Do Learner Beliefs about Learning Matter in English Language Education?

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Abstract

Despite the advocacy of learner-centered approaches in ELT, considering learners' role in the learning processes is not yet a trend in Malaysia. This paper scrutinizes the English language learning beliefs held by Malaysian National Secondary School (NSS) and the Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary School (MICSS) ESL students. The two areas of focus are (1) the differences in beliefs between the two student groups and (2) the factors contributing to differences in their beliefs. Students' beliefs were captured using the BALLI framework through questionnaires and interviews. Findings reveal a critical discovery that should be taken into consideration by language teachers. This paper presents several suggestions in re-shaping students' beliefs and in creating a motivating classroom based on students' current beliefs.

KEYWORDS: BALLI, Learner beliefs, Language learning

Introduction

Educational reforms have led to the advocacy of learner-centered approaches in English Language Teaching (ELT). Aligning with the shift of focus from teachers to learners, the emphases of researches have moved to learners and their contributions in language learning (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2006). Learners' viewpoints and their subjective experiences are now being regarded as important (Aro, 2009) as their beliefs hold sway over their motivations, attitudes and learning procedures (Riley, 1997). , However, considering the learners' role in learning processes is not yet a trend in Malaysia (Peng & Hui, 2012), implying that learners' roles are not yet obvious and significant (Choy & Troudi, 2006).

Previous studies have looked at the relationship between students' beliefs and other variables, including anxiety (Sioson, 2011), learning strategies (Hong, 2006), students' cultural background (Yang, 1999), and students' readiness for autonomy (Sankaran, 2004). These studies mostly emphasized tertiary level students (Sakui & Gaies, 1999) and secondary level students have received little attention (Choy & Troudi, 2006). In Malaysia, Peng and Hui (2012) investigated Malaysian English Second Language (ESL) students' beliefs in a national secondary school. Nevertheless, the major shortcoming of Peng and Hui's (2012) study in the local public secondary school is the exclusion of qualitative methodologies. This curtails the discovery of students' beliefs that are not encompassed in the survey items. To address gaps in the literature to a limited extent, this study adopted a mixed-method methodology to consolidate the findings. Besides, to provide a wider understanding of the Malaysian secondary students' beliefs, comparisons between the beliefs of ESL students from different local educational contexts are essential. Hence, I attempt to scrutinize the English language learning beliefs held by Malaysian National Secondary School (NSS) and the Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary School (MICSS) ESL students. This study also aims to discover the factors contributing to their beliefs.

The questions addressed in this study are:

1. Are there any differences in learners' beliefs about English language learning between Malaysian National Secondary School (NSS) and Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary School (MICSS) ESL students?

2. What contributes to the differences between the MICSS and NSS's students' beliefs about English language learning?

The findings allow improvements for the NSS and the MICSS teachers' teaching, textbook writing and curriculum development. The results are also applicable to the teaching of Chinese ESL learners of other contexts.

In the following sections, the terms 'students' and 'beliefs' respectively refer to the 'ESL/EFL learners' and their 'beliefs about English language learning'.

Literature review

The National Secondary School (NSS) and the Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary School (MICSS)

Relevant information on the National Secondary School and the Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary School are studied to provide an overview of how the two Malaysian educational contexts may influence ESL students' beliefs.

Table 1. The National Secondary School (NSS) and the Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary School (MICSS)

Educational Context / Elements	National Secondary School (NSS)	Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary School (MICSS)
Principles/philosophy of Education	- Aims to develop students' potential in a holistic and integrated manner, to produce students who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious. - Aims to promote national integration.	- Aims to develop students' five aspects of education i.e. moral, intellectual, physical, social and aesthetic education (Dong Zong, 2009). - Aims to preserve, impart and disseminate the Chinese language and culture.
Medium of Instruction	- Malay as the medium of instruction; English is a compulsory subject.	- Mandarin as the medium of instruction; English and Malay are compulsory subjects.

English Syllabus		
(i) Focus	- Focuses on the teaching of four skills and language contents i.e. grammar, sound system and vocabulary by advocating the communicative approach to ELT (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 1989).	- Focuses on the teaching of four skills and the language contents i.e. grammar, sound system and vocabulary through theme-based approach (Dong Zong, 2009).
(ii) Goals	- Aims to equip students with communication competency to perform language functions with correct language forms and structures (Ratnawati, 1996).	- Aims to develop students' language competencies. (Dong Zong, 2009).
	- Attempts to enhance students' communicative skills through the integration of four skills and language contents through 'realistic and authentic' tasks that stimulate real-life conditions. (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 1989, p. 81).	- Attempts to enhance students' language competencies through the teaching of four skills and language contents through meaning tasks and activities.
	- Arranged according to themes.	- Arranged according to themes.
	- Organized according to stipulated grammar, vocabulary and sound system.	- Organized according to stipulated grammar, vocabulary and sound system.
(iii) Structures of the English textbook	- ***Vocabulary lists are provided with English explanation***.	- ***Vocabulary lists are provided with English, Malay and Mandarin translation.***
Advocated Approaches	- Communicative approach, but explicit teaching of grammar is used where necessary (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 1989).	- Theme-based approach
Focus of English Language Teaching	- The use of meaningful tasks - ICT skills - Students' thinking skills - Multiple intelligences - Learner-centeredness	- The use of meaningful tasks - ICT skills (e.g. emails, the Internet, PowerPoint, Word etc.) - Students' collaborative skills.

Table 1 indicates that despite the different educational principles and the medium of instruction in both the educational settings, the advocated ELT approach in both contexts emphasizes the integrated teaching of four skills and language contents through meaningful contexts. Su (2007) argues that the grammar and vocabulary lists (deductive approach features) in the NSS textbook are a hindrance for the communicative approach advocacy. In my opinion, as the vocabularies are explained within the provided passage, it sustains the essence of the communicative methodology. Similarly, a paradox occurs in the MICSS' advocated approach as the vocabulary lists in the textbook provide the meaning in Malay and

Mandarin which is out of context. The major difference between the NSS and the MICSS is in the use of the translation method. The three-language explanation for the listed vocabularies reflects that the translation method in ELT is supported by the MICSS.

Approaches to investigate learners' beliefs

Barcelos (2006) identifies three approaches i.e. the normative, the metacognitive and the contextual approach to investigate learners' beliefs. They vary in terms of the concept of beliefs i.e. whether beliefs are considered stable or dynamic, individual or contextual, and the relationship between beliefs and actions (Hofer & Pintrich, 2004). The normative approach sees beliefs as individuals' stable 'preconceived notions, myths or misconceptions' (Horwitz, 1988, p. 119). A Likert-style questionnaire such as the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) developed by Horwitz (1985) is always used in this approach. The metacognitive approach defines beliefs as metacognitive knowledge that constitutes their 'theories in action' (Wenden, 1987, p. 112). It investigates beliefs through content analyses of data obtained from semi-structured interviews and self-reports. The contextual approach views beliefs as contextual, dynamic and social. It encompasses collecting data through ethnographic classroom observations, case studies, metaphor analyses and discourse analyses. Both the normative and metacognitive approaches posit a direct beliefs-actions relationship, whereas the contextual approach suggests the possibility of inconsistent beliefs-actions relationships due to contextual refrains.

Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) model

BALLI is an instrument designed by Horwitz (1987) to assess teachers' opinions on several issues related to language learning. In a brain-storming session, 25 foreign language teachers in the United States listed their beliefs, other people's beliefs, and their students' beliefs about language learning. After eliminating the idiosyncratic beliefs, the list was examined and added more beliefs. The instrument was then piloted with 150 first-semester foreign language students at The University of Texas at Austin (Horwitz, 1985). BALLI employs a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. It has been revised three times; the final version contains 34 items. It comprises five themes: (i) foreign language aptitude, (ii) difficulty of language learning, (iii) nature of language learning, (iv) learning and communication strategies and (v) motivation and expectation.

BALLI's validity is criticized by Kuntz (1996) for its teachers-generated items/themes, the lack of explanations for the generated themes, and the over-reliance on descriptive statistics. Nevertheless, studies employing factor analysis conducted by Yang (1999) and Park (1995) have proven BALLI's validity in the Asian context. BALLI has also been endorsed for its applicability as a tool for assessing learners' beliefs in a multicultural classroom (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2006).

Review of related studies on beliefs

The review of related studies is discussed within BALLI's five categories, focusing with the items most relevant to my study.

Beliefs are shaped by situational influences where the beliefs of the Asian and non-Asian students are varied in some ways (Yang, 1992; Su, 1995). Therefore, only studies on ESL/EFL learner beliefs in the Asian contexts are scrutinized. The reviewed studies encompass studies on secondary and tertiary level students' beliefs conducted in the Philippines (Sioson, 2011), Korea (Hong, 2006), Japan (Riley, 2006), Taiwan (Huang & Tsai, 2003), China (Li, 2011), Hong Kong (Wu, 2008), Iran (Ghobadi Mohebi & Khodadady, 2011), Thailand (Fujiwara, 2011) and Malaysia (Peng & Hui, 2012).

Foreign (English) language aptitude

Generally, students agree with the existence of English language ability (Ghobadi Mohebi & Khodadady, 2011; Hong, 2006; Li, 2011; Peng & Hui, 2012; Sioson, 2011; Wu, 2008) but disparage their own English language aptitude (Chang & Shen, 2006; Riley, 2006; Wu, 2008). Similarly, local secondary school students are not exempted from such a perception (Peng & Hui, 2012). Wu (2008) and Huang & Tsai (2003) rationalize such a scenario with students' unsuccessful English learning experiences. Besides, students hold various opinions toward their countrymen's English language aptitude. In this aspect, local secondary students think highly of the English learning ability of Malaysians due to their apparent bilingual capability (Peng & Hui, 2012).

Although most students disagree with the association of intelligence with being good at languages (Fujiwara, 2011; Riley, 2006; Wu, 2008), local secondary school students in Peng and Hui's (2012) study expressed agreement. Lightbown & Spada (1999) state that while intelligence may be a strong factor when it comes to learning which involves language analysis and rule deducting, it may be less important in a communicative classroom. Thus, students' response to this area may reflect the methodologies used in their contexts, and how those methodologies influence their beliefs.

The difficulty in language learning

Even though students generally perceive English as a difficult language (Wu, 2008; Hong, 2006; Li, 2011), they tend to underestimate the difficulty of learning English (Fujiwara, 2011; Peng & Hui, 2012; Riley, 2006; Sioson, 2011). This trend is also seen in Malaysian students' beliefs (Peng & Hui, 2012). Their underestimation is largely demonstrated in their belief about the length of time taken for successful English learning i.e. one hour per day for successful English mastery within 1 to 2 years. Consequently, their unrealistic optimism discourages them when facing failure to make the progress they anticipate (Riley, 2006). Wu (2008) assumes that students' underestimations are due to the lack of frequent contacts with either the native/non-native English speakers. Conducting the local study (Peng & Hui, 2012) in Terengganu which constituted 95% Malays, Wu's (2008) assumption may explain local students' impractical beliefs. In this regard, the NSS students in this study may have a more realistic evaluation as they were the last batch of students undergoing learning in the English

in Science and Mathematics policy, thus providing them more exposure to the English language. As for local students' perception of English as a difficult language, Peng and Hui (2012) attribute it to their transition from lower secondary to upper secondary which required them to deal with more complex English structures. As this study involved students who were in lower secondary level, they may view English as a less difficult language.

Nature of (English) language learning

Students' opinions are divided on whether learning English is about acquiring grammar rules, vocabularies and translating ability. Peacock (1999) and Wu (2008) present students' agreement about the importance of learning grammar while Ghobadi Mohebi and Khodadady (2011), Li (2011) and Riley (2006) report otherwise. Vocabulary learning has always been valued (Fujiwara, 2011; Ghobadi Mohebi & Khodadady, 2011; Wu, 2008). Conversely, students do not agree they should translate to and from their own mother tongue (Ghobadi Mohebi & Khodadady, 2011; Riley, 2006). Local students endorse the learning of grammar and vocabulary but disparage the necessity of translations (Peng & Hui, 2012). In this regard, the embedded and teaching methodology determines students' beliefs (Thornton, 2009; Huang & Tsai, 2003; Peng & Hui, 2012; Sakui & Gaies, 1999). Therefore, due to the translation used in the MICSS textbook, it is inappropriate to parallel the NSS students' disparaging of learning to translate to the MICSS students' beliefs.

Learning and communication strategies

The issues in this category have always been on the students' willingness to guess, tolerance for mistakes, and their view towards the roles of repeating and practising. Most studies (Hong, 2006; Wu, 2008) including the local study (Peng & Hui, 2012) report students' appreciation of the three aforementioned aspects.

Motivations and expectations

Regardless of students' proficiency, this category has always been more positively rated than the earlier categories (Chang & Shen, 2006; Lan, 2010; Sioson, 2011). The salient finding reported in the literature is that students' instrumental motivation is higher than their integrative motivation (Hong, 2006; Peng & Hui, 2012; Wu, 2008). Like most Asian students, local students are motivated to speak good English (Peng & Hui, 2012). Nevertheless, only 50% of them believe that they can speak English successfully. Besides proficiency (Huang & Tsai, 2003), Chang and Shen (2006) discovered that secondary students' motivation is influenced by their extracurricular English learning activities.

Theoretical framework

The study adapted Horwitz's (1988) BALLI framework. BALLI encompasses five categories. The first category, 'Foreign Language Aptitude', concerns the general existence of special ability for language learning. The second category, 'The Difficulty of Language Learning' includes the general difficulty of learning the English language as perceived by the learners. The third category 'Nature of Language Learning' concerns learners' perceptions of the

important aspects of learning English. The fourth category 'Learning and Communication Strategies' associates learners' English language learning practices. The fifth category 'Motivations and Expectations' concerns the desires and opportunities learners associate with the learning of English.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-method methodology where the quantitative phase (questionnaire) preceded the qualitative phase (focus group interview). This methodology was chosen for complementary purposes to seek elaboration, illustration, and clarification of the questionnaire data with the interview (Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 1989). The complementary mixed-method methodology compensated the limitation in a normative approach in this study i.e. using BALLI questionnaire to obtain quantitative data in which beliefs profiled in the quantitative data may not be all the beliefs learners might hold about language learning (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005).

Questionnaire

This study adapted Horwitz's (1988) BALLI 34-items questionnaire. It comprised the five categories in BALLI. This framework was adapted by rephrasing the structures of each item to suit the cognitive level of secondary school students. Six items outlined in BALLI concerning gender, age, English-speaking places and culture that are irrelevant to this study were removed. Furthermore, instead of a Five-point Likert Scale, a Four-point Likert Scale (*1= strongly disagree; 2= disagree; 3= agree; 4= strongly agree*) was used to avoid substantial neutral responses. As the questionnaire attempted to elicit students' opinion rather than their knowledge, I believe that the inclusion of neutral-response score is unnecessary. This instrument comprised 28 items.

Focus group interview

The interview protocol was developed based on the BALLI framework. It was constructed based on the issues reported in the literature, and the differences in beliefs between MICSS and NSS students revealed in the questionnaire. It consisted of the same five categories outlined in the questionnaire. Six participants i.e. three from the NSS and three from the MICSS were randomly chosen.

Context and the participants of the study

This study was conducted in a local national secondary school and a local Chinese Independent High School which are located in a state with an even racial composition.

Data analysis

The survey data was analysed using the t-test to obtain the mean, standard deviations, and the statistical significant differences between the NSS and the MICSS students' beliefs on each item. The interview data was transcribed and only significant data are reported.

Results and discussion

The findings are reported and discussed according to the two research questions. The similar study conducted in Malaysia by Peng and Hui's (2012) is compared extensively to provide an overview of the Malaysian ESL students' beliefs. In the discussion of findings for the first research question, only the issues discussed in the literature, the items that reveal significant differences between the two groups of students, and the significant interview data are reported.

Research Question 1: Are there any differences in learner beliefs about English language learning between Malaysian National Secondary School (NSS) and Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary School (MICSS) ESL students?

English language aptitude

Students from both contexts voiced a general consensus in this category. No significant statistical differences are reported in the t-test. Concurring with previous findings (Li, 2011; Peng & Hui, 2012; Sioson, 2011; Wu, 2008), both groups endorse the existence of English language aptitude. Unlike results reported in previous studies (Chang & Shen, 2006; Peng & Hui, 2012; Riley, 2006; Wu, 2008), both groups have faith in their own English learning ability, which comes from their confidence as a high proficiency English learner. This finding consolidates Wu's (2008) and Huang and Tsai's (2003) explanation that success and failure in English learning experiences shape learners' beliefs about their English language aptitude. However, although the students have strong beliefs in their own English learning aptitude, they doubt the English language learning ability of Malaysians because of the informal English used among Malaysians which is regarded as '*Broken English*'. This result does not align with Peng and Hui's (2012) finding which shows local students' endorsement for the English learning ability of Malaysians due to their bilingual capability. Concurring with earlier findings (Fujiwara, 2011; Peng & Hui, 2012; Riley, 2006; Wu, 2008), students agree that people who speak more than one language are intelligent. They reason that being multilingual i.e. good at languages enhances one's understanding in other subjects like Math/Science. Their justification does not reveal the influence of their teachers' methodology on their beliefs, but sustains Marcos' (2001) point that students who learn other languages score statistically higher on standardized exams than those who do not.

Difficulty of English language learning

There are no significant statistical differences in this category. Both groups of students agree that there are languages that are easier than English. However, NSS students' opinions are not unanimous in terms of the existence of the easier-than-English languages. Data show that students' first language is the factor contributing to the variability in opinion among the NSS students. Students whose first language is not English mention their mother tongue (mandarin) or the national language (Malay) as a language easier than English. Their justifications revolve around one factor: exposure to their mother tongue and national language at an early age makes those languages easier. This consolidates the concept of 'the earlier the better' in learning languages. Moreover, both groups of students perceive English as an easy language which does not concur with most of the findings (Fujiwara, 2011; Peng & Hui, 2012; Riley, 2006; Sioson, 2011).

Despite both groups' underestimation that one can attain successful English mastery in less

than one or two years with one hour per day English lesson (Fujiwara, 2011; Peng & Hui, 2012; Riley, 2006; Sioson, 2011), they clarify that such a high rate of acquisition can only be achieved if learners are exposed to and practise the language outside the 'one-hour block'. As this study took place in an urban area where English is commonly used, the students' awareness about the reality of learning English supports Wu's (2008) assumption that frequency of contact with English shapes students' realization about the reality of learning English.

Regarding the difficulty of the oral/aural skills, both groups share the same opinion that speaking is easier than comprehending and listening/speaking is easier than reading/writing (Peng & Hui, 2012). They think that speaking requires less complex structures, but writing requires contents and complex linguistic structures to score well in English tests. This may be because they are in the exam year where their teachers regularly polish their writing skills.

Nature of English language learning

Significant differences between the NSS and MICSS students' beliefs are shown in their conceptions on the type of learning required to learn a language and the use of translation. Firstly, while the NSS students agree that learning English and learning Math/Science are different types of learning, the MICSS students question such a conception. To the NSS students, Math and Science are thinking, solution-based subjects while English is an open-ended subject where teachers allow more answers. The NSS students make a distinction between the respective logical/mathematical and linguistic intelligence involved in learning science/mathematics and languages. A contrasting opinion aired by the MICSS students is that both mathematics/science and English subjects involve learning rules/formulas.

Secondly, the MICSS students endorse the translation method in learning English but the NSS students reveal otherwise. The NSS students explain that translation is only crucial for the less proficient ones (Liao, 2006). The little emphasis placed on the importance of translation among the NSS students corresponds with the result reported by Peng and Hui (2012). On the other hand, the MICSS students insist on translation for a better understanding. They assert that learning English with teachers of Indian descent enhances the need for translation to ensure that their understanding is clear and accurate. Their justification reflects two of the three qualities developed by translation i.e. 'clarity' and 'accuracy' (Ross, 2000, p. 61). A noteworthy point is that the NSS students who received Chinese primary education highly value the non-translation method after being exposed to the English-explanation method in the NSS. However, they understand the usefulness of the translation method in English learning.
In general, despite showing contradicting standpoints toward translation methods in English learning, both groups' agreement about the significance of learning grammar and vocabulary corroborates the local (Peng & Hui, 2012) and previous findings (Wu, 2008).

Learning and communication strategies

Both groups display discordant opinions in the effect of non-immediate correction of mistakes. The MICSS and NSS students respectively support and oppose the claim that non-immediate correction of mistakes may lead to fossilization. Their responses concur with their preference for and resistance to immediate corrections. The NSS students' tolerance for

mistakes is consistent with Peng and Hui's (2012) findings.

A significant difference is revealed in students' willingness of attempting unknown words. The MICSS students show reluctance in guessing unknown words but the NSS students appreciate the value of guessing (Hong, 2006; Peng & Hui, 2012; Wu, 2008). The MICSS students deem a wrong guess embarrassing but the NSS students are used to the teachers' encouraging them to attempt guessing unknown words through contexts.

Surprisingly, unlike Peng and Hui's (2012) findings, both MICSS and NSS students merely show a neutral response to the importance of practising English with CD's. An interviewee states that:

> *Actually it's the same. We do exercise from the computer. The school buys the exercises* (courseware) *and then we do it on the computer. Then we check the answer…no, we don't surf the internet; we are not allowed to.*

The quote above concurs with Mukundan's (2011) comments that the ELT courseware has a domineering role in instructing, modelling and providing students with feedback. It consequently seldom initiates any communication activity.

Motivations and expectations

Both students from the NSS and MICSS rate positively in this category (Chang & Shen, 2006; Sioson, 2011. Both groups possess high level of instrumental and integrative motivation. The students justify that their motivation comes from their English private tuition classes. This corroborates Chang and Shen's (2006) results that students' motivation can be influenced by their extra English curricular activities.

The statistical difference is found in students' desire in speaking good English. The NSS students unanimously attempt to speak English very well. Their high motivation replicates Peng and Hui's (2012) results. Nonetheless, the MICSS students' yearning for speaking English successfully is not in concert. An interviewee from the MICSS states that the school emphasizes Mandarin and it is viewed more important than English. To them, scoring in Mandarin is more crucial. Besides, both groups express that the English-speaking students are ostracized by the Mandarin-speaking students, and are labelled as showing off. Nevertheless, the NSS students explain that English is needed to communicate between Chinese and Indians. Therefore, English is still used among friends. In general, the high motivation shown by both groups of students gives them a strong sense of beliefs that they can learn to speak English well. Such belief is not found in local students in Peng and Hui's (2012) investigation.

Research Question 2: What contributes to the differences between the MICSS and NSS's students' beliefs about English language learning?

The discussion below focuses on differences in English language learning beliefs shown by the MICSS and NSS students, and is drawn from the interviewees' responses.

The employed methodology

In fact, both contexts, to a certain extent, employ deductive approaches in the ESL classroom. This explains the students' obsession with acquiring grammar and vocabulary. However, the

NSS teachers constantly encourage students to attempt unknown words from contexts. Such communicative approach enhances the NSS students' risk taking attitudes in learning vocabulary. Conversely, the MICSS teachers' immediate explanations of vocabulary discourage students from taking risks and add to their concerns about losing face (Yang, 1992).

The methodology embedded in the textbooks also accounts for students' different viewpoints toward translation in learning English. The listed vocabulary with only-English explanations in the NSS textbook helps students rely less on the translation method. In the MICSS, despite the Indian teachers' inability to translate English to Mandarin, the vocabulary list with the Mandarin and Malay translation in the textbook indirectly shapes students' reliance on the translation method. An interviewee mentions that she can '*straight away refer to the Mandarin meaning*'. Consequently, the minimal use of translation by their Indian teachers causes them to check the exact meanings of the occurring terms in their L1 (Kavaliauskienė, 2009). Such actions simultaneously reflect that they take charge of their own learning which accords with Mahmoud's (2006) view that translation is useful in promoting learner autonomy. Nevertheless, the translation method renders the MICSS students' over-emphasis on accuracy over fluency.

In terms of students' awareness for the existence of different types of learning in English and Math/Science, the deductive teaching embedded in the MICSS approaches renders students' rigid learning strategies preferences that merely involves dissecting the given materials, searching for contrasts, and finding cause-effect relationships (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). As a result, they apply the same learning strategies in studying English and Math/Science. This explains the reason they are not able to distinguish the two different types of learning involved in learning English and Math/Science. Conversely, the NSS students' recognition of the rooms for creativity (more than one answer) and logics respectively in English and Science/Math reflects their teachers' open-oriented style in the ESL classroom.

Generally speaking, the influence of teaching methodology on students' language learning beliefs replicates findings shown in previous studies (Thornton, 2009; Huang & Tsai, 2003; Peng & Hui, 2012; Sakui & Gaies, 1999).

Family background

Students' family background contributes to the difference between the MICSS and NSS students' beliefs in the existence of some easier-than-English languages. Their contact with their mother tongue and Malay at the earlier age renders them to view those languages easier than English. Students who are from an English-speaking background have no idea of other languages easier than English and generally see English as an easy language.

The school's educational principles and the sociolinguistic context (school racial demographics)

The school's educational principles and its racial demographics influence students' desire to speak English well. In the MICSS, Mandarin is preserved and the students are mostly Chinese. Thus, Mandarin is the medium of instruction and a major communication tool among students. Being ostracized for speaking English among Chinese friends, the MICSS students' desire to speak English well diminishes. However, despite ostracism occurring for those who speak English in both contexts, the NSS multicultural context allows students of

different races, especially among the Chinese and Indians to converse in English. Additionally, all the NSS interviewees view their friends of Indian descent as good English speakers and as their role models in learning English. Therefore, the yearning for speaking good English among the NSS students is significant.

Previous language learning experiences

Owing to the translation method students were exposed to during their primary education, the MICSS students believe in its effectiveness. However, the NSS students who were exposed to regular translation methods during their Chinese primary education manage to adapt to the occasional translation in the secondary school. This sustains Kern's (1995) view that individual beliefs can change more rapidly after exposure to alternative methods.

Beliefs not outlined in the BALLI framework

Data shows that students also express beliefs which are not outlined in the BALLI framework, which are (i) the English teachers' race/culture/mother tongue, (ii) ideal English classroom and (iii) motivation.

English teachers' race/culture/mother tongue

Students from both contexts expressed their beliefs in terms of the English teachers' culture or mother tongue. They prefer an English teacher who is of the same race/culture. They believe that teachers who share the same culture and mother tongue share the same thinking systems. The teachers therefore understand what they intend to express in English. Such belief falls under the 'linguistic determinism' labelled by Sapir (1929) which holds that people from different cultures think differently because of the differences in their languages. The MICSS students form such an idea through their difficulties in understanding and explaining to their English teachers of Indian descent.

Ideal English classroom

Both groups think that an English classroom should be lively where the language learners should respond to their teachers without worrying about the errors (Rubin & Thompson, 1982). Paradoxically, the MICSS students' beliefs about an ideal English classroom contradict their over-concern in losing face. In this regard, the MICSS students justify that their classmates' shyness provokes their reluctance in being more extrovert in the classroom. This shows that group cohesiveness determines the dynamics of an ESL classroom despite their actual preference for the communicative approach (Kern, 1995).

Motivation

Two additional beliefs in relation to Crookes and Schmidt's (1991) second language learning motivation are expressed by the students: *classroom level* and *syllabus level* motivation. Firstly, for the classroom level, they assert that they would love English if their teachers teach in an interesting way like using the internet and music. Secondly, for the syllabus level, they wish to have more appealing topics in their textbooks. They view the topics in their textbooks are dull and out-dated.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study reveals that the MICSS and the NSS students' beliefs differ primarily on their perceptions of the important expects of learning English and their English language learning practices. The most salient difference is in their endorsement for the translation method in learning English. Despite the influence of family background, school racial demographics and the students' previous English learning experiences, the current approaches and methodology employed and embedded in their educational contexts are the important elements that shape their beliefs. Besides, there are three additional ESL learner beliefs discovered in this study: English teachers' race/culture/mother tongue, ideal English classroom, and motivation in relation to techniques/activities employed in the classroom (classroom level) and teachers' choice of content (syllabus level). It shows that the NSS students' beliefs are closer to the learner-centred principles but the MICSS students' beliefs are still very determined by their traditional learning experiences and their classmates. This mirrors the stronger collectivistic learning culture in the MICSS.

Limitations of this study

The participants from the NSS are mostly Chinese. Although this study is able to compare the beliefs between Chinese students in NSS and MICSS, the racial uniformity in the NSS group does not able to adequately illustrate how educational contexts influence ESL students' beliefs regardless of race or culture in the NSS. The inclusion of other races i.e. Malay and Indians would have been more insightful as it provides a more in-depth investigation in whether educational settings play a major role in moulding ESL students' beliefs despite being culturally different.

Pedagogical implications

The finding reveals the importance of translation in English language learning to a certain extent. In fact, the mother tongue may serve social and cognitive functions (Carless, 2008). Hence, to employ occasional translation techniques appropriately, teachers should consider the four factors proposed by Harmer (2001): students' previous experience, students' proficiency level, the stage of the English language classes and the stage of the individual English lesson. Furthermore, teachers from both contexts should fully embrace ICT in the English classrooms to raise students' motivations (Miller, 2005) in both the classroom and syllabus levels.

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