

# ELT Students' Language Learning Beliefs and the Correlation to English Proficiency

Sheila Agustina<sup>1</sup>, Fika Megawati<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidoarjo; sheilaagustina@umsida.ac.id

<sup>2</sup>Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidoarjo; fikamegawati@umsida.ac.id

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\*Correspondence: Sheila Agustina

Email: sheilaagustina@umsida.ac.id

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**Abstract:** There are various factors affecting an English learner to be able to learn English successfully. These factors may influence one's learning pace and difficulties. One factor that is often referred to in many studies is the learner's belief. The diverse beliefs of English learners are often said to be an influential factor to their language achievement. Based on this notion, this paper makes an effort to prove the correlation between the students' language beliefs and achievement. This study focuses on students of English Language Teaching (ELT) as the participants. The ELT students' beliefs are concluded from the questionnaire adapted from Horwitz's Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI). Then, using the quantitative research approach, the results from the questionnaires are correlated to the students' score of English proficiency test using Pearson correlation with SPSS 26. In the end, the result of the study shows positive beliefs by the ELT students. However, its correlation to language proficiency is not significant.

**Keywords:** beliefs; proficiency; achievement

## INTRODUCTION

There have been many discussions about students' beliefs in language learning. It is said that every language learner must hold a certain belief regarding language learning. The idea of language learning belief was first declared by Horwitz [1] who defines it as perception on issues regarding second or foreign language learning. Since then, this notion has been explored by many researchers and practitioners who want to examine learners' beliefs on their language learning. Many research findings reveal that belief is not static. It changes overtime as a result from one's learning experiences [2]. As the learning experience develops, one's belief might also change. The learning experience itself is formed by various factors from the learner's learning environment. It explains that belief is dynamic depending on various factors [3]. Not only affected by learner's experience, belief also turns out to have contributions to language learning success [4], [5]. Such as motivation and strategies that can influence a person's success and failure in language [6]–[9], belief is assumed to have the same effect. However, unlike motivation and strategies, studies about how language learning beliefs affect learners' success are still limited and not sufficient.

Some studies are recorded to have discussed the effect of language belief on the learning success using Horwitz's Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) questionnaire as the main instrument. First, Bagherzadeh and Azizi [10] proved that there is a correlation between proficiency and beliefs among Non-English Major EFL Students. Next, Angelinawati [11] who conducted a survey on high-schoolers also found that beliefs are significantly correlated to English achievement. Then, Hulin & Yulian [12] who conducted a

study on Chinese English-Major College Students showed that learning belief affects positively on learning achievement. The recent study [13] about English-major students' language learning beliefs and academic achievement showed positive and strong correlations between the two descriptors. It explains that the more positive the belief held by a student, the higher the English score. However, there are also some studies which suggest otherwise. Castro and Mail [14] found that two group members of high-achiever and low-achiever have similar language learning beliefs about their language learning, and that their beliefs did not influence their test results. Moreover, Zhou [15] proclaimed that students' learning beliefs have no correlation to their English achievement. The latest study [16] also indicated insignificant correlation between English-major students' beliefs with academic achievement.

The unsettled conclusion about whether or not belief contributes to learning outcomes serves the foundation of this study in conducting similar analysis. Utilizing the same concept and instrument as previous researches, this study aims at describing the English Language Teaching (ELT) students' beliefs on language learning and revealing the correlation between beliefs and successful learning. Different from the previous studies that mainly used English scores as references, this study uses score of an English proficiency test as the reference for learning achievement.

## METHOD

### Research Design

This study mainly uses a quantitative approach with a correlational design. The quantitative approach is employed to identify the students' beliefs in language learning. The data of students' beliefs are taken from a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire adapted from Horwitz's Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)[1]. The questionnaire consists of 32 statements comprising 5 different categories. The 5 categories are beliefs on (1) the aptitude in foreign language, (2) language learning difficulty, (3) language learning nature, (4) strategies of learning and communication, and (5) expectation and motivation. The students' beliefs are then correlated to the students' last TOEP (Test of English Proficiency Test) scores using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient in SPSS version 26 software.

### Participants

The 23 students of the English Language Teaching Department of Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidoarjo are selected as participants in this study. The consideration of selection is simply based on their educational background and the fact that they are expectant English teachers. These chosen participants are in their final year because final-year students are considered to have more experience in English learning than other students. Before collecting data, each participant needs to complete a brief biographical form including name, sex, age, and last TOEP (Test of English Proficiency) score.

TOEP or Test of English Proficiency is a proficiency test equivalent to TOEFL (Test of English as Foreign Language) which is administered independently by Language Institute of Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidoarjo. The test includes listening comprehension, grammar skill, and reading comprehension.

### Data Analysis

In collecting the data of students' beliefs, students have to respond to 5-Likert scale items on the BALLI questionnaire. The scale varies from strongly agree (5), agree (4), undecided (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1). Then, the students' response is calculated statistically to find the mean scores of each belief category. These mean scores are presented on figures to depict each category and represent the beliefs:

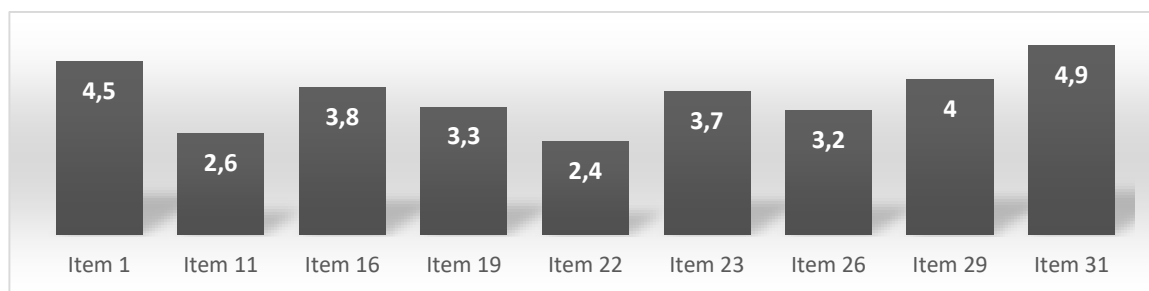
the higher the mean of the BALLI score, the more positive the student's belief. After that, these BALLI scores are compared to students' TOEP scores using Pearson correlation to discover the level of correlation and if the correlation is either positive or negative. The students' TOEP scores are correlated to students' overall BALLI scores and each belief category score. The results of these correlations are eventually presented in a table.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Students' Beliefs on Five Different Categories

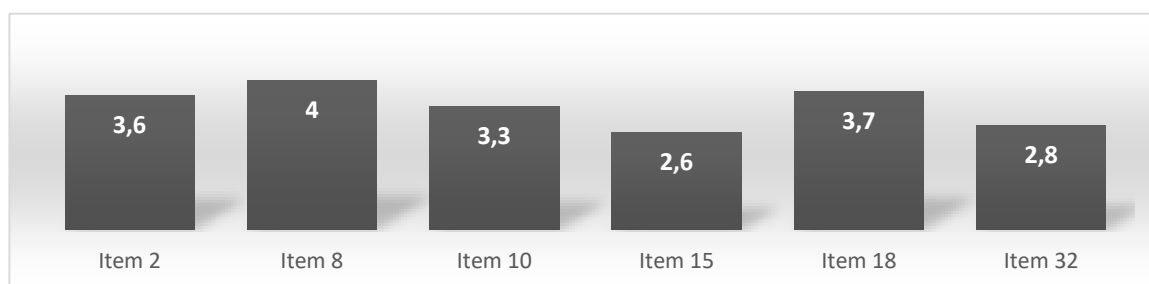
After analyzing the 5-point Likert scale questionnaires from 23 students, the results are summarized and described in five sections according to five different categories. First, the mean scores of students' beliefs on foreign language aptitude are presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Students' Beliefs on Foreign Language Aptitude**



Based on Figure 1, the highest mean score is reflected in Item 31 (Everybody is able to speak English). It means almost all participating students believe that individuals, regardless of the possible diverse backgrounds, have the ability to speak English. Sequentially, as shown in Item 1 (Children are easier in learning English), most students thought that it would be much harder for people to start learning English at a mature age. They assume that it is easier and faster for children to acquire a second or foreign language. Next, also with a relatively high mean score is Item 29. It seems most students believe that 'everyone who masters two or more languages is intelligent'. In contrast, as depicted in Item 22, many students argue that 'individuals who are clever at math have difficulties in learning English'. It infers that, in the students' opinion, the ability to learn a language does not associate with the ability to learn other subjects. It supports a study claiming that students did not believe being good at math is equivalent to lacking in English [17]. As for the students' beliefs on the difficulty of language learning, the mean scores are given in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Students' Beliefs on Language Learning Difficulty**



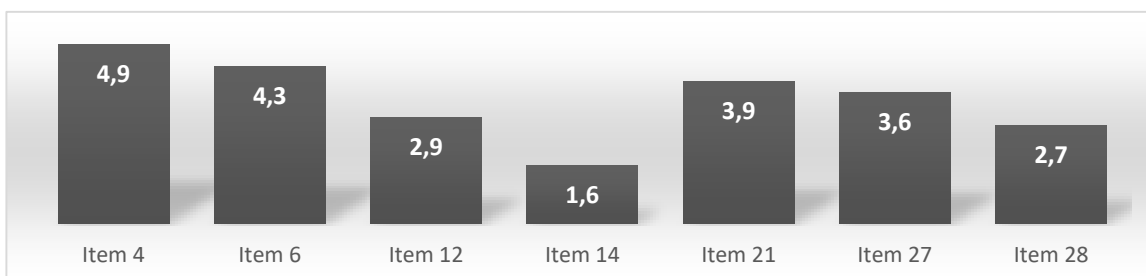
Based on Figure 2, the most positive belief is reflected in Item 8 (I believe I will be able to speak English). It means most students believe that they will finally be able to use English orally on a daily basis. On the other hand, Item 15 (Speaking English is easier than listening to it) has the lowest score in this category. Students seem to disagree that producing utterances in English is easier than trying to understand people saying English [17][18]. It can be said that the students are not confident with their speaking skills, or that they have difficult times in expressing themselves orally compared to just listening to other people speaking English. Then, regarding the beliefs related to the language learning nature, the mean scores are presented in Figure 3.

**Figure 3. Students' Beliefs on Language Learning Nature**



Based on Figure 3, the students seemingly have similar perceptions related to the language learning nature. It can be seen from the fair to high mean score shown in 6 question items. However, there are 3 items which hold strong beliefs of the students. Item 9, which has the highest mean score, says that 'Studying English is studying new vocabulary'. It seems that most students agree that trying to acquire English is the same as trying to acquire unfamiliar words. The students continue to reckon that 'Studying English is not the same as studying other subjects' as described in Item 25. Respectively, most students believe that English is better learned in English-speaking countries (Item 30). They might think that learning English in those places will help them develop good habits and eventually perform the language the best way. As for the students' beliefs on the learning and communication strategies, the mean scores are presented in Figure 4.

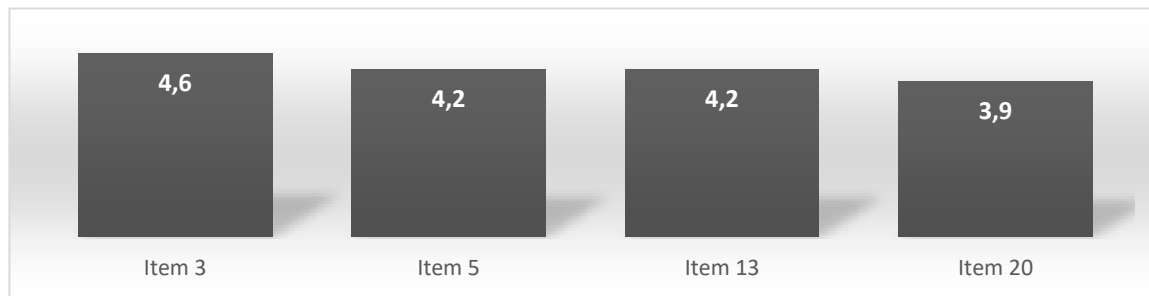
**Figure 4. Students' Beliefs on Learning and Communication Strategies**



Based on Figure 4, the mean score is significantly high on Item 4 (Practicing English regularly is important). It means most students believe that practicing English regularly can result in a good performance. It also means almost all students are confident that perfection in learning English comes from regular drills and repetition. Moreover, according to the students based on the high score of Item 6 (Guessing English words is fine if you have no idea about their meanings), guessing can be a good

strategy when someone finds unfamiliar English words. On the other hand, as reflected in low-scored Item 14 (We can mention everything in English when we can pronounce them properly), many students consider that making errors and mistakes for the first time is understandable, so that people should not feel burdened to express themselves using English. Last, the mean scores of students' beliefs about motivation and expectation are presented in Figure 5.

**Figure 5. Students' Beliefs on Motivation and Expectation**



Based on Figure 5, it is obvious that most students hold positive beliefs of this category. Item 3, which has the highest mean score, describes that students have many chances to use English when they can speak English correctly. Then, based on Item 5, most students hope to learn English to get acquainted to the English speakers well and have no trouble communicating with them. With still a high mean score, the result of Item 13 confirms that many students assume that speaking English well will be beneficial to finding good jobs in the future. Finally, the students also believe that Indonesian people consider speaking English is important (Item 20).

**Correlation on Students' Beliefs and TOEP (Test of English Proficiency) Scores**

After analyzing the correlation statistically, the explanation is presented based on five different categories of students' beliefs (aptitude in foreign language, language learning difficulty, language learning nature, strategies of learning and communication, and expectation and motivation). The correlation between students' beliefs on each category as well as the total BALLI scores is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlation of Students' Beliefs and TOEP Scores

		TOEP	Belief 1	Belief 2	Belief 3	Belief 4	Belief 5	BALLI Score
TOEP	Pearson Correlation	1	-0.311	0.047	0.112	-0.412	-0.203	-0.256
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.149	0.832	0.611	0.051	0.352	0.238
	N	23	23	23	23	23	23	23
Foreign Language Aptitude	Pearson Correlation	-0.311	1	0.197	0.411	0.029	.645**	.813**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.149		0.369	0.051	0.895	0.001	0.000
	N	23	23	23	23	23	23	23

Difficulty of Language Learning	Pearson Correlation	0.047	0.197	1	-0.030	-0.365	0.014	0.239
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.832	0.369		0.893	0.087	0.951	0.272
	N	23	23	23	23	23	23	23
Nature of language Learning	Pearson Correlation	0.112	0.411	-0.030	1	0.054	0.362	.676**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.611	0.051	0.893		0.808	0.089	0.000
	N	23	23	23	23	23	23	23
Learning and Communication Strategies	Pearson Correlation	-0.412	0.029	-0.365	0.054	1	0.188	0.284
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.051	0.895	0.087	0.808		0.390	0.188
	N	23	23	23	23	23	23	23
Motivation and Expectation	Pearson Correlation	-0.203	.645**	0.014	0.362	0.188	1	.803**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.352	0.001	0.951	0.089	0.390		0.000
	N	23	23	23	23	23	23	23
BALLI Score	Pearson Correlation	-0.256	.813**	0.239	.676**	0.284	.803**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.238	0.000	0.272	0.000	0.188	0.000	
	N	23	23	23	23	23	23	23

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As shown in Table 1, overall students' belief on English language learning has negative yet insignificant correlation with their TOEP scores ( $r = -0.256$ ,  $p = 0.238$ ,  $>0.05$ ). The negative correlation defines that the higher the students' BALLI scores, the lower the TOEP scores. It also means that students who score relatively high in their TOEP tend to hold negative beliefs toward English language learning. However, the correlation is weak, so it can hardly be said that such correlation exists.

In detail, based on the students' foreign language aptitude beliefs and their TOEP scores, negative and weak correlation is evident ( $r = -0.311$ ,  $p = 0.149$ ,  $>0.05$ ). It says that students with higher TOEP scores do not believe in the presence of special ability in language that individuals possess, or that a certain gender has better language ability than the other. They also argue that language ability is related to intelligence. Yet again, this correlation is not strong.

As for the students' difficulty of language learning beliefs and TOEP scores, the number shows positive but insignificant correlation ( $r = 0.047$ ,  $p = 0.832$ ,  $>0.05$ ). Although the correlation is weak, the high-scorer students understand that learning English is not easy, and some aspects might be challenging, but they think these are manageable.

Then, according to the students' language learning nature beliefs and their TOEP scores, there is also a positive and insignificant correlation ( $r = 0.112$ ,  $p = 0.116$ ,  $>0.05$ ). It can be said that high-scorer students tend to believe that English is not the same as other subjects, and it needs special treatment to be able to acquire English well, such as knowing the native's culture or learning it directly

in the English-speaking countries. Many high-scoring students may also believe that learning English requires much effort in learning grammar, translation, and new vocabulary.

Regarding the beliefs of students' learning and communication strategies and their TOEFL scores, the result shows negative and insignificant correlation ( $r = -0.412$ ,  $p = 0.051$ ,  $> 0.05$ ). It describes there is little tendency for high-scoring students not to utilize various language learning strategies. In fact, low-scoring students use more strategies than the other group. However, the correlation is weak.

Last, the analysis of the students' motivation and expectation beliefs and their TOEFL scores indicates another negative and insignificant correlation ( $r = -0.203$ ,  $p = 0.352$ ,  $> 0.05$ ). Even though the correlation is low, it can be inferred that high-scoring students lack motivation in learning English compared to the other group.

## CONCLUSION

Referring to the results of the analysis, it can be drawn that the ELT students have fairly positive beliefs regarding English language learning ( $M = 3.7$ ). The most positive category is held by Belief 5 or motivation and expectation ( $M = 4.2$ ). It shows that most students believe that being able to perform English well is important and beneficial for both social and work life [19]. Respectively, Belief 3 about the language learning nature comes third ( $M = 3.8$ ), and Belief 1 about foreign language aptitude comes next ( $M = 3.6$ ). Furthermore, there is not a single category which is perceived negatively by the students. Belief 2 about difficulty of language learning and Belief 4 about strategies of learning and communication share the same fair score from the students ( $M = 3.4$ ). However, when these beliefs are correlated to the students' TOEFL scores, the correlations tend to be negative and weak. In short, this study claims that most students have positive beliefs in language learning, but the attribution to the proficiency test is insufficient. The insignificant relationship in this study can be caused by the small number of participants, so it is suggested for researchers who are interested in the similar area to reach a larger number of participants.

Although there are no direct attributions to learning outcomes, the positive beliefs held by the majority of students are a good indicator of a pleasant learning atmosphere inside the classrooms. It is considered important for English teachers to instill learners' interest and generate motivation by sharing positive beliefs in learning English. It is because teachers play significant roles for students to learn successfully [20].

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