

## **Beliefs about language learning: Exploring links to personality traits**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper reports on an exploratory study that aimed to investigate a possible relationship between learners' beliefs about language learning and their personality traits – a relationship suggested by a number of interdisciplinary studies, including those in cognitive and personality psychology. The motive for conducting this study was to seek to explain the previously reported stable nature of certain learner beliefs, particularly since negative beliefs can be detrimental to the learning process. Data from 262 ESL learners were collected using the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (Horwitz, 1987) and the NEO-Five Factor Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1985), and analyzed using factor analysis and multivariate regression analysis. Overall, the results do not suggest a strong relationship between learner beliefs and personality traits in the population sampled.

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## INTRODUCTION

Learners' cognitive and affective contributions to language learning have been an interest of educational researchers for over three decades now, both for the light they shed on the learning process and the impact they have on learning outcomes. This paper explores the psychological contributions learners make to language learning, in particular beliefs and personality that could provide useful pedagogical insights for teachers in many contexts.

In addition to briefly reviewing the relevant literature from cognitive psychology, personality psychology and the relevant Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, the paper describes an exploratory study which aimed to investigate a possible relationship between learners' beliefs and their personality traits. Such a relationship has been suggested by a number of interdisciplinary studies, including those in cognitive and personality psychology, yet one that has not been extensively reported on in literature, particularly in the area of SLA. This relationship is thought to be important, as beliefs about language learning – including those related to the difficulty of the language under study, the usefulness of certain learning strategies, the length of time it takes one to acquire a good proficiency, as well as the role of age, gender and culture have proven to be relatively stable and difficult to change, if found to be unproductive to achievement. Therefore, scholars have suggested that the relationship between beliefs and other stable individual learner differences, such as personality traits, could shed light on their lack of malleability (e.g., Abraham & Van, 1987; Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005; Rifkin, 2000). Already, relationships between beliefs in general and various individual learner differences have been reported on in fields other than SLA, as described below.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Early psychological studies into learners' perceptions and beliefs about learning "opened a whole new Aladdin's cave of personal beliefs, myths, understandings, and superstitions as they were

revealed by the persons' thoughts and feelings about their learning" (Thomas & Harri-Augstein, 1983: 338). The researchers concluded that beliefs about learners' own capacity and personal models of their own processes were much more central to understanding the individuals' learning performances than more universally accepted theories of learning, and that these personal 'myths' explained much more about individual differences in learning than such psychometric measures as intelligence or aptitude. Moreover, they provide a framework for understanding how learners conceptualize themselves as learners and the situation they enter which provides a potential for learning - more obviously in the classroom and less obviously, perhaps, other social events in wider communities (Breen, 2001).

Studies into beliefs about learning, particularly about language learning, provided insights into their role on acquisition. It was revealed that attitudes to learning and the perceptions and beliefs that determine them may have a profound influence on learning behaviour (Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Corno, 1986; McCombs, 1984; Cotterall, 1995) and on learning outcomes (Martin & Ramsden, 1987; Reid & Hresko, 1981; Van Rossum & Schenk, 1984; Weinert & Kluwe, 1987). Furthermore, it has been noted that successful learners develop insights into beliefs about language learning processes, their own abilities and the use of effective learning strategies (Anstey, 1988; Biggs, 1987; Ehrman, 1989, 1990; Oxford, 1990, 2003; Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1986;). Therefore, awareness of learners' beliefs is central to teaching, and while some may have a facilitative effect on learning, others can hinder the learning process and contribute to anxiety (Horwitz, 2001; Horwitz & Young, 1990).

Research and debate continues into the possible factors that can account beliefs in general, producing somewhat mixed results. In various academic fields such as social and cognitive psychology, a number of studies have attempted to identify both endogenous and exogenous factors thought to influence one's beliefs about an object, concept or phenomenon. So far, research has established that our perceptions and beliefs are shaped by our attitudes (Fishbein &

Ajzen, 1975), experiences (Gaoyin & Alvermann, 1995; Kuntz, 1999) and culture (Alexander & Dochy, 1995; Tumposky, 1991), including immediate family environment (Dias, 2001). Despite the paucity in literature on beliefs and personality type, a few studies have been conducted in psychology on specific beliefs and personality type (Cheng & Hau, 2003; Furnham, Chamorro-Premuzic, & McDougall, 2002; Hutchinson & Gul, 1997; Kardash & Scholes, 1996), personality type and perception (Allmon, Page, & Roberts, 2000; Irani, Schelrer, Harrington & Helg, 2000), and, epistemology and personality type (Nussbaum & Bendixen, 2003).

These aforementioned studies offer a substantial groundwork for the current study, and lay the foundation for further efforts to uncover the proximal cognitive and psychological causes of individual differences in beliefs. Other studies which report a relationship between personality traits and various beliefs include: Pratt (1980), and Hutchinson and Gul (1997) who examined the effects of personality traits and cultural beliefs; Furnham *et al.* (2002) who examined beliefs about intelligence and personality traits; and more recently Nussbaum and Bendixen (2003) who examined epistemological beliefs and personality traits. These studies report a positive correlation between the variables under investigation – beliefs and personality.

In the context of SLA, other stable individual factors such as gender (Bacon & Finnemann, 1992; Bernat & Lloyd, 2007; Piechurska-Kuciel & Bernat, in press; Siebert, 2003) and nationality (Horwitz, 1999; Siebert, 2003; Tumposky, 1991) have been studied in relation to learner beliefs, producing mixed results. Siebert's (2003) study investigating whether beliefs are gender-specific is one of the first attempts to establish links between learner beliefs and stable individual factors. Siebert surveyed 64 female and 92 male language learners at a higher education institution in the US and found a number of significant belief differences between males and females in relation to language learning and strategy use as well as differences in beliefs about gender and language learning. Piechurska-Kuciel and Bernat (in press) also found statistically

significant differences between genders in a study of Polish mildly dyslexic secondary students' beliefs about language learning, and attributed these differences to socialization. In the Australian context, Bernat and Lloyd (2007) investigated the beliefs of advanced learners of English at university. Unlike previous studies, their results indicate that overall males and females held similar beliefs about language learning, with only one questionnaire item being statistically significant and another one being only marginally significant.

In terms of nationality, Siebert (2003) examined the influence of national origin/ethnicity and found that these variables had an influence on beliefs about language learning. Significant differences were found in the beliefs of these groups concerning various areas under investigation. For example, 53% of students from Middle Eastern origin reported having a special ability to learn languages, compared with only 5% of Japanese students and 10% of Chinese students. Siebert suggested that these findings may be due to the cultural convention of the Japanese and Chinese society to downplay one's abilities, therefore making it difficult to determine whether these students actually believe they lack ability. Other studies (Horwitz, 1999; Schultz, 2001; Tumposky, 1991), however, report little or no differences in beliefs among various nationality groups.

#### **AIMS AND RATIONALE**

The aim of the study is to examine, using factor analysis and multiple regression analysis, to what extent, if any, can learner beliefs about language learning be predicted by certain personality traits. The rationale for this study comes from identification of the paucity in literature and research on the possible relationship between beliefs about language learning and personality type. This is because researchers are becoming increasingly aware of the potential impact that students' attitudes, perceptions and beliefs about the nature of knowledge have on their engagement in the classroom and their likelihood of achievement (Cassidy & Echaus,

2000; Hofer & Pintrich, 2004; Livengood, 1992; Schommer, Crouse & Rhodes, 1992).

In the field of language learning, a number of studies have focused on learners' beliefs about language learning in conjunction with different other stable individual learner differences. However – to date – there has been no study reported on learners' beliefs about language learning in relation to the personality type variable, despite suggestions of a possible relationship (Abraham & Vann, 1987; Ellis, 1994; Rifkin, 2000). Ellis (1994) concludes that “learners' beliefs are likely to be influenced by general factors such as personality and cognitive style” (p.479).

Another call for such an investigation is made by one of the early pioneers of the field of study into learner beliefs about language learning, Anita Wenden (1999). In her recommendations of future directions for research, the author proposes that research examine “to what extent do individual learner characteristics account for belief differences?” (p.441) and suggests studying variables such as cognitive style, age, professional background and educational experience among others. More recently, Rifkin (2000) suggested that apart from the influence of the contextual variables on learner beliefs, personal factors such as personality type could account for the variance among learner beliefs to a greater degree than factors investigated in his study.

Yet another researcher in the field, Mantle-Bromley (1995), argued that further research is needed as “we do not yet know enough about the nature of incoming students' beliefs to design effective curricular intervention addressing those beliefs” (p.377). Thus, this study will further the research into the nature of learners' beliefs and their relationship to other factors, specifically personality traits.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A convenience sample included 262 survey respondents (155 females and 107 males), aged between 17 and 39, with a mean age of 24

(median age also 24). They represented many nationalities, with mainland China being the country of origin for the majority of participants (58%). Other nationalities included: Korea, Japan, Thailand, Columbia, Vietnam, Germany, Mexico, Peru, Indonesia, Turkey, France, Hong Kong, Burma, Taiwan, Bosnia, Bangladesh, and Chile.

Participants were recruited on voluntary basis. At the time of data collection, they were enrolled in various pre-entry English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses at an Australian university. First, the NEO-FFI was distributed. One requirement of this study was that participants have an overall IELTS Score of at least 6.0 (or TOEFL 570) in order to understand the NEO-FFI personality questionnaire which was not designed in mind with speakers from non-English speaking backgrounds. During the data collection, due to the sometimes rather complex nature of language contained in the NEO-FFI (metaphors, colloquialisms, etc.), participants were shown on an overhead transparency and given a handout of a previously prepared vocabulary-meaning list that could potentially be difficult to understand. Participants were also allowed to use dictionaries and seek clarification from their teachers, if they were uncertain of the meaning of certain expressions. There was no time limit set.

The NEO Personality Five Factor Inventory [Short Version] or NEO-FFI (Costa & McCrae, 1985) is a 65-item questionnaire – a short version of the 240-item NEO PI-R [Full Version, Revised]. It is also a paper-and-pencil self-report measure based upon the five-factor model of trait personality which is currently widely accepted by the psychological community. The five factors of dimensions of personality measured by this inventory are: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness (NEOAC). Each domain consists of six facets which can be summed to form a total domain (e.g. extraversion) score. Respondents use a five point Likert format scale to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with each of the 65 statements, indicating the extent to which each statement describes the person's self. Item responses are numerically coded and summed to obtain facet and domain scores.

The inventory has been in existence for over 20 years. A considerable amount of research has been done on it, and excellent support for the validity and reliability of domains has been reported consistently (Furnham, 1996). It is one of the most heavily used measures in academic research studies on personality and is believed to be superior to, for example, the Myer Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) that is used widely in the consultancy and training world (Furnham, 1996).

The Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) (Horwitz, 1987) [see Appendix A], on the other hand, was designed specifically with language learners in mind and did not present any challenges in terms of language comprehension. The BALLI (Horwitz, 1987) is a pencil-and-paper, self-report 34-item questionnaire, containing statements related to the following five areas (later also referred to as 'Horwitz taxonomy'): Foreign Language Aptitude, The Difficulty of Language Learning, The Nature of Language Learning, Learning and Communication Strategies, and, Motivations and Expectations. Respondents were required to rate their agreement to each statement on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Participants indicated their degree of agreement or disagreement to each of the 34 items included on the sheet. There was also no time limit set.

The data were gathered over an eight-month period, and entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 16 for analysis. Preliminary analyses of the sample of students and their responses to the BALLI, using Mahalanobis distances and a chi-square test, showed that three students had responses that were outliers in the data; they were omitted. The MSA (measure of sampling adequacy for the factor analysis) was inadequate ( $< 0.5$ ) for two questionnaire items: B15 and B25, which were subsequently omitted.

The responses from 262 students on the remaining 32 BALLI items were summarised using factor analysis, with maximum likelihood extraction and oblimin rotation. Seventeen (17) of the



items gave responses that were interrelated and that appeared in the five summarising factors. The responses to the remaining 17 items were not interrelated in the BALLI, but still contain information that may be useful in any further investigations, such as the relationship between the BALLI and the NEO-FFI.

Scores for each student for the five areas of the Horwitz taxonomy were calculated by summing the responses for the questions included in the relevant area:

- (i) Foreign Language Aptitude;
- (ii) The Difficulty of Language Learning;
- (iii) The Nature of Language Learning;
- (iv) Learning and Communication Strategies; and
- (v) Motivations and Expectations.

The scores for each of the five personality factors (NEOAC) were regressed separately:

- (i) on the scores for the five factors that summarised the inter-related responses to the BALLI plus the seventeen responses that did not appear in the summary; and
- (ii) on the five Horwitz taxonomy scores.

## RESULTS

Table 1 below shows descriptive statistics for the responses by the 262 advanced students for the BALLI questionnaire. The minimum and maximum value for each question in Table 1 was 1 and 5, respectively. Table 2 shows responses to the Horwitz taxonomy variables, and Table 3 shows the NEO FFI personality questionnaire results.

**TABLE 1**  
**Descriptive statistics for responses to 34 BALLI questions for 262 students**

	BALLI item Number and its description	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
B1	It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.	1.49	0.83	2.23	5.67
B2	Some people have a special ability for learning a foreign language.	1.83	0.78	1.35	3.39
B6	People from my country are good at learning foreign languages.	2.30	1.01	0.75	0.02
B10	It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.	3.26	0.74	0.21	0.44
B11	People who are good at maths or science are not good at learning foreign languages.	1.78	0.75	1.10	2.22
B16	I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	2.82	0.82	-0.08	0.50
B19	Women are better than men at learning languages.	2.26	0.93	0.76	0.39
B30	People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.	2.02	0.98	1.12	1.10
B33	Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	4.17	0.98	-1.34	1.47
B3	Some languages are easier than others.	2.56	0.90	0.40	-0.03
B4	The English language is: 1 very difficult; 2 difficult; 3 medium difficult; 4 easy; 5 very easy.	3.62	0.93	-0.46	-0.18
B15	If someone spent 1 hour a day learning a language, how long would it take them to speak the language very well? 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 hr per day.	1.73	0.81	1.50	3.37
B25	It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language.	2.17	0.82	0.36	-0.08

**TABLE 1**  
**Descriptive statistics for responses to 34 BALLI questions for 262 students (continued)**

	BALLI item Number and its description	Mean	SD	Skew-ness	Kurtosis
B34	It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.	3.90	0.82	-1.07	2.01
B8	It is necessary to learn about English speaking cultures to speak English.	3.25	1.17	0.06	-1.00
B12	It is best to learn about English in an English speaking country.	3.10	0.87	-0.20	-0.01
B17	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning new words.	2.69	0.99	0.20	-0.61
B23	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning grammar.	1.67	0.76	1.61	4.54
B27	Learning a foreign language is different than learning other academic subjects.	2.91	1.08	0.32	-0.72
B28	The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from my own language.	1.70	0.75	1.49	3.87
B7	It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.	3.22	1.11	-0.02	-0.93
B9	You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly.	3.52	1.10	-0.54	-0.52
B13	I enjoy practicing English with the Australians I meet.	3.03	1.02	-0.04	-0.57
B14	It's OK to guess if you don't know a word in English.	2.16	0.89	0.73	0.75
B18	It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	3.19	1.11	-0.26	-0.87
B21	I feel shy speaking English with other people.	2.39	0.78	0.40	0.07
B22	If beginning students are allowed to make mistakes in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on.	2.54	1.06	0.35	-0.81

**TABLE 1**  
**Descriptive statistics for responses to 34 BALLI questions for 262 students (continued)**

	BALLI item Number and its description	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
B26	It's important to practice with cassettes/tapes or CD Roms.	3.83	0.98	-0.73	0.11
B25	I believe I will learn to speak English very well.	1.55	0.72	1.78	5.20
B20	People in my country feel it is important to speak English.	2.78	1.03	0.17	-0.76
B24	I would like to learn English so that I can get to know Australians better.	1.29	0.61	3.03	12.53
B29	If I learn to speak English very well I will have better job opportunities.	1.64	0.76	1.41	3.09
B31	I want to learn to speak English very well.	1.98	0.97	1.41	2.11
B32	I would like to have Australian friends.	3.09	1.09	-0.12	-0.91

In Table 1, the standard error for the skewness estimates is 0.15 and for the kurtosis estimates is 0.30. Some of the variables are not normally distributed; but the variables are only used in modeling analyses where it is the residuals of the model that need to be normally distributed.

**TABLE 2**  
**Descriptive statistics for Horwitz scores on BALLI questionnaire**

Horwitz Taxonomy Scores	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Foreign Language Aptitude	1.44	4.00	2.56	.38	.40	1.23
The Difficulty of Language Learning	1.60	4.40	3.02	.50	-.08	-.19
The Nature of Language Learning and Communication Strategies	1.00	4.33	2.62	.49	-.39	.62
Motivations and Expectations	1.88	3.88	2.91	.36	.00	-.00
	1.00	5.00	1.69	.50	2.53	13.81

The Kolmogorov statistic for testing normality has p-value <.03 for Motivations and Expectations, and >.15 for the other four scores; the variables are only used in modeling analyses where it is the residuals of the model that need to be normally distributed.

**TABLE 3**  
**Descriptive statistics for scores on personality traits using the NEO-FFI questionnaire**

Personality Trait	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Neuroticism	46.25	8.51	25	73	0.49	0.32
Extraversion	46.53	9.38	25	75	-0.16	0.18
Openness	47.29	7.15	25	73	0.05	0.66
Agreeableness	48.19	8.09	28	75	0.11	0.25
Conscientiousness	48.91	8.38	25	67	-0.60	0.22

The Kolmogorov statistic for testing normality, has p-value <.01 for Conscientiousness, and >.15 for the other four scores. The variables are only used in modeling analyses where it is the residuals of the model that need to be normally distributed.

The factor analysis of the BALLI responses using oblimin rotation which produced a five-factor solution is shown in Table 4. It includes the twelve (12) items that had loadings of at least .4 on a factor.

**TABLE 4**  
**The factor analysis of the BALLI responses using oblimin rotation produced a five-factor solution**

BALLI item number and its description		Loadings on factor				
		1	2	3	4	5
B31	I want to learn to speak English very well.	0.71				
B29	If I learn to speak English very well I will have better job opportunities.	0.65				
B20	People in my country feel it is important to speak English.	0.50				
B17	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning new words.		0.79			
B23	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning grammar.		0.68			
B32	I would like to have Australian friends.			-0.83		
B24	I would like to learn English so that I can get to know Australians better.			-0.66		
B13	I enjoy practicing English with the Australians I meet.			0.50		
B21	I feel shy speaking English with other people.				0.51	
B16	I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.				-0.41	
B11	People who are good at maths or science are not good at learning foreign languages.					0.52
B19	Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.					0.50

Factor 1 is a measure of the students' motivations for coming to Australia to improve their English proficiency, gain higher professional qualifications and improve employment prospects in the future. Factor 2 shows their preferred strategies for learning a foreign language and reflects 'traditional' notions of language learning. Factor 3 reflects the respondents' integrative motivation and a desire to 'fit-in' with Australians. Factor 4 is a measure of the students' self confidence, and factor 5 reflects the respondents' belief that there is an inherent distinction between learning humanities-type subjects like languages, and the 'hard sciences', and that women are better at the former than at the latter.

For the relationships between the personality traits and the responses to the BALLI, regression analyses using backward elimination with  $\alpha = 0.02$  (to keep control of Type 1 error) were used. These analyses relate each of the five NEO-FFI personality trait scores to the BALLI responses. They were examined in three models, of which the first two are hierarchical, that is, the explanatory variables in the first model are a subset of those used in the second model. The scores for each of the five personality factors (NEOAC) were regressed separately:

- (i) on the scores for the five factors plus the twenty-two responses that did not appear in the inter-relationships; and
- (ii) on the five Horwitz taxonomy scores.

Table 5 shows the summary of the results of backward elimination regression analyses relating the BALLI survey and the NEO-FFI survey.

The practical significance of each model is given by the percentage of the variance in the personality score that is explained by the model ( $R^2$ ), and has been converted to the effect size  $f^2 = R^2/(1-R^2)$  (Cohen, 1992) in Table 5. Effect size (ES) is interpreted as small if  $f^2 = 0.02$ ; medium if  $f^2 = 0.15$ ; large if  $f^2 = 0.35$ .

**TABLE 5**  
**Summary of results of the backward elimination regression analyses relating the scores of each of the five NEOAC personality traits to the BALLI factor scores**

Summary of results of analyses relating the BALLI survey and the NEO-FFI survey.				
Personality Trait	Effect size of Beliefs used as explanatory variables for each personality trait.			
	Using the five factors summarising the inter-related BALLI responses plus the 17 remaining BALLI responses		Using the summated scores for the Horwitz taxonomy	
	Effect size Cohen $f^2$	Explanatory Variables	Effect size Cohen $f^2$	Explanatory Variables
Neuroticism	.17	<u>Factor 3</u> Reflects the students' integrative motivation <u>Factor 4</u> Measure of the students' self-confidence: <u>B8</u> The English language is very difficult. <u>B18</u> It is important to repeat and practise a lot.	.04	Learning and communication strategies.
Extraversion	.03	<u>Factor 3</u> Reflects the students' integrative motivation		None
Openness	.03	<u>B33</u> Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.		None
Agreeableness	.05	<u>B27</u> Learning a foreign language is different than learning other academic subjects		None
Conscientiousness	.10	<u>B4R</u> The English language is very difficult. <u>B8</u> It is necessary to learn about English-speaking cultures to speak English. <u>B5</u> I believe I will learn to speak English very well.	.04	Learning and communication strategies



The effect sizes for the models shown in the left panel of Table 5 are small for Extraversion (0.03), Openness (0.03), and Agreeableness (0.05); and medium for Conscientiousness (0.10) and Neuroticism (0.17). These models use the inter-relationships summarised by the five factors of seventeen of the BALLI responses and the extra useful information in the BALLI responses that were not part of the summarised inter-relationships. These results are based on responses to all 34 BALLI items, and can be compared with those based on the Horwitz taxonomy, which also uses all responses through the summated scores. The results are shown in the right panel in Table 5, and show that the effect sizes were zero (for Extraversion, Openness, and Agreeableness), or small (0.04 for Neuroticism and Conscientiousness).

None of the models shows a strong relationship between a personality trait and the BALLI results for this sample of students. The Horwitz scores were not at all useful in the analysis of these data because the Horwitz taxonomy was devised using data from a different population. The strongest relationship involved Neuroticism, but it is only of moderate strength with Cohen effect size of 0.17. This means that respondents who scored highly on Neuroticism (showed emotional instability) did not report a desire to make friends with Australians, did not show a high level of self-confidence, and perceived English to be very difficult where much practice and repetition are required in order to learn it. This result finds support in psychological literature on neurotics' feelings of concern or anxiousness about having to perform a task that is perceived to be difficult, low self-efficacy beliefs, and low desire for socialization (Watson & Clark, 1984). Conscientiousness showed only a weak-to-moderate Cohen effect size. Other traits had Cohen effect size that ranged from 0.05 down to zero, showing weak or non-existent relationships.

## DISCUSSION

In this sample, the overall strength of the relationship of learners' beliefs to their personality traits was found to be weak. A relationship of moderate strength was found between the Neuroticism personality trait and certain language beliefs (e.g., the higher a participant scored on the Neuroticism scale, the more difficult they perceived the English language to be), which reflects a general trend in psychological research findings that highly neurotic individuals perceive tasks to be more difficult than other individuals (Jarsen & Buss, 2005). Other relationships in the study were, however, weak or non-existent. Therefore, while language learning theories may need to take into account positive correlations produced by research studies, the overall findings of the present study are not strong enough to support any firm recommendations. A number of factors may have contributed to these results, such as sample and contextual variables, as well as survey instruments and data analysis methods.

While this exploratory study provides useful theoretical and methodological insight into a possible relationship of learner beliefs and personality traits, the outcomes nonetheless are subject to a number of constraints. Dewaele (2005) points out that, first and foremost, the outcome of any research will depend on the population involved in the research. Participants in SLA studies are typically young adults enrolled in the universities where the researchers work. They cannot, therefore, be representative of other populations in terms of ethnic or linguistic background, age, and ability, among other variables. It is clear that more varied samples of participants representing a wide variety of backgrounds and cultural combinations would strengthen the validity of the findings gleaned by quantitative studies in psychologically oriented SLA research which aspire to generate universal explanations about human psychological traits (Dewaele, 2005).

One of a number of population constraints which may have had an impact on the outcomes obtained in this research is the ethnicity

bias of 58% represented by participants of Chinese national background. An examination of the basic concept of Confucianism and the teaching of Confucian Classics reveals that cultural values are the dominant force shaping the individual's perceptions and ways of learning (Hu, 2002). It may be possible that it is the respondents' in question cultural collectivistic heritage that is a greater influencing factor in their perceptions of language learning rather than their individual differences such as personality traits.

However, the limitations of this study go beyond its sample-related constraints and context specificity. Given the particularly complex and multi-faceted nature of beliefs about language learning and the myriad of factors that could account for them, it is difficult to exclude any endogenous and exogenous factors likely to contribute to the dimensions of the specific relationship under study. Consequently, while no attempt is made to generalize the findings of this study beyond the sampled population, comparison data suggest the feasibility of finding general trends across contexts and individual differences of learners through replicated studies (Kern, 1995).

#### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this paper was to report on a study that investigated the relationship between learner beliefs and personality traits. Specifically, it was designed to examine a possible relationship between beliefs about language learning of advanced ESL students in the Australian tertiary context and their personality traits, using a sample of 262 overseas students from various nationality backgrounds.

The study was exploratory in nature and arose out of a number of calls in the field (Horwitz, 1999; Rifkin, 2000; Wenden, 1999) for the investigation of the relationship of language learner beliefs and individual differences. Such a relationship has been argued to be a possible causative factor in the stability of learner beliefs reported in some studies. Establishing the stability of language learner beliefs is

of significant importance because a number of researchers report a predominantly unchangeable, static nature of learner beliefs (Kern, 1995; Weinstein, 1994; Williams & Burden, 1997), suggesting possible ethical and methodological concerns in attempting to change these beliefs in the classroom context for the benefit of the learners (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005). As Mantle-Bromley (1995) notes, "we do not yet know enough about the nature of incoming students' beliefs to design effective curricular intervention addressing those beliefs" (p. 377), pointing to the need for further research into the feasibility of such interventions. Yet, it is possible that in the future belief-intervention activities might have a place in the classroom, as anecdotal evidence of teachers would suggest that some are done with apparent success. However, there is still a lack of documented evidence to suggest whether changes in learner beliefs produce positive outcomes and are long lasting, reflecting a lack of longitudinal studies in this area, and the debate continues on the ethical, empirical, and practical issues concerned with changing unrealistic or unproductive learner beliefs.

While a topic of great interest to educational researchers is how beliefs influence knowledge acquisition and restructuring, the difficulty for future empirical research is compounded by the notion that "while we can theoretically and philosophically separate beliefs from other interrelated constructs..., it seems virtually impossible to do so in any true sense, pragmatically or empirically" (Garner & Alexander, 1994: 299). Furthermore, cognitive theory postulates that for beliefs to be 'updated' a certain condition must exist. Namely, "on the assumption that prior beliefs are largely true, new prospective beliefs are examined for consistency with prior beliefs, since a necessary condition of a belief being true is consistency with all other true beliefs" (Goldman, 1986: 100). Likewise, social psychology research provides compelling, corroborating evidence that when presented with new information, learners are heavily influenced by what they already know or believe (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Strong beliefs are highly accessible, easily activated and tend to bias information processing (Fazio, 1989).

A number of interdisciplinary studies have reported on the relationship of beliefs to other individual differences such as personality traits (Furnham, Johnson, & Rawles, 1985; Furnham *et al.*, 2002; Langston & Sykes, 1997), their resistance to change (Garner, & Alexander, 1994), as well as the learners' vested interest in previously held beliefs (Woods, 2003), particularly when there is ego-involvement because one has a high personal stake in one's belief – then there will be less likelihood of change (Krosnick, 1988). Abelson (1986) summarized by saying that beliefs are like possessions – we hold onto them, value them and can be resistant to letting them go. Indeed, the notion of individual's cognitive readiness to change is an element important in change in a number of different theories of learning. Readiness for metacognitive change seems to have an important affective side as well (Woods, 2003).

While the study described is the first known attempt to seek to establish a possible relationship between learner beliefs about foreign or second language learning and personality traits, it would be worthwhile for other researchers to replicate the study given alternative contextual and participant variables. Other recommendations include investigating a possible relationship of language learner beliefs to other stable individual differences such as gender, as a number of recent studies have already reported a significant and positive relationship (Bacon & Finneman, 1992; Piechurska-Kuciel & Bernat, *in press*; Siebert, 2003). Contextual or situational variables, as well as ethnic and nationality differences, could further be studied for the light they may shed on the nature (and possibly stability) of learner beliefs. Indeed, a number of studies on context/setting specificity (Bernat, 2006; Rifkin, 2000), and ethnicity (Horwitz, 1999; Siebert, 2003), have produced varied results in relation to these variables and language learner beliefs.

More importantly, the field of language learner beliefs has yet to determine the possibility and plausibility of changing learner beliefs in the classroom context, should they be found to be unproductive to the learners' progress in acquiring a second or foreign language. Over two decades ago, Horwitz (1988) reported that more than a

third of the students in her study held misconceptions with respect to the length of time it takes to learn a foreign language, to name but one of many instances of unproductive beliefs. Horwitz's findings are corroborated by the current study. Whether learner beliefs can and ought to be changed in the classroom is a currently much under-researched area, reflected by the paucity of literature on the issue. Dole and Sinatra (1994) point out that "most often studies did not examine long term changes in beliefs by re-administering dependent measures over time" (p. 253). Yet, a number of psychological theories exist, such as the central and peripheral routes to persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and systematic processing (Chaiken, 1987), which could provide a theoretical framework for future studies exploring the possibilities of belief change and change continuity in the ESL context, provided a better understanding of learner beliefs is first established.

Other areas of future research might include investigating ways of dealing with the mismatch between teacher and learner beliefs in the classroom. Studies that have found significant belief differences between teachers and their learners generally report that students hold a higher preference for grammar, translation, vocabulary and pronunciation exercises (Baya & Cheng, 1997; Bernat, 2007a, 2007b; Davies, 2003; Peacock, 1999; Siebert, 2003), and often hold unrealistic expectations about the length of time it takes to learn a foreign language (Cohen & Fass, 2001; Horwitz, 1988). Kern (1995) and Horwitz (1988) suggest that differences between student and teacher beliefs might create tension in the classroom, thus emphasizing the need for studies to investigate the most productive ways of minimizing the gap. Suggestions for minimizing this gap have recently been raised by Woods (2003) and Bernat (2007b), and could provide future researchers and language teachers with a framework to begin with.

Finally, although research in SLA was spawned by various disciplines such as linguistics, language teaching and educational psychology, it has evolved into a field with relatively closed competing paradigms. Researchers within these paradigms tend to

avoid concepts and methodologies from neighbouring disciplines that could potentially enrich their own perspectives. Indeed, researchers have recently called for more interdisciplinary studies in the field of foreign language acquisition (Dewaele, 2005), and particularly in the area of learner beliefs (Bernat, 2008). Consequently, it may be worthwhile to combine a number of research methodologies in future studies, given the constraints of purely quantitative methods investigating a phenomena as cognitively and affectively rich as learner belief systems, and the interpretatively subjective and contextually specific nature of qualitative studies alone. A combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods could provide greater insight into a multitude of potentially interacting socio-cultural/contextual, affective/psychological, cognitive/neurobiological, and ideological factors that determine – to a variable extent – the learning process, the production and the comprehension of foreign languages. No doubt, diversity of theoretical and methodological frameworks in language learner beliefs research could create a rich tapestry of complementing studies, broadening our current knowledge in this area.

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### APPENDIX A: BELIEFS ABOUT LANGUAGE LEARNING INVENTORY (HORWITZ, 1987)

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Nationality: \_\_\_\_\_

Read each belief and **circle** the number that shows your opinion.

1 = strongly agree      2 = agree      3 = neither agree or disagree  
4 = disagree      5 = strongly disagree

Code*	Foreign Language Aptitude					
B1	It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.	1	2	3	4	5
B2	Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	1	2	3	4	5
B6	People from my country are good at learning foreign languages.	1	2	3	4	5
B10	It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.	1	2	3	4	5
B11	People who are good at maths or science are not good at learning foreign languages.	1	2	3	4	5
B16	I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	1	2	3	4	5
B19	Women are better than men at learning languages.	1	2	3	4	5
B30	People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.	1	2	3	4	5
B33	Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>The Difficulty of Language Learning</b>					
B3	Some languages are easier than others.	1	2	3	4	5
B4	The English language is: 1=very difficult; 2=difficult; 3=medium difficult; 4=easy; 5=very easy.	1	2	3	4	5
B15	If someone spent 1 hour a day learning a language, how long would it take them to speak the language very well? 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 hr per day	1	2	3	4	5
B25	It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language.	1	2	3	4	5
B34	It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.	1	2	3	4	5

Code*	Foreign Language Aptitude					
	<b>The Nature of Language Learning</b>					
B8	It is necessary to learn about English speaking cultures to speak English.	1	2	3	4	5
B12	It is best to learn English in an English speaking country.	1	2	3	4	5
B17	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning new words.	1	2	3	4	5
B23	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning grammar.	1	2	3	4	5
B27	Learning a foreign language is different than learning other academic subjects.	1	2	3	4	5
B28	The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from my own language.	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>Learning and Communication Strategies</b>					
B7	It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.	1	2	3	4	5
B9	You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly.	1	2	3	4	5
B13	I enjoy practicing English with the Australians I meet.	1	2	3	4	5
B14	It's OK to guess if you don't know a word in English.	1	2	3	4	5
B18	It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	1	2	3	4	5
B21	I feel shy speaking English with other people.	1	2	3	4	5
B22	If beginning students are allowed to make mistakes in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on.	1	2	3	4	5
B26	It's important to practice with cassettes/tapes or CD Roms.	1	2	3	4	5
	<b>Motivations and Expectations</b>					
B5	I believe I will learn to speak English very well.	1	2	3	4	5
B20	People in my country feel that it is important to speak English.	1	2	3	4	5
B24	I would like to learn English so that I can get to know Australians better.	1	2	3	4	5
B29	If I learn to speak English very well I will have better job opportunities.	1	2	3	4	5
B31	I want to learn to speak English very well.	1	2	3	4	5
B32	I would like to have Australian friends.	1	2	3	4	5