

# The Relationship between High School Students' Beliefs about Language Learning and Their Use of Language Learning Strategies

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## Abstract

Gaining insights into the learners' individual characteristics such as beliefs about language learning and their relationship with learning strategies is essential for planning effective language instruction. Thus, the present study investigated the relationship between beliefs about language learning and learning strategy use in Iranian high school students. This study also compared the correlation of the two variables between males and females and monolingual and bilingual students. The strategy inventory for language learning (SILL) and the beliefs about language learning inventory (BALLI) were used to collect data from four hundred and sixty-two high school students from different cities of the country. Descriptive analyses, Pearson r correlation, and the Fisher z-transformation test, were used to analyze the data. The results revealed that the students used metacognitive strategies most and compensation and affective strategies least. Also, they held strong motivational beliefs about English language learning. Significant positive correlations were found between beliefs and strategy categories. The strongest correlation was found between the students' metacognitive strategies and their motivation and expectations. The findings revealed no significant difference between the correlation coefficients of monolinguals and bilinguals, and males and females in terms of their language learning beliefs and strategies. Regarding the pedagogical implications of the results, it is discussed that knowledge of students' language learning beliefs and their preferred strategies can lead teachers and educational authorities toward more informed instructional choices.

**Keywords:** language learning, strategies, beliefs, high school students

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1980s, a growing interest in the role of individual learners' in language learning led researchers to investigate learner variables as a means of explaining differences in students' ability to learn a foreign or second language. Learners' use of learning strategies and their beliefs about language learning are among these variables which have been explored and investigated as heated topics in the field of second language acquisition.

Some studies have revealed that in the classroom context, the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes that students bring with them to the learning situation are significant contributory factors in the learning process and ultimate success (Breen, 2001). For example, second/foreign language learners may hold strong beliefs about the nature of the language, its difficulty, the process of its acquisition, the success of certain learning strategies, and their own expectations about achievement and teaching methodologies. Horwitz (1987, 1988) found that previous language learning experiences as well as cultural backgrounds can influence learners' beliefs about language learning. Also, the possible relationship between the learners' beliefs about language learning and their choice of learning strategies has been suggested in some studies (Abraham & Vann, 1987; Chang & Shen, 2005; Horwitz, 1987, 1988; Yang, 1999). According to Hong (2006), investigating students' beliefs and their relationship with more specific areas such as language learning strategies, can provide us with valuable sources of insight into the language learning process. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the relationship between high school students' language learning beliefs and strategies and to compare the correlation of the two variables between males and females and monolingual and bilingual students.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Learners' Beliefs about Language Learning

Language learning beliefs have been defined in the literature as "general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning, and about the nature of language learning and teaching" (Victori & Lockhart, 1995, p. 224). Beliefs about language learning are viewed as a component of metacognitive

knowledge, which include all that individuals understand about themselves as learners and thinkers, including their goals and needs (Flavell, 1987; as cited in Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005). Barcelos (2000; as cited in Aragao, 2011) suggested that language teachers should take account of their students' beliefs as the tools students use in understanding their learning context and in dealing with it. Horwitz (1999) also insisted that it is important to understand learner beliefs in order to better understand learner approaches to language learning, and learner's use of learning strategies to better plan language instruction.

So far, studies on belief have mainly concentrated on English language learners' beliefs using Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) as the instrument in different ESL and EFL contexts. These studies have investigated the link between beliefs and gender (Bernat & Lloyd, 2007; Siebert, 2003; Tercanlioglu, 2005), language proficiency (Abedini, Rahimi & Zare-ee, 2011), language learning strategies (Yang, 1999), the effect of culture on beliefs (Horwitz, 1999), and the dimensions underlying language learners' beliefs (Sakui & Gaines, 1999).

Regarding the effect of gender on learners' beliefs, Tercanlioglu (2005) found that the difference between males and females' beliefs was not statistically significant. However, Siebert's (2003) study, examining international university students in the United States, showed significant gender-related differences. Also, Bernat and Lloyd (2007) found significant differences in male and female beliefs in only two of the items of the belief questionnaire.

## **Language Learning Strategies**

Oxford (1990) defined language learning strategies as "... specific actions, behaviors, steps or techniques that students use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language" (p. 8). Language learning strategies are usually contrasted with communication strategies, which are resorted to while producing second language output. They are also contrasted with learning styles based on their problem-oriented nature (Akbari & Hosseini, 2008). Various classification systems have attempted to categorize individual strategies within larger groups. The most frequently cited and comprehensive classification of

learning strategies to date is that of Oxford (1990) who developed the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL).

Oxford (1990) drew a general distinction between direct and indirect strategies, which are further subdivided into 6 groups: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. Direct strategies consist of “strategies that directly involve the target language” in the sense that they “require mental processing of the language.” (1990, p. 37), while indirect strategies “provide indirect support for language learning through focusing, planning, evaluating, seeking opportunities, controlling anxiety, increasing cooperation and empathy and other means” (1990, p. 151). Oxford’s classification was used as a framework for this study because of its systematicity and comprehensiveness.

Studies of language learning strategies, so far, have investigated the ways in which the choice of learning strategies is affected by various factors like gender (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; Yilmaz, 2010), age (Chesterfield & Chesterfield, 1985; Purdie & Oliver, 1999), second language proficiency (Liu, 2004), academic specialization (Peacock & Ho, 2003), bilingualism/monolingualism (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2007), cultural background (Oxford, 1996), motivation (Schmidt & Watanabe, 2001), multiple intelligences (Akbari & Hosseini, 2008), and beliefs about language learning (Chang & Shen, 2005; Hong, 2006; Yang, 1999).

Regarding the effect of gender on the choice of learning strategies many studies show that in typical language learning situations females use significantly more learning strategies than males do (Liu, 2004; Ok, 2003). Other studies report males as using language learning strategies more frequently than females (Wharton, 2000). Yet, some other studies report no differences in strategy use as relates to students’ gender (Yang, 2010).

## Bilingualism in Language Learning

The difference between monolinguals and bilinguals/multilinguals in language learning has been addressed in a number of studies in the field of second language acquisition (Hong, 2006; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2007; Tuncer, 2009; Vossoughi & Ebrahimi, 2003). However, the literature on language learning differences between monolinguals and bilinguals/multilinguals has revealed mixed results. While the

outperformance of bilinguals has been reported in some studies (Hong, 2006; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2007), some others have suggested monolinguals' advantage (Gathercole, 1997; as cited in Hong, 2006), or no difference between them (Maghsudi, 2006).

Hong (2006) compared monolingual and bilingual Korean university students regarding their strategy use and beliefs about language learning. Students from both groups reported low use of social and memory strategies. But overall, bilingual students reported higher use of learning strategies. Hong-Nam and Leavell (2007) also examined the language learning behaviors and thought processes of monolingual Korean and bilingual Korean-Chinese university students by comparing their use of learning strategies. The findings indicated that monolinguals used compensation strategies most and affective strategies least. Bilinguals preferred to use metacognitive strategies most and memory strategies least. Furthermore, bilinguals reported higher use of learning strategies. Also, Vossoughi and Ebrahimi (2003) studied the difference between bilingual and monolingual English learners regarding their language learning strategies, attitudes and motivation. They found significant differences between the two groups in their use of language learning strategies and their attitudes toward English language learning. No significant differences were found between groups in terms of their motivation. They found that bilinguals differed from monolinguals in their use of metacognitive, cognitive, and compensation strategies.

## **Beliefs and Strategy Use**

Many researchers have provided evidence on the relationships between learner beliefs and language learning strategies. Wenden (1986) found that learners' explicit beliefs about the nature and the process of language learning provide the logic for their choice of learning strategies. Horwitz (1988) also argued that some preconceived beliefs about language learning have the potential of restricting learners' range of strategy use.

In a frequently-cited study on the relationship between beliefs and strategy choice, Yang (1999) investigated language learning beliefs and learning strategies of Taiwanese university students. She found a strong relationship between students' beliefs and their use of strategies. For example, the students' self-efficacy about learning English was closely related to their use of all types of learning strategies. In another study by

Chang and Shen (2005), the relationship between the two variables was investigated. The results revealed a moderate, significant relation in each pair of subcategories of beliefs and strategies.

Learners' beliefs about the nature of language and learning have been investigated and studied by some Iranian researchers in recent years (Harati, 2011; Ganjabi, 2011; Ghabanchi & Meidani, 2012; Khodadadi, 2009; Pishghadam & Pourali, 2011; Yamini & Dehghan, 2005). However, very few studies have addressed the relationship between learner beliefs and learning strategies (Abedini et al., 2011; Ghavamnia, Kassaian & Dabaghi, 2011). These studies have been mostly conducted with university students, and research on high school students' beliefs and strategies has been very limited. As far as the researchers are aware, no comparative study has been done so far on the difference between the Iranian bilingual and monolingual male and female high school students in terms of using language-learning strategies and their beliefs about language learning. Thus, the present study was motivated by the need to bridge such a gap.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study was conducted to answer the following questions:

1. What are the beliefs of Iranian high school students about language learning?
2. What language learning strategies do Iranian high school students use?
3. Is there any relationship between Iranian high school students' beliefs about language learning and their use of learning strategies?
4. Is there any significant difference between the correlation of strategy and belief in monolingual/bilingual and male/female groups?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Four hundred and sixty-two high-school students from ten different cities in Iran participated in this study. Two-hundred and fifty-two students were female and two-hundred and ten students comprised the male group. Two hundred and thirty students were Azeri-Persian bilinguals

and two hundred and thirty-two were monolingual Persian-speaking students. Their age ranged from 14 to 18 years. The sample included students of the first grade in high school (25%), second grade (24%), third grade (30%) and fourth grade (21%). All students had studied English for at least three years at junior high-school and they were at a lower intermediate level of proficiency.

## Instrumentation

The instruments in this study were two questionnaires: the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL, ESL/EFL 7.0 version) developed by Oxford (1990), and the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI, ESL/EFL version) developed by Horwitz (1987). Both questionnaires were translated into Persian, pilot tested, and modified for the study. A few questions regarding demographic information were also added.

The BALLI assesses learners' beliefs within five categories: the difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation and expectations. Items are scored on a five-point Likert scale: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree. Cronbach alpha reliability for the translated version was found to be .66.

The SILL is divided into six categories of strategies. They include memory: storing and retrieving information (9 items), cognitive: understanding and producing the language (14 items), compensation: overcoming limitations in language learning (6 items), metacognitive: centering and directing learning (9 items), affective: controlling emotions and motivation (6 items), and social: cooperating with others in language learning (6 items). It employs a five-point Likert-scale: 1= never or almost never true of me, 2= generally not true of me, 3= somewhat true of me, 4= generally true of me, and 5= always or almost always true of me. The Cronbach alpha for the Persian version of the SILL was estimated to be .91.

## **Data Collection Procedure**

The questionnaires were administered during the students' regular class time in February and March 2012 by their English teachers. Before the administration procedure, a brief explanation on the purpose of the study was given to the students. They were also informed that the completion of the questionnaires would not affect their grades and their responses would be kept confidential.

## **Data Analysis**

The gathered data were analyzed using SPSS version 18.0. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations, were computed to summarize the students' responses to the SILL and BALLI items. Pearson correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between beliefs and strategy use. To identify the significance of the difference between correlation of the two variables in monolinguals and bilinguals and males and females, the Fisher z-transformation test was done.

## **RESULTS**

### **Research Question One**

Research question one was: "What are the beliefs of Iranian high school students about language learning?" To answer this question descriptive statistics of the students' responses to the BALLI were computed. This section presents the results of the descriptive analyses of the five categories of the BALLI: the difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation and expectations.

BALLI items in the difficulty of language learning category concern the general difficulty of learning a foreign language. The students showed seventy-two percent endorsement of the idea that some languages are easier to learn than others. Forty-six percent agreed on the statement "It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language". Far more boys (63%) than girls (41%) agreed or strongly agreed that they will learn to speak English very well. The mean average of this category was 3.61 (N=462, SD= 1.14).

The category of foreign language aptitude considers the general existence of special ability for language learning and beliefs about the characteristics of successful language learners. Seventy-six percent of the students believed that some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages. However, forty-nine percent agreed that they have a special ability for learning foreign languages. When asked whether it is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one, fifty-seven percent agreed and twenty-five were neutral. Also, fifty-nine percent of the participants believed that people who speak more than one language are very intelligent. The mean average of this category was lowest among all belief categories ( $M= 3.43$ ,  $N= 462$ ,  $SD= 1.15$ ).

BALLI items in the nature of language learning, concern issues related to the nature of language learning process. Half of the students believed that knowing about culture is important in foreign language learning. Contrary to the common belief that it is best to learn English in an English-speaking country, only sixty-five percent of the students agreed with this notion. The majority of the students (89%) perceived learning vocabulary as the most important part of language learning, sixty percent favored grammar, and fifty-nine percent supported translation. Also, half of them believed that language learning involves a lot of memorization. The mean average of this category was 3.75 ( $N= 462$ ,  $SD= 1.12$ ).

Items in the category of learning and communication strategies refer to various strategies learners use to master a second or foreign language. Nearly all of the students (95%) agreed or strongly agreed that it is important to repeat and practice a lot. Eighty-two percent stressed the importance of speaking with an excellent pronunciation. More than half of the students disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement: " You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly". Forty-two percent agreed that it is OK to guess if one doesn't know a word in English. This category received a relatively high mean average ( $M= 3.76$ ,  $N= 462$ ,  $SD= 1.16$ ).

The last category, motivation and expectations, concerns the desire and expectation for language learning opportunities. The majority of students (about 78%) stated that they like to learn English to know native speakers of English and their cultures better. Sixty-eight percent of the students answered that they like to have English speaking friends.

About 83% of students believed that learning English will provide them with better opportunities for a good job. Finally, 90% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they want to learn English well. The highest mean average among all belief categories is in motivation and expectations category ( $M= 4.08$ ,  $N= 462$ ,  $SD= 1.16$ ).

## **Research Question Two**

Research question two was: "What language learning strategies do Iranian high school students use?" To answer this question descriptive statistics of the students' responses to the SILL was computed. The results of the descriptive analyses of the six categories of the SILL are reported in this section: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Oxford (1990) suggested a mean of 1.0-2.4 and lower for "low", a mean range of 2.5-3.4 for "medium", and a mean range of 3.5-5.0 for "high" levels of strategy use. The same scale is used in the present study in interpreting the results.

Memory strategies are employed for storing and retrieving new information. Half of the students reported that they always connected the sound of a new English word and an image of it to help them remember the word. The same number also stated that they use English words in sentences to remember them. Sixty-four percent of the students answered that they never physically act out new English words. Sixty-eight percent stated that they never or almost never use flashcards to remember new words. The mean average of this category was 2.88 ( $N=462$ ,  $SD= 1.20$ ).

The SILL items in the category of cognitive strategies concern manipulating or transforming the target language. Sixty-three percent of the students stated that they say or write new words several times. Forty percent of the participants reported that they never or almost never use English words they know in different ways. More than half of the students answered that they never or almost never write notes, messages, letters or reports in English, and they never start conversations in English. This category received a mean average close to that of memory strategies ( $M= 2.87$ ,  $N= 462$ ,  $SD= 1.35$ ).

Compensation strategies are intended to make up for missing knowledge while using the language. One third of the students stated that they used gestures when they couldn't think of a word during a conversation. Thirty-three percent stated that they always or almost always made guesses to understand unfamiliar words. Sixty-eight percent

of the students reported that they never make up new words. More than half of the students never read English texts without looking up every new word. This category received the lowest mean average among all strategy categories ( $M= 2.74$ ,  $N= 462$ ,  $SD= 1.25$ ).

Metacognitive strategies provide a way for learners to manage their own learning process. Sixty percent of the students answered that they always thought about their progress in English. Also, the same number reported that they always noticed their mistakes and used them to do better. Forty percent stated that they always looked for opportunities to read as much as possible in English. The mean average of this category is highest among the six strategy categories ( $M= 3.40$ ,  $N= 462$ ,  $SD= 1.15$ ).

Affective strategies refer to learners' emotions, motivation and attitudes toward learning language. In this category, more than half of the students reported that they never felt tense or nervous when studying or using English. The results also indicated that more than half of the students never talked to someone else about their feelings in learning English, wrote down their feelings in a language learning diary or gave themselves a reward when they did well in English. The category of affective strategies yielded a mean average of 2.78 ( $N= 462$ ,  $SD= 1.32$ ) which was the lowest mean after compensation strategies.

The SILL items in the category of social strategies refer to learner's communication with people who use the target language. Half of the students stated that if they didn't understand something in English, they asked the other person to slow down or say it again. About the same number reported that they always tried to learn about the culture of English speakers. Fifty percent of the students never asked questions in English. With a mean average of 3.09 ( $N= 462$ ,  $SD= 1.38$ ), social strategies were the most used strategies after metacognitive strategies.

### **Research Question Three**

Research question three was: "Is there any relationship between Iranian high school students' beliefs about language learning and their use of learning strategies?" To find the answer to this research question, Pearson r correlation coefficient was computed. Table 1 represents the correlations of beliefs and strategy categories for 462 students. As shown in the Table, the six categories of strategies were significantly correlated

with five categories of beliefs with correlation coefficients ranging from .14 to .37.

**Table 1:** Correlations of beliefs and strategy categories

	B1	B2	B3	B4	B5
<b>S1 Pearson Correlation</b>	.22	.22	.14	.18	.23
<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	.000	.000	.002	.000	.000
<b>S2 Pearson Correlation</b>	.21	.34	.15	.26	.35
<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	.000	.000	.001	.000	.000
<b>S3 Pearson Correlation</b>	.14	.21	.09	.20	.23
<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	.002	.000	.036	.000	.000
<b>S4 Pearson Correlation</b>	.18	.34	.09	.22	.37
<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	.000	.000	.036	.000	.000
<b>S5 Pearson Correlation</b>	.21	.11	.16	.15	.23
<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	.000	.012	.002	.001	.000
<b>S6 Pearson Correlation</b>	.15	.28	.16	.20	.35
<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	.001	.000	.002	.000	.000

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

N= 462

S1= Memory Strategies, S2= Cognitive Strategies, S3= Compensation Strategies, S4= Metacognitive Strategies, S5= Affective Strategies, S6= Social Strategies, B1= Beliefs about language aptitude, B2= beliefs about difficulty of language learning, B3= beliefs about the nature of language learning, B4= beliefs about learning and communication strategies, B5= motivation and expectations.

## Research Question Four

Research question four was: “Is there any significant difference between the correlation of strategy and belief in monolingual and bilingual, and male and female students?”

In order to find the significance of the difference between the correlation of strategy and belief in male and female students, first the correlations between the two variables for each groups of females and males were obtained, then the Fisher z-transformation test was conducted. The observed value of z was calculated to be  $z = 1.17$  ( $-1.96 < z > 1.96$ ) which is within the range of insignificant difference.

To find the significance of the difference between the correlation of strategy and belief in monolingual and bilingual students, the correlations between the two variables for each groups of monolinguals and bilinguals were first calculated, then the Fisher z-transformation test was done. The observed value of z was calculated to be  $z = .59$  ( $-1.96 < z$

> 1.96), which indicates an insignificant difference between the correlation coefficients of monolinguals and bilinguals.

## DISCUSSION

### Research Question One

Reviewing the results of the BALLI items reveals that high-school students held different beliefs and opinions about English language learning. The majority of the students believed that it is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language. This result is consistent with Horwitz's (1988) findings. Belief in child superiority in language learning seems to be a common knowledge among people. More than half of the students asserted that they had a special ability for learning foreign languages and believed that everyone can learn to speak a foreign language. This finding indicates that many Iranian high school students have fairly positive estimates of their own language learning abilities.

Regarding beliefs about the difficulty of language learning, 78% of the students agreed that some languages are easier to learn than others. This is in line with Horwitz's (1988) result in which the Asian learners' agreement with this item ranged from 63 to 72%. The fact that far more boys than girls believed that they will learn to speak English very well suggests that boys were more optimistic about language learning or consider language learning an easier task in comparison to girls.

In the category of beliefs about the nature of language learning, more than half of the students believed that it is important to know about the English culture in order to speak English. This belief is congruent with their social strategies since half of the students reported that they always try to learn about the culture of English speakers. The overwhelming majority of the participants (90%) agreed that the most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary. Sixty percent maintained that grammar learning is the most important part of learning a foreign language. Along the same line, 59% of the students selected "learning how to translate" as the most important part. Also, half of them believed that language learning involves a lot of memorization. These beliefs and the fact that they are supported by considerable numbers of the participants are probably reflecting the

prevalence of grammar-translation method in their English classes (Dolati & Seliman, 2011).

Considering beliefs about learning and communication strategies, more than half of the students disagreed with the statement “You shouldn’t say anything in English until you can say it correctly” and agreed that it is OK to guess if they don’t know a word in English. It can be concluded that the students are aware of the importance of guessing and the inevitability of making mistakes in language learning. However, these beliefs are in contrast with their responses to the statement “if beginning students are permitted to make errors in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on”. Sixty percent of the participants agreed with this statement. It seems that the students held somewhat contradictory beliefs in this category.

In the category of motivation and expectations, eighty percent of the students believed that learning English could provide them with better job opportunities. However, 75% liked to learn English to know native speakers and their cultures. Also, 65% of the students liked to have English speaking friends. This might imply that instrumental motivation such as wanting to learn English for job opportunities is stronger than integrative types of motivation in high-school students. The majority of the participants (90%) agreed that they want to learn English well. All beliefs in this category suggest that the students were motivated to learn English. It seems that students are well-aware of the importance of English language in their academic enterprises and in their future careers. Chalak & Kassaian (2010) and Vaezi (2008) also found high-school students motivated to learn English.

On the whole, the highest means in all belief categories belong to the category of motivation and expectations. This means that the students hold strong motivational beliefs about English language learning. This finding is in agreement with the results of the previous belief studies in Iran (Abedini et al., 2011; Ghabanchi & Meidani, 2010; Zare-ee, 2010).

## **Research Question Two**

An examination of the SILL results reveals that high-school students use a variety of language learning strategies. In the category of memory strategies, the fact that the students reported connecting the sound of a new word and an image of it to help them remember the word, might imply that the students were using their photographic and auditory

memory to remember the words. Half of the students reported that they used English words in sentences to remember them. This might be an effort made by the students to gain mastery over the meaning as Oxford (1990) maintains that the principle of memory strategies is meaning. Many students reported that they never used flashcards to remember new words. This might be because the students were not acquainted with using flashcards or they might not have been exposed to such a technique for remembering new words.

Regarding cognitive strategies, many students responded that they never used English words they knew in different ways. This may be explained by the fact that naturally Iranian high school students have very few opportunities to use what they learn in their English classes either through speaking or writing. The fact that the students never or almost never wrote messages, letters, reports or notes in English, might be explained by the fact that the writing skill is by no means taught in public schools.

Considering compensation strategies, one third of the students stated that they always used gestures when they couldn't think of a word during a conversation. This relatively small number may be explained by the fact that high school students seldom take part in conversations in English. Sixty-eight percent of the students reported that they never made up new words. This might refer to their low level of proficiency and lack of knowledge of word-formation rules. More than half of the students never read English texts without looking up every new word. This may imply that the students are highly dependent on their dictionaries or word lists provided by the teachers, since English teaching in public schools in Iran is still dominated mainly by grammar-translation method (Dolati & Seliman, 2011). Overall, the students' means in compensation strategies are low. This means that Iranian high school students use relatively few compensation strategies. Oxford (1990) states that compensation strategies are used to help learners use the new language for comprehension and production despite their limited knowledge in the new language. Keeping this in mind, one can infer that the students' infrequent use of compensation strategies is likely related to the fact that they rarely have to produce or manipulate English in the classroom.

In the area of metacognitive strategies, many students answered that they always thought about their progress in English. This demonstrates an attempt made by the students to evaluate their learning. As Oxford

(1990) put it, metacognitive strategies include the planning, organization, evaluation, and monitoring of one's own language learning. The students' means in the category of metacognitive strategies are highest among the six strategy categories. This might mean that the students use metacognitive strategies most, which indicates that they plan, organize, evaluate, and monitor their own language learning.

Regarding affective strategies, more than half of the students reported that they never felt tense or nervous when studying or using English. This might be because learning English for the majority of high school students does not involve speaking or listening which is the major cause of embarrassment and nervousness in learners (Oxford, 2005). The results also indicated that more than half of the students never talked to someone else about their feelings in learning English, wrote down a language learning diary or gave themselves a reward when they did well. The low means in this category implied that affective strategies were the least used of the six strategy categories by the four groups. One explanation can be the reluctance of Iranians in communicating their feelings and emotions, a trait common in eastern cultures (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Nishida, 1996).

In the category of social strategies, about half of the students stated that they always tried to learn about the culture of English speakers. This is probably because of the inherent attractiveness of western cultures to young people in addition to the fact that the students are getting familiar with English culture through movies, satellite T.V, the Internet, etc. About half of the students never asked questions in English. This is possibly reflecting the fact that in public schools, the students' mother tongue is the medium of instruction in English classes. Naturally they don't need to ask their questions in English.

In sum, the highest means in all groups is in the category of metacognitive strategies and the lowest means are seen in affective and compensation strategies. This means that Iranian high school students use metacognitive strategies most and affective and compensation strategies least. This finding is in agreement with the results of previous studies which reported metacognitive strategies as the most frequently used and affective strategies as the least frequently used strategies by Iranian learners (Gerami & Madani, 2011; Hajhashemi, Parasteh Ghombavani, & Yazdi Amirkhiz, 2011; Lachini, 1997; Pishghadam, 2009; Tajeddin, 2001).

### **Research Question Three**

As shown in Table 1, the six categories of strategies were significantly correlated with five categories of beliefs. The significant correlation coefficients imply that more positive beliefs about language learning are associated with high level of learning strategy use. This finding confirms Abraham and Vann's (1987) suggestion that learners' beliefs about how language operates and how it is learned may affect the variety and flexibility of their strategy use. It is also in line with the results of previous studies in most of which a moderate to strong positive correlation between language learning beliefs and learning strategy use was reported (Abedini et al., 2011; Chang & Shen, 2005; Hong, 2006; Horwitz, 1987, 1988; Yang, 1999).

The strongest correlation was found between the students' metacognitive strategies and their motivation and expectations. Beliefs about motivation and expectations were also highly correlated with social and cognitive strategies. This result is in agreement with the findings of Yang (1999), Chang and Shen (2005) and Abidini et al. (2011) who found a strong relationship between language learning motivation and most strategy categories. The weakest correlation was found between compensation strategies and beliefs about language aptitude. This suggests that what students believe about language aptitude is not a strong determinant of their learning strategies.

As Horwitz (1988) suggested that certain beliefs about language learning would facilitate or restrict the use of learning strategies, the results of this study showed that Iranian high school students' beliefs about language learning can influence their use of language learning strategies. An important fact is that no negative correlation was found between beliefs and strategy use, as was the case in some studies (Hong, 2006; Yang, 1999). This means that Iranian high school students' beliefs about language learning are not discouraging or restricting factors to their use of learning strategies, but are likely to facilitate and expand it.

### **Research Question Four**

The correlation between beliefs and strategies in the female group was higher than that in the male group. However, according to the obtained z value, this difference was not statistically significant. This implies that

the relationship between beliefs about language learning and strategy use is not affected by gender in Iranian high school students. In other words, the relationship between beliefs and strategy use is quite similar in male and female students. This finding is consistent with the results of previous studies (Kafipour, Noordin & Pezeshkian, 2011; Pishghadam, 2009; Tajeddin, 2001; Yang, 2010; Ziahosseini & Salehi, 2008).

The correlation between beliefs and strategies in the monolingual group was slightly higher than that in the bilingual group. However, the  $z$  value demonstrated that this difference was not statistically significant. The insignificant difference between the two groups means that the relationship between beliefs about language learning and strategy use is not influenced by the state of bilingualism in Iranian high school students. In other words, the strategy use and beliefs are correlated with one another to the same degree in monolinguals and bilinguals. With reference to the findings of previous studies, this research question yielded mixed results. While the result is in contrast with the results of Hong-Nam and Leavell (2007) and Vossoughi and Ebrahimi (2003) who reported the advantage of bilinguals, it is in agreement with the findings of Maghsudi (2006) and Nayak et al. (1990; as cited in Hong, 2006) who reported no significant differences between monolinguals' and bilinguals' use of strategies.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

On the whole, the present study contributed to increasing our knowledge about high school students' language learning beliefs and strategies. It also provided empirical evidence for the relationship between beliefs about language learning and learning strategy use among Iranian high-school students. The significant correlation coefficients demonstrated that learners' beliefs are related to and interact with learning strategies through logical relationships. Beliefs of students of all four groups concerning motivation and expectation were significantly correlated to most strategy categories. This implies that the higher motivation the students have for learning English, the higher the frequency of strategy use. The fact that no negative correlation was found between beliefs and strategy use in the four groups, leads us to the hopeful conclusion that Iranian high-school students' beliefs about language learning do not

discourage or restrict their use of learning strategies, but might be facilitating factors in this regard.

A comparison of the findings of this study with those of previous studies in the literature indicates that the participants of this study held both similar and different beliefs and strategies compared to ESL (Horwitz, 1987; Siebert, 2003) and EFL (Hong, 2006; Horwitz, 1988; Park, 1995; Yang, 1999) learners. This demonstrates the importance of the influence of different language learning contexts and diverse educational backgrounds in forming learners' beliefs and their choice of learning strategies.

The findings of this study entails some implications for the practice of English language learning and teaching in Iran, and are beneficial for those involved in it, like teachers and textbook designers. Teachers should gain insights into their students' language learning beliefs and the strategies they use in order to help less successful students become more efficient and confident learners. These insights can lead them to more effective instructional planning and implementation. The results of this study showed that in some cases, high school students have restricted views of language learning which can influence their learning process. For example, the overwhelming majority of the students believed that language learning is mostly a matter of learning the vocabulary and grammar or how to translate into their mother tongue. Language teachers are expected to modify such misconceptions. Since the students in this study reported strong motivational beliefs for learning language, the teachers can direct the students' motivation and use it as a handle to improve their students' language learning abilities. It would also be helpful for teachers to take into account learners' beliefs and their strategy preferences in choosing their teaching methodologies. They can inject strategy training in the regular English classes after an examination of the learners' beliefs and adapt strategy-based instruction. Textbook designers and the publishers of materials for learning English should also attend to the language learning beliefs and learning strategies of students for producing effective and practical materials to suit the needs of Iranian learners.

## Bio-data

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