

**University Students' Beliefs about  
English Learning and their Use of  
Learning Strategies: a Mixed-Method  
Study in Macao**

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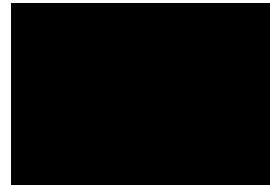
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## **Candidate's Certification**

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis and all sources used have been acknowledged in this thesis



## **Abstract**

This thesis is an exploration of two phenomena which become foregrounded when attention is focused on the process of learning an additional language, namely, (1) the beliefs language learners have about learning an additional language and (2) the strategies they use to learn the language, where strategic language learning has been recognised as contributing to successful outcomes. The thesis also explores relations between these two phenomena. Specifically, the study reported in this thesis used a mixed method approach to investigate the beliefs about language learning of tertiary students studying English in Macao, the language learning strategies these students use to learn English, and the relations between their language learning beliefs and the strategies they use. Students' beliefs about learning English and their strategies they use to learn the language were investigated quantitatively, through a questionnaire survey, and qualitatively, through follow-up interviews.

First, a sample of undergraduates (N=346) participated in a questionnaire survey composed of a Personal Background Information section, Horwitz's (1987) Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) and Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). Next, in order to give the students, and their teachers a voice, to contextualise the questionnaire responses and to help explain the quantitative results, a selection of undergraduate volunteers (N=12), drawn from the questionnaire participants, and a sample of university English lecturers (N=5) participated in follow-up interviews.

An analysis of the questionnaire responses and interview data showed that tertiary students in Macao tend to believe that language learning is associated with age, aptitude, learning context, repeated practice of pronunciation and vocabulary. These beliefs are

aligned with a lack of confidence about their own ability to learn English combined with extrinsic, rather than intrinsic, motivation to learn the language, for better job opportunities. The analysis also showed that tertiary students in Macao use a wide range of strategies to learn English, specifically compensation strategies, but these strategies are used infrequently. Furthermore, from within each strategy category, the students' strategy choice was very narrow. This finding suggests a lack of awareness among the students of the potential contribution of a wider repertoire of language learning strategies to their language learning, and may also reflect the test-oriented approach to English teaching prevalent in Macao secondary schools.

Finally, the analysis showed a weak to modest correlation between Macao tertiary students' beliefs about language learning and the strategies they used to learn English. These include a correlation showing that those who believe that language learning is difficult tend to use cognitive, metacognitive and compensation strategies, while those who believe that a language is best learned through communication tend not to use memory strategies. In addition, students who believe that English is best learnt in an English-speaking country, that vocabulary learning is the most important in English learning, and that their confidence with English would increase over time tend to use affective and social strategies, while those students who are more motivated to learn English are more likely to use metacognitive strategies but fewer affective strategies.

The contribution made by this study can be viewed from three perspectives: theory, methodology and pedagogy. Theoretically, the study demonstrates that the BALLI and SILL remain robust instruments for capturing language learners' beliefs about language learning and the strategies they use to learn a language, as confirmed by the responses to the open-ended questions appended to both inventories. The study has also contributed knowledge about the language learning beliefs and strategy use of a

specific group of students, tertiary students in Macao, in relation to their educational and sociocultural context, while showing only a modest correlation between this group of students' beliefs about language learning and their language learning strategy use. Methodologically, the study suggests that correlating language learning beliefs and language learning strategies needs to be approached with caution, especially when the factors being correlated are composite ones. The weak correlation between Macao tertiary students' beliefs about language learning, and the language learning strategies they use, suggests that any barriers to students becoming strategic language learners because of their beliefs can be overcome, for example, through effective pedagogy. Thus, the thesis concludes by recommending that in Macao teaching about language learning strategies is integrated into coherent English language teaching programs from kindergarten to tertiary level aligned with a set of clearly-articulated, incremental language learning goals.

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## **Glossary**

### **L1**

L1 refers to the first or native language, or the mother tongue.

### **L2**

L2 refers to a language learned after the first or native language. L2 can refer to a foreign or a second language.

### **Foreign Language (FL)**

A foreign language is a language learned in a setting in which the language is not the main vehicle of everyday communication for the majority of people.

### **Second Language (SL)**

A second language is a language learned in an environment in which that language is the main vehicle of everyday communication for the majority of people.

### **BALLI**

BALLI is the abbreviation for the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory. It is a structured questionnaire used to measure different learners' beliefs about English learning.

### **SILL**

SILL is the abbreviation for the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning. It is a structured learning strategy questionnaire used to measure learners' different types of language learning strategies used by learners.

### **Learner beliefs about language learning**

Learner beliefs about language learning refer to learners' preconceived notions or conceptions about L2 learning.

## **Language learning strategies**

L2 learning strategies are steps taken by L2 learners to enhance their L2 learning. L2 learning strategies are tools for deliberate and goal-directed involvement, and are broad and teachable actions to be employed by L2 learners for different learning purposes (Oxford, 2011). In this study, learners' language learning strategies are measured by Oxford's (1990) inventory of SILL and hence Oxford's (1990) six categories are employed in this study:

### *1. Memory strategies*

Memory strategies are techniques that help learners store and retrieve new information, such as making associations, using imagery and sounds to remember new expressions, reviewing in a structured way and employing physical response or mechanical techniques.

### *2. Cognitive strategies*

Cognitive strategies are steps or skills that involve repeating and formal practising with sounds, structures or natural interactions, receiving and sending messages with different resources, analysing expressions, reasoning deductively, translating, transferring, summarising and note-taking.

### *3. Compensation strategies*

Compensation strategies are techniques that enable learners to make up their limited knowledge in the process of comprehending or producing the target language, such as guessing wisely in listening and reading, using gestures, switching to the native language, and using a synonym or description in order to get the meaning across in speaking or writing.



#### 4. *Metacognitive strategies*

Metacognitive strategies refer to steps that learners take to manage or regulate their learning, such as planning and arranging for learning tasks, setting goals and objectives, monitoring the learning process for errors, and evaluating progress.

#### 5. *Affective strategies*

Affective strategies are strategies that help learners gain control over their emotions, attitudes and motivation related to language learning, such as encouraging oneself through positive self-talk, self-rewarding, talking with someone about one's feelings, or writing a language learning diary.

#### 6. *Social strategies*

Social strategies are actions that involve other people, such as asking questions, cooperating with others, and becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings.

### **Learner Autonomy**

Learner autonomy is the capacity to take charge of one's own learning. It is seen as a natural product of the practice of self-directed learning, or learning in which the objectives, progress and evaluation of learning are determined.

### **English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Learners**

EFL learners are learners who study English which is regarded as a foreign language in the learners' setting, i.e. where English is not the main vehicle of everyday communication.

### **English as a Second Language (ESL) Learners**

ESL learners are learners who study English which is regarded as a second language in the learners' setting. i.e. where English is the main vehicle of everyday communication.

**Attribution**

Attribution is the process of identifying the source or cause of one's success or failure of performance, or the result of that process.

**Self-efficacy**

Self-efficacy is a belief that one is capable of achieving that which is attempted or desired, such as task completion.

**Extrinsic / intrinsic motivation**

Intrinsic motivation is the self-desire to seek out new things and new challenges. It is driven by an interest or enjoyment in the task itself, and exists within the individual rather than relying on external pressures or a desire for reward. Extrinsic or instrumental motivation refers to the performance of an activity in order to attain a desired outcome and comes from influences outside of the individual.

**Bilingual education**

Bilingual education refers to the use of both students' first language and English as languages of instruction for content area instruction.

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