Iranian Intermediate ESP Students' language learning beliefs and their language learning strategies

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Abstract

The aim of the study is to examine the relationship between ESP students' language learning beliefs and strategy use. 68 Iranian female students studying in midwifery and nursing departments were selected. Study participants received the Quick Oxford placement, and 51 intermediate participants were selected from among them. Language Learning-Related Beliefs Inventory, and Language Learning Strategy-Inventory were used. Chi-square was used to find the relationship. The results showed that Iranian midwifery students are moderate in their beliefs about language learning, they generally use language learning strategies at a moderate level, and their preferences for language learning strategies are compensatory, metacognitive, memory, cognitive, social and affective. The results also showed that there is a positive relationship between ESP students' language learning beliefs and their use of language learning strategies. The findings of this study can also be fruitful for language learners and teachers, curriculum designers and material developers.

Keywords: ESP students, language learning beliefs, language learning strategies;

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1. Introduction

Belief has been defined as "psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that is felt to be true" (Richardson, 1996). Rokeach (1968) also declared that "beliefs are predispositions to action." He also (Barcelos, 2003) declared that learners' beliefs mean "beliefs about the nature of language and language learning."

Beliefs are important in educational psychology and the role of beliefs in the process of language learning cannot be ignored. Language learners' beliefs can be influential in the process of learning since these beliefs familiarize learners with the extent to which they are able to manage their own learning (Goetze and Driver, 2022). As (Bandura, 1986) declared individuals' beliefs about their capabilities to manage different realities is of great importance. Learners' beliefs have proved to influence both the actions and experiences of language learners Horwitz (1999). According to Horwitz (1988), language learning beliefs are directly related to the understanding of student expectations of success in language classes. So it is challenging to study the influence of language learners' beliefs since it motivate them to attend language classes and even learn better.

Language learners' perceived knowledge about the degree to which they can manage their learning process influence their learning performance and the ones who believe that they have control over the learning process attain higher levels of proficiency (Li, 2022). Also as Ajzen (2005) stated investigating learners' beliefs is of utmost importance but difficult to be discovered due to several factors that affect their beliefs. White (1999) declared that learners' beliefs shape their expectations about learning. Csizér and Dornyei (2005) hold the same views based on the previous findings. Considering these viewpoints, when teachers are informed about learners' beliefs about language, they can adapt different approaches in organizing opportunities for their students to learn better (Cotterall, 1999; Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005).

Understanding learners' perceptions about the difficulty of language learning; becoming aware of the fact that there exists different aptitude and opinions among individuals about language learning and beliefs about how individuals communicate as well as knowing learners expectations in language learning; all these are essential in the process of language learning (Albert and Csizér, 2022). Furthermore, it has been suggested that successful learners evolve perceptive beliefs about their abilities and language learning processes as well as effective use of language learning strategies and the combination of all these facts are effective in the learning process (Franklin-Guy, 2006).

According to Pintrich and DeGroot (1990) learners who hold positive views bout language learning and consider learning as an interesting are much more actively involved in their academic process. Not only students but also teachers should be aware of the importance of beliefs in language learning. The ones who have enough knowledge about the importance of language beliefs try to manage their class more effectively.

Conversely, language a learner who does not have positive viewpoints about language learning may be reluctant to employ effective strategies and this leads to negative experiences and even negative self-concepts or anxiety in classroom (Yesilcınar and Erdemir, 2022). On the other hand, students may have "false," ignorant, or negative beliefs, which can lead to reliance on less effective strategies, a negative attitude toward learning experiences, classroom anxiety, and negative self-concepts (Huang, 2006; Frugé, 2007).

Elaine Horwitz pioneered research on language learning beliefs of learners and teachers. 1980s, Horwitz during 1980s designed an instrument to assess students' beliefs about learning a second language entitled Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI). From then on, different lines of research

were carried out by employing Hurwitz's instrument to study language learning beliefs (Horwitz, 1988; Bacon and Finneman, 1990; Yang, 1999; Truitt, 1995; Park, 1995; Kuntz 1996b; Mori, 1999).

To access learners' beliefs about language learning, Horwitz's Inventory *about Language* Learning (BALLI) is the most widely used questionnaire to investigate students' beliefs about language learning (Barcelos, 2003). It consists of five main areas: (a) beliefs about the difficulty of language learning, which relates to the overall difficulty of learning a second language, as well as perceptions of the difficulty of a particular target language; (b) foreign language ability in relation to views on the existence of the talent and the type of individuals who possess it; (c) beliefs about the language learning process related to students' ideas about "what it means to learn a language and how to do it" (d) beliefs about how to communicate; and (e) motivation and student expectations (Horwitz, 1988; Horwitz, 1999).

Many researchers to date used Horwitz's BALLi in different contexts to asses learners' beliefs about language learning. For example, (Nikitina and Furuoka, 2006; Rieger, 2009; Zhang & Cui, 2010; Ghobadi and khodadady, 2011; Fujiwara, 2011; Abdolahzadeh and RajaeeNia, 2014; Al-malki and Javid, 2018).

About language learning strategies it should be mentioned that, the change from teacher-centered approaches to learner-centered ones over the last decades is crystal clear. Following this trend, there was much endeavor to help language learners to rely on themselves to feel more autonomous in language learning (Li et al., 2023; Sudina, 2023). An autonomous learner is responsible for what and how he/she learns. Good language learners employ various techniques in their language learning process. Hence, as individuals learn differently, they may adapt different strategies and techniques in EFL/ESL contexts, among them language learning strategies can be mentioned. Actually, language learning strategies which aims at finding the characteristics of good/successful language learners was triggered by the work of some researchers during the 1970s and in the middle this period, careful defining of language learning strategies emerged through the works by Michael, O'Malley and Chamot (Brown 2007).

Due to the substantial role of language learning strategies, many studies have recently carried out to facilitate language leaning (e.g., Berg and Lu 2021; Hoang et al. 2022; Erdogan 2018; Habók and Magya, 2018). However, this does not imply that no new studies are required since there are many factors that may hinder or accelerate language learning and need to be investigated. Some learn a particular piece of information quickly; some others may have difficulty in learning a particular subject matter. The point is that *why* some learn more effective than others. It can be related to individuals' learning strategy. Therefore, instructors have to look for the possible and available ways and strategies to help individuals be successful learners. There are a wide range of studies (Khamkhien, 2010; Lee, 2010) addressing different factors affecting language learning strategies. This indicates the significance of language learning strategy in the realm of language learning.

Ghavamnia et al. (2011) examined the relationship between language learning beliefs, language learning strategies, , proficiency and motivation, and the purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between strategy use on the one hand and three other variables (motivation, proficiency, and learners' beliefs), on the other hand. The findings revealed a positive relationship between strategy use and motivation, proficiency, and language learning beliefs. These results may be used in the future to inform pedagogy.

Wenden (1987) declared that Learners' beliefs are automatically related to learners' use of language learning strategies. Accordingly, learners' use of language learning strategies was consistent with their stated beliefs about language learning. According to White (1999) learners' expectations developed prior to their experiences and beliefs shape these experiences. Hence, learners' beliefs guide them in their conceptualizations of language learning and influence the approaches they adopt to L2 learning.

Furthermore, Horwitz (1988) has suggested that learners' beliefs in language aptitude can succeed them in language learning and they may believe that "an average ability is adequate for language learning. Considering the above mentioned sentences, the present study tries to examine the relationship between ESP students' language learning beliefs and their use of language learning strategies. Since to date, it seems that few studies focused on ESP students' beliefs about language learning and its relationship with the use of language learning beliefs and the use of language learning strategies by ESP students.

1.1.Research questions

This study, however, aims at finding out the beliefs intermediate ESP students majoring in midwifery and nursing held as well as the strategy type(s) they employ in their English learning. Therefore, the following research questions were raised.

1. What beliefs do Iranian Intermediate ESP students hold about English language learning?

2. What strategies do Iranian Intermediate ESP students employ in the process of language learning?

3. Is there any relationship between Iranian Intermediate ESP students' language learning beliefs and their language learning strategies?

2. Method

In this section, the participants of the study, instruments, and data collection procedures are presented.

2.1. Participants

The participants of the study were originally68 Iranian female students majoring in midwifery and nursing. These students participated in a standard test of English proficiency, that is, Quick Oxford Placement Test (QPT) version two, and overall 51 intermediate students were selected based on their scores on the test. In terms of age, they were within the age range of 20 to 29. They were selected based on convenience sampling method for manageability reasons as well as availability.

2.2. Data collection tools

Three instruments were used in the study. The first one was version (two) of Quick Oxford Placement Test (QPT) developed by Oxford to homogenize the participants. The second one was Horwitz's (1987) Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) to find the subjects' beliefs about English language learning and the third one was SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) to measure language learning strategies employed by the participants.

2.3.Compliance with ethics

Throughout the preparation process of this study, scientific and ethical principles were adhered to comply with. It is declared that all researches and studies used in the study are stated in the bibliography.

2.4. Data collection procedures

As the first step, 68 Iranian students majoring in midwifery and nursing at Islamic Azad University, Kazeroun branch, Iran were selected. Among these students, 51 intermediate students were selected based on their scores on Quick Oxford Placement Test (QPT) version two. To investigate the participants' beliefs about language, the BALLI was distributed online among -students. It takes about 24 minutes to complete. The BALLI includes 34 items. Thirty-two of them offer 5-point Likert-type responses, ranging from "*strongly agree"* to "*strongly disagree"*: Strongly agree (SA) = 5; Agree=4; Neither agree nor disagree (N) =3; Disagree (D) =2; Strongly disagree=1, and two items; 4 and 14,are the participant' rating

of the difficulty level of English, ranging from very difficult, difficult, medium, easy, and very easy, and the amount of time needed to learn English very well. It actually examines beliefs about five language learning areas; learning and communication (8 items), important aspects of language learning (6 items), expectations and difficulty of learning (6 items), nature and aptitude of language learning (9 items) and difficulty and ability of language learning (6 items).

Also SILL was distributed online for the participants. This questionnaire is developed by Oxford to measure language learning strategies by learners. It includes 50 items in the two dichotomous constructs of direct and indirect learning strategies. The number of items in each part is as follow: Part A: memory strategy 9 items, part B: Cognitive strategy 14 items, Part C: Compensation strategy 6 items, Part D: Metacognitive strategy 9 strategy, Part E: Affective strategy 6 items, and Part F: Social strategy 6 items. It takes about thirty minutes to complete. The participants were asked to indicate their response to the given items which were based on a Likert scale ranging from never or almost never true of me (1) to always or almost always true of me (5). According to Oxford and Burry- Stock the reliability of SILL is relatively high in many cultural groups (1995). Having collected the completed questionnaires, the researchers analyzed the results.

3. Results

In what follows the results of the study are reported based on the data gathered from the two questionnaires.

3.1 The participants' language learning beliefs

RQ1: What beliefs do Iranian Intermediate ESP students have about English language learning?

According to the criteria of Oxford (1990) in five point Likert type questionnaires, the same as BALLI , a mean score equal or above 3.50 is interpreted as having a strong degree of impact ($3.50 \leq M \leq 5.00$ = strong); a mean score equal or above 2.50, but below 3.50 is interpreted as having a moderate degree of impact ($2.50 \leq M < 3.50$ = moderate), and a mean score below 2.50 is considered as having a weak degree of impact ($M < 2.50$ = weak).

Table 1. Frequencies of the participants' scores in BALLI

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Weak	6	11.8	11.8	11.8
	Moderate	25	49.0	49.0	60.8
	Strong	20	39.2	39.2	100.0
	Total	51	100.0	100.0	

As shown in Table 1, among the participants of the study, 11.8% (N=6) were weak; 49% (N=25) were moderate and 39.2% (N=20) were strong in their beliefs about language learning. So, most of the participants had moderate beliefs about language learning.

To have a detailed analysis of the data in regard with different parts of BALLI, the mean scores of the participants in different subcategories of BALLI are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of the items of BALLI based on their constructs

Constructs	N Valid	Mean	Std. Error of Mean	Std. Deviation
Learning and communication	51	4.0327	0.08298	0.59256
Important aspects of language learning	51	3.8309	0.11824	0.84440
Motivation and expectation	51	3.5137	0.17501	1.24980
Nature and aptitude of language learning	51	3.2462	0.05116	0.36536
Difficulty and ability of language learning	51	3.2288	0.10162	0.72569
Total	51	3.4123	0.08191	0.58495

As shown in the last row of Table 2, the participants of the study have moderate beliefs about language learning in general (2.50 ≤M <3.50 = moderate). Meanwhile, the reports of the participants' five components of beliefs about language learning according to Table 2 are as follows:

Considering the five components of beliefs about language learning, the results showed that learners had the strongest belief learning and communication (M=4.03), followed by important aspects of language learning (3.8) and motivation and expectation (3.51). The last two factors were nature and aptitude of language learning (3.24) and difficulty and ability of language learning (3.22).

3.2 Language learning strategies that the participants apply in their language learning

RQ2. What strategies do Iranian Intermediate ESP students employ in the process of language learning?

To answer this question, the participants of the study were asked to participate in the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). Oxford (1990) developed SILL to measure language learning strategies for ESL and EFL learners. SILL consisted of 6 parts and 50 items. In administering SILL, respondents were asked to answer their use of language learning strategies in five-point Likert-scale items from (1) never or almost never true of me to (5) always or almost always true of me.

According to the criteria of Oxford (1990), a mean score equal or above 3.50 is interpreted as having a strong degree of impact (3.50 ≤M ≤ 5.00 = strong); a mean score equal or above 2.50, but below 3.50 is interpreted as having a moderate degree of impact (2.50 ≤ M < 3.50 = moderate), and a mean score below 2.50 is considered as having a weak degree of impact (M < 2.50 = weak). Accordingly, Table 3 reports the frequencies of the ESP students' scores in SILL.

Table 3. Frequencies of the participants' scores in SILL

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Weak	17	33.3	33.3	33.3
	moderate	34	66.7	66.7	100.0
	Total	51	100.0	100.0	

As shown in Table 3, among the participants of the study, 66.7 % (N=34) were moderate in using language learning strategies and 33.3% (N=17) were weak. Moreover, no strong language learning strategy user was reported so it was not mentioned in the table.

To have a detailed analysis of the data in regard with different parts of SILL, the mean scores of the participants in different parts of SILL are reported in Table 4.

Table 4. Hierarchy of the Mean score of the participants' parts of SILL

	N	Mean	Std. Error of Mean	Std. Deviation
	Valid			
Compensation	51	3.9477	0.07733	0.55226
Metacognitive	51	2.9717	0.04550	0.32496
Memory	51	2.7451	0.03538	0.25268
Cognitive	51	2.1078	0.03592	0.25650
Social	51	2.0131	0.09733	0.69510
Affective	51	1.8235	0.05079	0.36272
Total	51	2.6015	0.03037	0.21687

As shown in the last row of Table 4, the participants of the study were moderate strategy users in general ($2.50 \leq M < 3.50$ = moderate). Meanwhile, the reports of the participants' performance in different parts of the SILL according to Table 4 are as follows:

Compensation strategy with the mean score of 3.94 was ranked as the most frequent strategy applied by the participants of the study. According to the criteria of Oxford, ESP students were mostly strong in using compensation strategy. Meta- cognitive strategy with the mean score 2.97 ranked as the second frequent applicable strategy by the participants; while, memory strategy with the mean score 2.74 ranked as the third frequent applicable strategy. In sum, according to the criteria of Oxford (1990), the participants of the study were moderate in the use of metacognitive and memory strategies.

Meanwhile, cognitive strategy with the mean score of 2.10 ranked as the fourth frequent strategy, while social strategy with the mean score of 2.01 and affective strategy with the mean score of 1.82 ranked as the least frequent strategies respectively. According to the criteria of Oxford (1990), a mean score below 2.50 was interpreted as having a weak degree of impact. Hence, the participants of the study used cognitive, social, and affective strategies weekly.

3.3 The relationship between Language Learning beliefs and language learning strategies

RQ3. Is there any relationship between Iranian Intermediate ESP students' Language Learning beliefs and their language learning strategies? As mentioned earlier, the main goal of the present study was to find any statistically significant relationship between Iranian Intermediate ESP students' Language Learning beliefs and their language learning strategies. Hence, as the first step, Figure 1 is provided.

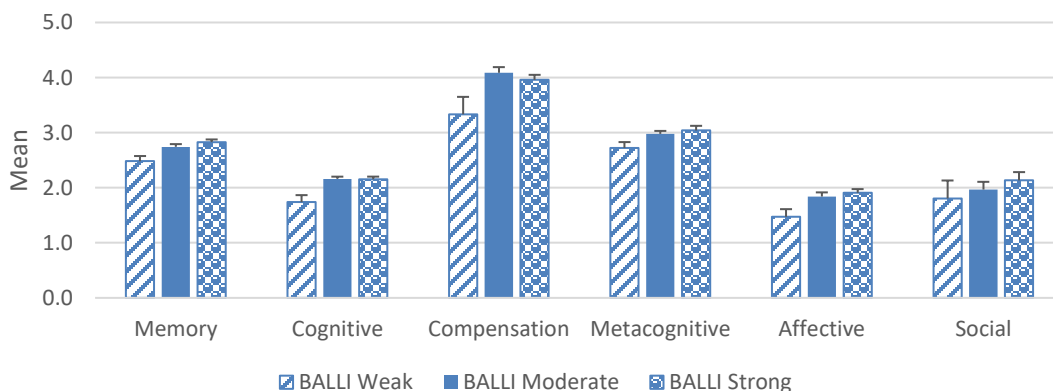Figure 1. The mean of different parts of SILL by splitting BALLI

Figure 1 shows the mean of different parts of SILL by splitting BALLI. Hence, the compensation strategy was the most used strategy among the participants. Therefore, their preferences of language learning strategies were as follows: compensation, metacognitive, memory, cognitive, social, and affective. The figure also depicts that the participants had strong rather than weak beliefs for the given hierarchy in SILL.
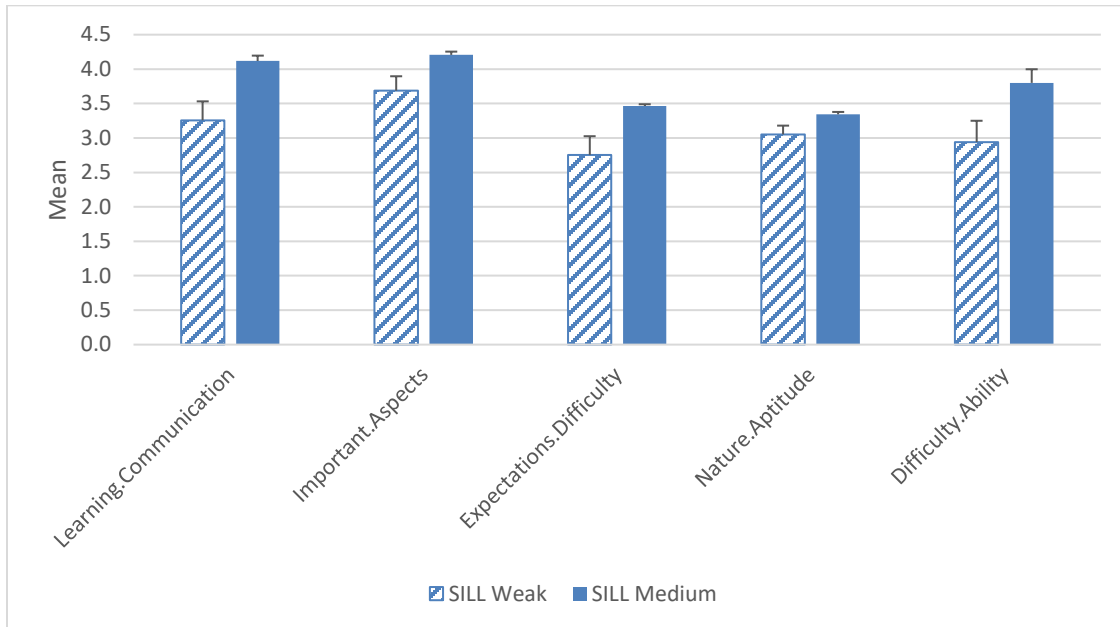
Figure 2. The mean of different parts of BALLI by splitting SILL

Figure 2 represents the relationship considering the use of language learning strategies. As it was mentioned before, in the participants of this study, only two levels were seen. Those who were weak in use of language learning strategies and those who were moderate; no strong strategy users were seen. Then the Chi-square was run.

Table 5. Frequencies of discrete SILL and discrete BILLI

			BALLI			Total
			Weak	moderate	Strong	
SILL	Weak	Count	6	7	4	17
		% of Total	11.8%	13.7%	7.8%	33.3%
	moderate	Count	0	18	16	34
		% of Total	0.0%	35.3%	31.4%	66.7%
Total		Count	6	25	20	51
		% of Total	11.8%	49.0%	39.2%	100.0%

Among the 33.3% participants who were weak in the use of SILL, 11.8% had weak (negative beliefs), 13.7% had moderate beliefs, while 7.8% had strong beliefs about language learning. And among the 66.7% of the participants who were moderate in the use of SILL 35.3% were moderate in their beliefs about language learning and 31.4% had strong beliefs about language learning.

Table 6. Chi-square tests between SILL and BALLI

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	13.920[a]	2	0.001
Likelihood Ratio	15.261	2	0.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	8.850	1	0.003
N of Valid Cases	51		
a. 2 cells (33.3%) have expected count <5. The minimum expected count is 2.00.			

To find any possible relationship between SILL and BALLI, each questionnaire on the whole was regarded as a variable and each one was divided into three levels of weak moderate and strong. In BALLI we have the three levels of week, moderate and strong, but in SILL we had only two levels of weak and moderate. Hence, Chi-square was run to see whether SILL and BALLI are independent or dependent. Since the sig=.001 < 0.05, we accept that BALLI and SILL are dependent and there is a positive significant relationship between them.

Table 7. Correlation between SILL and BALLI

		Value	Asymptotic Standard Error[a]	Approximate T[b]	Approximate Significance
Interval by Interval	Pearson's R	.421	.124	3.246	.002[c]
Ordinal by Ordinal	Spearman Correlation	.381	.133	2.881	.006[c]
N of Valid Cases		51			

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.
b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.
c. Based on normal approximation.

The relationship between SILL and BALLI is ordinal by ordinal, and the spearman correlation is used here. Table 7 represents the strength of correlation between the two variables of the study (0.381). It represents moderate correlations between SILL and BALLI.

4. Discussion

In the previous sections, the analyses of the data which were collected through Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), and Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) were presented and the results were reported in each section. In what follows, the research questions of the study are discussed and interpreted considering the analyses.

4.1.1 Discussion on the first research question

The present study focuses on determining the ESP students' beliefs about language learning. It was found that most of the students were moderate in their beliefs in language learning (49%), followed by strong belief (39.2%) and weak (11.8%). This indicates that a small number of the language learners in ESP courses have a weak view concerning language learning beliefs. It may be due to fact that many of them consider the English language as an important means of consulting with different resources in their fields of study. The more knowledgeable they are in English, the easier to access various resources and materials, something which can lead to higher mastery of information.

The findings, moreover, indicates that learning and communication with the mean score of (M=4.03) appears as the first construct of BALLI followed by important aspects of language learning (M=3.83). Language learners believe that the primary purpose of language learning is to be able to negotiate

meaning and to be able to communicate with other individuals. For them, learning different components of language such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, was very important. When a learner is not accurate (in speaking and writing), or s/he does not have a good mastery of lexical knowledge it can hinder the process of language learning. Therefore, language learners believe that knowledge of components of language is very essential.

Motivation and expectation with the mean score of (M=3.51) were the next construct. For the learners, motivation both negatively and positively impacts language learning. The more the learners are willing and motivated, the easier the process of language learning. Nature and aptitude of language learning (M= 3.25) was shown as the forth construct. When language learners feel that they have good aptitude for language learning, they try to do their best and make much effort to learn the language. The findings are somehow in line with the results by Al-Malki and Javid (2018) confirming that learners possess higher English language aptitude. Difficulty and ability of language learning (M=3.23) appears as last in the hierarchy.

4.1.2 Discussion on the second research question

The order of language learning strategies by Iranian ESP students were found to be as follow:

Compensation, metacognitive, memory, cognitive, social, and affective strategy.

The findings are in line with the findings of the study by Mochizuki (1999) who found compensation as the most and affective as the least frequent strategies by the Japanese university students.

In the current study it was found that Iranian ESP students were generally moderate language learning strategy users. However, a closer look at the data revealed that the participants of the study were strong in the use of compensation strategy. Oxford (1990) argues that compensation strategy deals with finding synonyms, by the learners, from the context and using gestures for communication (Shakarami et al., 2017).

The findings of this part of the study confirms the results by Yılmaz (2010) who found that compensation strategy is the most frequently used language learning strategy. The results, however, contradict the findings by Najafi and Dehghani (2022) that revealed metacognitive and cognitive strategies as the most frequent and compensation strategy as the least frequent strategies by EFL learners.

4.1.3 Discussion on the third research question

The findings depicted that there is a positive relationship between the two variables of the study. In other words, it was shown that when beliefs about language learning strategies become stronger, the use of language learning strategies increases. When language learners hold positive view regarding language learning it can lead to higher use of language learning strategies.

The findings are in line with the findings of the study by Azar and Saeidi (2013) who reported a positively significant correlation between overall beliefs and language learning strategy use. The highest correlation was reported to be between the overall BALLI and metacognitive strategies. The results also are somehow in line with the findings by Mailing and Jianrong (2015). They found that learners' beliefs about language learning were significantly correlated with the use of the strategy categories, except for the difficulty of language learning. The findings contradicts Arslan and Kafes's (2021) findings, on Turkish pre-school EFL students' beliefs about language learning, which revealed that learners' language learning beliefs were not significantly correlated with feature such as gender, age, and proficiency level.

5. Conclusions

It is conducive to pay attention to factors that affect learning including individual differences such as age, sex, gender, individuals' ability in language such as knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and language

learning strategy. Horwitz (1998) points to the significance of emphasizing factors such as language learner beliefs that impact language learning. It helps us understand the way language learners perceive language, themselves, classmates and teachers. It is obvious that more successful learners develop beliefs about language learning.

Language learning strategies were shown to be correlated with SILL. Therefore, an increase in the learners' beliefs about language can lead to stronger use of language learning strategies. In the process of language learning, detrimental factors should be eliminated since they can negatively affect learning and consequently may hinder the learning process. Those involved in the realm of education including teachers and material developers should attempt to eliminate whatever leads to negative beliefs in order to facilitate the language learning. Language teachers could use and discuss positive instructional practices in the classroom to lessen the impact of negative attitudes on language learners. Conducting another study focusing on ESP students' language learning beliefs and their achievement is suggested.

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