learning; these include the nature of the language of study, its level of difficulty, the process of its acquisition, the success of certain learning strategies, student aptitudes, and the expectations of the language learners.

Additional shaping factors that have been thought to determine or influence language learners' beliefs and thus demand further close exploration are the degree to which beliefs differ across learners, family and home backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, classroom/social peers, the effects of instructional interventions based on students' beliefs about language learning, the nature of the language studied, and the stability of beliefs. Another possible avenue of exploration is to look into the nature and development of language beliefs among EFL teachers and learners, or, to go beyond a mere description of such beliefs, to advance a deep understanding of why language learners hold certain beliefs and what roles these beliefs play in language-learning experiences. In addition, to identify the underlying causes of language-learning beliefs of Saudi EFL learners.

Various pedagogical implications can be gleaned from a conceptual discussion of the variety of EFL-learning beliefs held by Saudi EFL learners. First, Saudi EFL teachers should engage their students in meaningful dialogue about their English language-learning beliefs and, in particular, the beliefs and misconceptions that adversely affect their language learning. Second, Saudi EFL teachers should urge learners to be confident in their ability to learn English and give them the feeling they are progressing well. Saudi EFL teachers should show convincing faith in their Saudi EFL learners' ability to succeed. Among the several ways that Saudi EFL teachers can accomplish this is by helping their learners set realistic goals according to their capabilities and interests and have reasonable expectations. Third, all practitioners involved in the Saudi EFL context must have a high level of awareness of language-learning beliefs and workable mechanisms for changing such beliefs. Fourth, Saudi EFL teachers are encouraged to create a pleasant atmosphere in the English classrooms to boost Saudi EFL learners' positive beliefs about learning English. They should also know how to incorporate strategies for increasing learner motivation and decreasing language-learning anxiety into their teaching practices. In doing so, teachers should be familiar with a variety of factors that promote and sustain motivation, such as engaging learners in interesting and challenging activities, giving learners control over what they are learning, and supporting learners' self-directed learning and autonomy. Moreover, language-learning motivation can be fostered through varying teaching methods, activities, and materials. Teachers also need to create a supportive language-learning environment. In the interest of minimizing students' levels of language-learning anxiety, teachers should avoid anxiety-provoking

practices, including constant criticism and creation of a competitive learning atmosphere. Additionally, teachers should identify things students can do well. Fifth, there is an urgent need to implement a public program or community language-engagement framework that aims to raise awareness in the Saudi community of the importance and value of high English competence. Such an initiative should encompass strategic ways in which schools, families, communities, and the wider academic community of education can work more closely to instill positive beliefs toward learning English. Sixth, in recognition of the considerable effects (and potential benefits) of parental involvement on Saudi EFL belief, and ultimately on fostering their English development, Saudi parents must show a high level of involvement in their children's English-language studies. There are many avenues through which parents can become involved in their children's English-language learning, which makes the parents' engagement more effective and drives forward their English learning. Parents should be involved in several home- and school-based activities, such as visiting their children's schools, being actively involved in other school activities, providing opportunities to enhance learning outside of school, monitoring homework, providing books or computers, and initiating communication with teachers to discuss their children's progress.

7. Conclusion

This paper focuses on a significant attribute of Saudi EFL learners—language beliefs—and investigates some of the sub-beliefs and internal and external factors that contribute to Saudi EFL beliefs. The above in-depth discussion revealed the manifestations of the determinants of each belief and traced their underlying causes. Certain beliefs about learning English held by Saudi EFL learners are major constraints militating English-language education in Saudi Arabia as well as presenting serious challenges for it. Thus, an immediate strategic plan is necessary to rectify Saudi EFL learners' negative beliefs and to exploit their positive language beliefs via systematic, extensive, and careful treatment.

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