

## **Language Learning Beliefs and Gender Dynamics of University Students in Egypt: An Exploratory Study**

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### **Abstract**

The present study contributes to the growing body of research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) literature on foreign language learners' beliefs about language learning. It aims at exploring students' beliefs about language learning in an English-medium university in Cairo, Egypt and examining the gender dynamics that shape and sustain those beliefs. The study adopted a mixed-methods data collection approach, data was collected using a questionnaire and interviews. Sixty-five first year students took a modified version of Horwitz's (1987) Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI). Nine participants were interviewed for an in-depth exploration of their language learning beliefs.

The results showed that the lucrative future career foreign language learning in Egypt promises is the primary reason students are interested in investing in learning English. In terms of gender dynamics, the findings revealed that gender differences as a variable is not to be assumed. In the specific population which participated in the study, there was little evidence in their intention to follow traditional societal norms proscribing women joining the workforce. Consequently, other social variables ought to be taken into account for more significant research findings.

**Keywords:** Gender Dynamics, Language Learning Beliefs, Motivation

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## معتقدات تعلم اللغة وديناميات الجندر لدى طلاب الجامعة في

مصر: دراسة استكشافية

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### ملخص

تسهم الدراسة في إثراء دراسات أكتساب اللغة الثانية الخاصة بمعتقدات دراسي اللغات الأجنبية حول دراسة اللغة حيث تهدف الدراسة إلى إستكشاف معتقدات طلاب إحدى الجامعات الأجنبية بالقاهرة حول دراسة اللغة كما تسعى الدراسة إلى التعرف على ديناميكيات النوع التي تؤثر على تلك المعتقدات وقد تم إستخدام طرق بحثية مختلفة لجمع المعلومات حيث أستخدمت دراسة إستبائية و مقابلات شخصية مع الطلاب حيث أكمل خمسة و ستون طالبا و طالبة الدراسة الإستبائية ، كما حضر تسعة طلاب المقابلات الشخصية للتعرف على معتقداتهم حول دراسة اللغة الأجنبية عن قرب. و قد أشارت النتائج إلى أن فرص العمل الواعدة التي يتيحها تعلم اللغات الأجنبية بمصر هو أحد الأسباب الرئيسية لإهتمام الطلاب بتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية. و فيما يخص ديناميكيات النوع فقد أشارت نتائج الدراسة إلا أنه ليس بالضرورة أن تكون هناك إختلافات قائمة على النوع. و فيما يخص الطلاب المشاركون في الدراسة بالتحديد فقد أشارت النتائج إلى وجود أدلة قليلة على رغبتهم في إتباع التقاليد الإجتماعية، خاصة تلك المعنية بعمل المرأة، مما يؤكد ضرورة إستكشاف عوامل إجتماعية أخرى للحصول على نتائج أكثر وضوحاً.

### **Introduction and Background**

Interest in the notion of autonomy and the characteristics of Good Language Learners (GLL) has drawn attention to the importance of studying learners' beliefs about English language learning as a major factor influencing the language learning acquisition process and outcome. Horwitz's (1985, 1987, 1988) early studies on beliefs about language learning mark the emergence of a plethora of research studying English language learners' beliefs in the field of applied linguistics. She successfully identified beliefs commonly held by both language teachers and learners in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts and developed the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), an instrument for assessing beliefs about language learning which, since its development, has been one of the most widely used questionnaires in researching language learners' beliefs.

The significance of studying learners' beliefs about language learning lies in the fact that such studies help language educators understand the reasons behind learners' resistance to specific teaching techniques, lack of motivation and attrition in foreign language programs (Wenden, 1987). In other words, they contribute to "the understanding of student expectations of, commitment to, success in, and satisfaction with their language classes" (Horwitz, 1988, p. 283). Wenden (1986) posits that providing learners with an opportunity to reflect on and evaluate their beliefs about language learning is a "precondition to effective learning" (p. 9). Horwitz (1987) suggests using the BALLI as a discussion stimulus in language classes to help in developing a rigorous curriculum that appeals to learners' different beliefs and expectations. Similarly, Dörnyei (2005) suggests that periodical administration of the BALLI helps as a consciousness-raising tool for learners to understand the nature of language learning.

While research on language learners' beliefs has provided profound insight, Barcelos (2006) identifies two major shortcomings in early research on language learners' beliefs, one of which is analyzing those beliefs within the framework of academically established SLA theories. Such analysis usually results in regarding

learners' beliefs as erroneous or counterproductive, as well as obstacles to the implementation of autonomy. Horwitz (1987), for instance, suggests that students base their beliefs on limited experience and knowledge and argues for teachers to "confront erroneous beliefs with new information" (p. 292). Barcelos (2006) also contends that research has failed to identify the social context of learners' beliefs, regarding them as decontextualized metacognitive knowledge. Such criticism is the corollary of the cognitive approach to language acquisition studies, which considers language learning as an individual process that occurs primarily in the learners' mind. In fact, the driving metaphor of this approach, as Ellis (1997) suggests, is that of the learner as a computer "who process[es] input data" (p. 42). Ellis (1997) suggests that this metaphor is reiterated in the terminology of early SLA theories such as the "input" and "output" hypotheses (p. 50).

Such a diversity in approaching learners' beliefs is reflected in the way language learning beliefs researchers define and understand the nature of beliefs. Benson and Lor (1999), for instance, acknowledge both the cognitive and social aspects of learners' beliefs. They suggest that learners' beliefs are best understood as "cognitive resources on which students draw to make sense of and cope with specific content and contexts of learning" (p. 462). They contend that although those beliefs are expressed as general truths, they are still shaped by the specific language learning contexts in which they occur. Similarly, White (2008) emphasizes the social dimension of those beliefs seeing them as "part of students' experiences and interrelated with their environment" (p. 124).

The emphasis on the social and contextual dimensions of language learning dominates the current body of learner-centered L2 research which, Kramersch (2009) suggests, corresponds to the need to shift the focus of SLA research from the process of language acquisition to "the flesh-and-blood individuals" involved in the learning process (p. 2). A parallel shift is also acknowledged in the driving metaphors of SLA research from the metaphor of learners as a computer to that of the "learner-as-apprentice" (Kramersch, 2002, p. 2) according to which language is perceived as a means for communication rather than an input into the learners' minds.

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Such acknowledgement of the social nature of beliefs has triggered an interest in investigating the interplay between language learners' beliefs and a wide range of constructs including ethnicity (Siebert, 2003), culture (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Fujiwara, 2011), language proficiency (Tanaka & Ellis, 2003), and learner autonomy (Cotteral, 1995). Gender has recently emerged as the subject of a number of studies researching language learners' belief systems (Bernat & Lloyd, 2007; Daif-Allah, 2012). Similarly, in addition to studying language learning beliefs of university students in Egypt, the present study seeks to analyze the gender dynamics in which these beliefs exist, and their relationship to each other.

### **Review of Literature**

Gender dynamics have been a subject of extensive studies, controversial discussions and popular appeal across a variety of fields, and language learning is no exception. In fact, the impact of gender on English language learning is of great interest to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) practitioners (Norton & Pavlenko, 2004). This section reviews a number of BALLI-based studies in which gender is either the focus or emerges as a significant factor affecting research results.

Early studies of learners' beliefs about language learning, including those of Horwitz (1985, 1987, 1988), sparked the interest of language learning researchers around the world to explore learners' beliefs in different contexts with regard to a number of variables including gender. There has also been a growing interest among researchers in Arab countries to investigate gender politics and language learners' beliefs (Diab, 2006; Daif-Allah 2012). While some researchers are interested in exploring both teachers' and learners' beliefs about language learning, others focus primarily on studying those of learners only. Similarly, a number of researchers administer the original version of the BALLI without modifying any of its items, whereas others prefer tweaking some of its items or even administering a translated version of the widely-cited questionnaire for learners to complete in their mother tongue.

Siebert (2003) took the lead in studying the influence of gender on language learners' beliefs using the BALLI. She administered the questionnaire to 156 students whose ages ranged between 17 and 73 and 25 teachers whose experience in teaching English ranged between three and 32 years in three intensive English language programs in the Northwest region of the United States. The study aimed at examining the effects of national origin/ethnicity and gender as background variables on learners' and teachers' beliefs.

The study yielded a number of significant results, one of which is that male students tended to resist communicative approaches to language teaching more than female students through expressing a belief that mastering grammar rules is the best way to learn English. Siebert (2003) suggests that such a belief may lead male students to dedicate their effort to studying grammar rules at the expense of other language skills. The study also revealed a preference for communicative language learning among female students who preferred face-to-face interaction with native speakers to practicing with audio/video materials. Siebert (2003) concludes her study by highlighting the difficulty of convincing learners of the importance of communicative approaches to language learning if only "traditional learning outcomes" (p. 33) like grammar and vocabulary are being assessed. Similarly, it could be argued that traditional methods of assessing language learning outcomes have a crucial influence on learners' beliefs.

It is important to note that support for the effect of gender on learners' beliefs in L2 literature is not uncontested. In an attempt to replicate Siebert's (2003) study in an Australian context, Bernat and Lloyd (2007) used the BALLI to investigate the potential effect of gender on foreign language learners' beliefs about language learning in an Australian context. The questionnaire was administered to 155 female and 107 male undergraduate and graduate students studying English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in an Australian university. The participants' age ranged from 17 to 39 with post-intermediate to pre-advanced language proficiency level. The learners came from 19 different countries with the majority from China, Korea, Japan, Taiwan and Thailand.

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Although the study hypothesized that male and female student participants would differ in their language learning beliefs, no statistically significant gender differences were found in the beliefs participants in the study held about English language learning except for two items in the questionnaire: multilingualism and intelligence. The results showed that female students believed that a relationship existed between multilingualism and high levels of intelligence. However, unlike their male counterparts, they found practicing English with native speakers less interesting.

Given that the majority of the participants in the study came from East Asian and Southeast Asian countries, Bernat and Lloyd (2007) suggest that learners' cultural background could possibly be a significant variable in contributing to shaping their beliefs about language learning. Similarly, they contend that learners' level of language proficiency might influence their beliefs, in the sense that learners with a high level of language proficiency, like the ones in the study, tend to hold realistic and positive beliefs about language learning regardless of their gender. Thus, acknowledging the fact that the results of their study refute those of Siebert's (2003) study, Bernat and Lloyd (2007) call for additional studies to explore gender and beliefs about language learning in different research contexts before any generalizations can be made from their study.

In response to Bernat and Lloyd's (2007) call, Rieger (2009) examined how learners' gender and target language shape their beliefs about language learning in a Hungarian context. A modified Hungarian version of the BALLI was administered to 109 first-year students enrolled in various academic writing courses at a university in Budapest. The average age of the participants was 19.3. The results indicated that significant statistical differences were only detected in the way females recognized the importance of certain language learning approaches more than their male peers. Rieger (2009) acknowledges that the relatively small number of male participants in the sample of the study might have affected the results. These results draw attention to the importance of having a representative sample that equally reflects both male and female learners' beliefs about language learning in different language learning contexts.

In Iran. Nahavandi and Mukundan (2014) administered a translated Farsi version of the BALLI along with a demographic questionnaire to 369 Iranian EFL learners in Azad University of Tabriz, Iran. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 41. The study aimed at exploring Iranian EFL learners' beliefs about English language learning and the possible effect of gender on shaping those beliefs among other objectives. The results revealed significant statistical differences in the learning and communication strategies items, with female students more likely than their male peers to endorse that specific communication strategies are important in the language learning process. The results, thus, correspond to those of Rieger's (2009) and accentuate the need for further investigation of the rationale behind female learners' preference of specific approaches to language learning.

Although learners' beliefs remain an under-researched topic in Arabic-speaking countries, a few research studies have been conducted to explore Arabic-speaking English language learners' beliefs about language learning, examining gender as a potential variable (Diab, 2006; Daif-Allah, 2012). Diab (2006), for instance, examined Lebanese university students' beliefs about learning both English and French as foreign languages. A modified version of the BALLI was administered to 284 students in three universities in Lebanon. The results showed that political and socio-cultural factors within the Lebanese educational context affect learners' beliefs about both languages. Most significantly, although gender was not the main focus of the study, the results revealed that significant differences in the students' beliefs were attributed to gender as a background variable in the study. However, no further illustrations are provided, which might be attributed to the fact that gender was not the main subject of the research study. The results, however, further support the necessity of considering gender as a potential variable when studying learners' beliefs about foreign languages in the Arab context.

Daif-Allah's (2012) study examined the beliefs of Saudi English language learners about English language learning and the effect of gender on shaping those beliefs. Two hundred and fifty Saudi first-year students at the Intensive English Language Program (IELP) at Qassim University took a modified Arabic language



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version of the BALLI. The results indicated statistically significant gender-related differences in 20 out of 34 BALLI items pertaining to English language aptitude, language learning motivation and expectations. Unlike female students in Siebert's (2003) study, who did not endorse the use of audio and video language learning tools, Saudi female students in Daif-Allah's (2012) study expressed a reluctance to practice English face-to-face and a preference to practice it in language laboratories instead. Such preference, Daif-Allah (2012) suggests, is "more of a gender and cultural issue related to situational anxiety and norms of the Saudi conservative society" (p. 32). The study, thus, yields significant results with regard to how the social context along with cultural norms intersect with gender in affecting Arab language learners' beliefs about learning English and foreign languages in general.

In Egypt, Demian (1989) and Taha (2002) investigated the beliefs, attitudes and motivation of Egyptian English language learners studying at the American University in Cairo (AUC). Demian (1989) investigated the sex differences in the attitudes and motivation of Egyptian ESL students. The participants were 61 male and 61 female Egyptian students enrolled in the English Language Institute (ELI) at the American University in Cairo whose average age was 18. A demographic questionnaire and an attitude and motivation test battery were administered to the participants. The study indicated that no significant differences were found in the attitudes and motivations of male and female participants towards learning English language. Both male and female participants were equally motivated to learn English as a key factor for a promising future career. The participants also displayed a favorable attitude towards Arabic, which they perceived as the language of their "affiliation and interpersonal relations" (p. 57).

Taha's (2002) study aimed at describing the beliefs Egyptian English language learners and teachers hold about the nature of the language learning process, among other foci. The participants were 34 teachers and 183 students studying in the Center for Adult and Continuing Education (CACE) at AUC. The participants' ages ranged from 23 to 40. A questionnaire designed by the researcher was administered to the participants to elicit their beliefs about language learning.

The results revealed that both teachers and learners considered speaking as the most important language skill. The teachers and the learners in the study also endorsed the use of cassettes and TV programs to enhance the language learning process. The results also showed that learners perceived vocabulary to be an essential part of language learning. The teachers participating in the study stressed the importance of teaching grammar and vocabulary in a meaningful context. Additionally, the results indicated that although learners did not believe that grammar is the most important aspect of language learning, they highly valued its importance in facilitating speaking the target language. Taha (2002) suggests that this finding indicates that Egyptian learners were keen on improving both the accuracy and fluency of their target language use.

What the studies reviewed reveal is the difficulty of maintaining generalizations about language learners' belief system across different contexts. Rather, the studies confirm the importance of a careful examination of the cultural, social and contextual frameworks in which language learning takes place to gain insight into the big picture of learners' language learning beliefs and the variables that shape and affect them. Similarly, the findings of the studies reviewed demonstrate the difficulty of establishing a uniform relationship between gender and language learners' beliefs, which renders gender as a context-dependent variable.

In light of these findings, the purpose of the present study is to analyze university students' language learning beliefs in a private English-medium university in Egypt and examine gender as a possible variable that shapes and sustains these beliefs through using a contextual framework for data analysis. Accordingly, the present study contributes to the emerging SLA literature on English language learners' beliefs in the Arab region, especially in the Egyptian context which is worthy of investigation but still remains under-researched.

Overall, previous research findings have provided evidence that gender is a possible variable that might have an effect on language learners' belief system. However, researchers have stressed a need for further in-depth studies analyzing the ways in which gender contributes to shaping language learners' beliefs in different EFL contexts (Bernat & Lloyd, 2007; Daif-Allah, 2012). Additionally, many of the studies researching learners' beliefs relied exclusively on reporting gender differences, as indicated in the BALLI results.

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The purpose of the present study is to go beyond reporting statistical data results about the beliefs male and female learners hold about language learning through adopting a mixed-method data collection approach. The present study also aims at locating learners' beliefs in their appropriate social and academic contexts. In doing so, I will examine gender as a possible variable that shapes and sustains those beliefs through using a contextual framework for data analysis.

*The rising number of English-medium educational institutions in Egypt indicates that the demand for learning English has been increasing. In his comprehensive analysis of the profile of English language learning in Egypt, Schaub (2000) asserts that instrumental motivation has fueled an interest in studying English in Egypt where many Egyptians associate English with “the promise of more money or better jobs” (p.228). Instrumental Motivation is defined as “motivation that is essentially practical, such as the need to learn the language in order to get a better job” (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 64).*

The significance of the present study lies in exploring the language learning beliefs of Egyptian learners studying in an English-medium university and their gender dynamics, and analyzing them within the social and economic context in which they exist.

The study answers the following questions:

1. What prevalent beliefs do Egyptian university language learners have about language learning?
2. Is there a difference between the beliefs Egyptian male and female university language learners hold about language learning? If so, in what ways do they differ?

### **Theoretical Framework of the Study**

Barcelos (2006) acknowledges the possible overlap between the three proposed frameworks and recommends adopting an exploratory approach of data collection and analysis, which allows meaning to emerge from the data and context of the research rather than having preconceived understandings of learners' beliefs. The present study adopts a contextual framework of data analysis since it examines the language learning beliefs of Egyptian learners in the

specific context of an English-medium university and the gender dynamics of this learning context. As the name suggests, the contextual framework which Barcelos (2006) endorses, places primary focus on researching and analyzing beliefs of learners in a specific learning context. Studies adopting this framework, thus, do not aim at generalizing any of their findings beyond the population of the study. The dynamic and social aspects of language learning beliefs are reinforced within this framework which included a variety of data collection techniques such as: ethnographies, classroom observations, diaries and learning journals. These techniques are sometimes consolidated by the use of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, although these are not the main data collection techniques within the contextual approach. Diverse frameworks such as metaphor, narrative and discourse analysis frameworks also guide data analysis. Although the contextual framework of analysis allows researchers to carefully infer and examine learners' language beliefs, the inability to generalize the findings of studies adopting this framework is a challenge that still needs to be addressed by language learning beliefs researchers. Recently, a number of interdisciplinary research methodologies have been emerging under the umbrella of the contextual framework which draws on diverse theories such as Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Negueruela-Azarola, 2011; Yang & Kim, 2011), Bakhtin's dialogic theory (Dufva, 2003; Pan & Block, 2011), complexity theory (Mercer, 2011) and ecological frameworks (Peng, 2011).

### **Research Design**

The study adopted an exploratory approach, as it has no hypothesis. Although many studies investigating learners' beliefs about language learning relied exclusively on the widely-cited BALLI, the present study adopts a mixed-methods approach in order to better address the research questions of the study, triangulate the findings, and increase the results' reliability.

### **Participants and Sampling**

The sample of this study was one of convenience. The participants were freshman students (n = 65) enrolled in an Academic English for Freshman (AEF) program at a private English-medium university in Cairo, Egypt. The number of students in each class ranged from 8 to 15. Participants' ages ranged from 17 to 21

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years old ( $M = 18.85$ ). 71% of the questionnaire respondents reported gender as male, while 29% self-reported as female. Of the nine interview participants, five participants reported their gender as males, whereas four participants reported their gender as females.

All the participants in the study were Egyptians, whose native language was Arabic. The program in which the participants were enrolled is an integrated language skills and content course, which prepares students with the necessary language and academic skills for studying in an English-medium university with a special focus on academic writing in mixed-gender classes. Students in the program attend the AEF class for three hours four days a week and take two other core classes of their choice simultaneously.

### Study Instruments

A modified version of the BALLI questionnaire (Appendix A) was first administered to the participants in the study. Semi-structured interviews (Appendix B) followed to glean insights about the the participants' beliefs. The modified version of the questionnaire comprises items presenting three themes from Horwitz's (1987) BALLI in addition to three new themes which are supported by the belief system literature. The themes adapted from the BALLI are beliefs about (1) foreign language aptitude (2) the nature of foreign language learning (3) motivation for foreign language learning. The themes added to the original questionnaire are beliefs about (1) gendered associations with specific languages (2) English language learning in Egypt. The data collection process started after the Institutional Review Board (IEB) permission was granted. Data was collected towards the middle of the spring 2015 semester.

### Results

#### Questionnaire Data

Beliefs about foreign language aptitude. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of the "Beliefs about Foreign Language Aptitude" section of the questionnaire. The mean score of 4.49 in response to the statement "It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language" shows respondents' high agreement with this belief. Almost half of the respondents (43%), however, preferred to

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remain neutral regarding the statement “Women are better than men at learning languages.” The rest of the participants were divided over this statement with 30% in agreement and 27% disagreeing.

Respondents generally agreed with the statement “Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages,” but their responses to the statements “I have a special ability for learning foreign languages,” and “Egyptians are good at learning foreign languages.” were ambivalent with a mean score of 3.30 and 3.20 respectively. There is a general agreement with the statements, “People who speak more than one language are very intelligent” and “It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one” with mean scores of 3.62 and 3.91 respectively. However, almost half of the respondents (57%) disagreed with the statement “People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages,” with a mean score of 2.47.

Table 2.

*Frequencies of Response (in %), Means and Standard Deviations for the Beliefs about Foreign Language Aptitude Questionnaire Items (N=65)*

No.	Item	SD <sup>1</sup>	D	N	A	SA	Mean	Standard deviation
1	It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.	5	1	3	22	69	4.49	.986
2	Women are better than men at learning languages.	7	20	43	25	5	2.98	.976
3	Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	2	2	15	52	29	4.06	.808
4	I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	1	8	58	25	8	3.30	.790
5	Egyptians are good at learning foreign languages.	1	11	62	18	8	3.20	.795

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6	People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages. <sup>2</sup>	19	38	25	15	3	3.53	1.069
7	People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.	17	0	23	42	18	3.62	.979
8	It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.	2	6	15	54	23	3.91	.879

<sup>1</sup>SD: Strongly Disagree, D: Disagree, N: Neither agree nor disagree, A: Agree, SA: Strongly Agree

<sup>2</sup> Reversed-scored item

**Beliefs about the nature of foreign language learning.** The frequencies of response, means and standard deviations for the “Beliefs about the Nature of Foreign Language Learning” questionnaire items are presented in Table 3. Overall, the mean scores in response to the statements in this section indicated that respondents believed in the importance of both accuracy (i.e. learning grammar rules and vocabulary items) and fluency (communication and pronunciation. There is strong agreement with the statements “It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country (e.g. USA, UK),” and “The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary words and grammar rules,” as well as the statement “The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning how to use the language to communicate effectively” with mean scores of 4.35, 4.06 and 4.43.

The mean and standard deviation for the statements “Learning a foreign language is different than learning other academic subjects” and “It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation” showed a general agreement to these statements. There is a similar degree of agreement with responses to the statement, “English is easier to learn than other languages.” Finally, although half of the respondents (50%) agreed with the statement “It is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures

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(e.g. American, British) in order to speak English well,” almost one third of them (29%) disagreed with the statement. Interestingly, in contrast to the results of the questionnaire, interview data revealed general agreement among participants with respect to the importance of the cultural component of foreign language learning.

Table 3

*Frequencies of Response (in %), Means and Standard Deviations for the Beliefs about the Nature of Foreign Language Learning (N=65)*

No.	Item	SD	D	N	S	SA	Mean	Standard deviation
9	English is easier to learn than other languages.	3	6	28	45	18	3.69	.951
10	It is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures (e.g. American, British) in order to speak English well.	3	26	21	42	8	3.25	1.031
11	It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country (e.g. USA, UK)	2	6	11	18	63	4.35	1.007
12	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary words and grammar rules.	9	0	10	47	34	4.06	.906
13	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning how to use the language to communicate effectively.	2	2	7	31	58	4.43	.829
14	Learning a foreign language is different than learning other academic subjects.	4	0	17	48	31	4.05	.818
15	It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.	3	0	17	32	48	4.25	.848



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Beliefs about English language learning in Egypt. As the mean scores in Table 4 indicate, there is a general agreement with the statements “In Egypt, people think highly of people who speak English well,” and “Although Arabic is the official language of Egypt, learning English is a must.”

Table 4

*Frequencies of Response (in %), Means and Standard Deviations for the Beliefs about English Language Learning in Egypt (N=65)*

No.	Item	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	Standard deviation
16	In Egypt, people think highly of people who speak English well.	3	0	22	48	27	3.98	.787
17	Although Arabic is the official language of Egypt, learning English is a must	2	9	16	42	31	3.92	.997

Beliefs about English language learning motivation. As indicated in Table 5, there was general agreement with the statement “I would like to learn English so that I can get to know people from other countries better.” There was rather strong agreement with the statement “If I learn English very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job” which shows that instrumental motivation is an important factor that contributes to motivations for learning English in Egypt.

Table 5

*Frequencies of Response (in %), Means and Standard Deviations for the Beliefs about English Language Learning Motivation (N=65)*

No.	Item	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	Standard deviation
18	I would like to learn English so that I can get to know people from other countries better.	2	3	12	51	32	4.09	.843
19	If I learn English very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job.	1	0	5	22	72	4.63	.720

### Gender Differences

In an attempt to answer the second research question of the study regarding the possible differences between the beliefs male and female language learners have, t-test was run for all of the questionnaire items. Only one statement yielded significant statistical differences in the beliefs about the nature of foreign language learning section, as indicated in Table 7.

Table 7

*Questionnaire Items of Significant Difference between Male and Female Participants*

Item	Mean of Male Participants	Mean of Female Participants	Significance
It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country (e.g. USA, UK)	4.68	3.84	.001

The statement “It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country (e.g. USA, UK)” had a mean score of 4.68 for males and 3.84 for females and was significant at  $p = .001$ . Male participants indicated that they agreed more with immersion as an effective method for English language learning as none of them disagreed with the statement.

### Open-ended Question

The questionnaire concluded with a general open-ended statement for participants to complete, “In my opinion, the most important thing about English language learning is ...” Out of the 65 questionnaire respondents, 56 recorded a response. Data was coded and categorized into different themes; each of these themes was then counted and tabulated. A peer reviewer also coded the responses to provide confirmation of coding responses.

More than half of the participants (58%) emphasized the communicative aspect of using English as a lingua franca. Firth (1996) defines English as a lingua franca as “a ‘contact language’ between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture, and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication” (p. 240). This is reflected in the way participants perceived English by referring to it as an “international language” and “the language of the world.” For

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instance, one participant noted, "It is an international language and this will help us communicate anywhere I travel outside of Egypt." Another participant wrote, "It will help you in everything in your life because it actually became the language of the world." A third participant indicated, "It is the common language in the whole world. Learning it is a must to learn and communicate."

Participants also highlighted how studying English helps in avoiding possible cross-cultural misunderstandings. One participant explained, "the opportunities that open up once we learn the language. It also helps us to understand the different cultures of English-speaking countries through communication with them and their people." Another participant noted, "Learning English helps in broadening the mind and empowering one's skills and helps us engage and interact with diverse cultures more and better."

A number of participants also noted the promise of job opportunities learning English offers. As one participant put it, "English is essential for career life." Another participant stressed this idea, but also highlighted the importance of learning other foreign languages for better job opportunities, stating that "it will help us be qualified when searching for a job in addition to other languages."

Some participants also noted the importance of practicing the language to master. One participant noted, "Practicing a lot as any other language; English needs constant care and practice." Another participant pointed out the significance of practicing language in authentic contexts stating that "We have to practice what we learn in our daily life throughout conversations and life situations." Finally, 15% of the participants indicated that learning English helps them in their academic career. For example, one participant wrote, "it helps me have the ability to know [sic] field of studies in college and after graduation."

It is important to note, however, that the results revealed that the wording of the open-ended question was quite vague since some participants provided what they believed were the most important reasons for studying English (e.g. communication and job opportunities) while other participants noted what they believed was the most important technique to study English effectively (e.g. practice). Thus, rewording the open-ended question of the questionnaire used in the present study is recommended to obtain more insightful results.

### **Interview Results**

This section reports in some detail the results of the nine interviews conducted to gain insights into participants' beliefs about foreign language learning. Efforts were made to ensure interviewees included both female and male students to compensate for the fact that male questionnaire respondents outnumbered their female counterparts. The participants were four female participants and five male participants between 18 and 19 years old. Six participants received the Thanaweya Amma high school certificate while two participants studied for the IGCSE certificate. Only one participant took the French Baccalaureate. Most interviewees studied either French or German as a foreign language additional to English in high school. Two participants studied Spanish and Italian as additional foreign languages in high school. Participants were varied in their intended majors. The Interview themes were identified by the principal investigator and verified by a peer reviewer.

### **Motivation**

Almost all participants indicated that the necessity of learning English to secure decent job opportunities when they graduate as the reason for their enrollment in an English-medium university. Mahnoud thought that foreign language proficiency outweighed any other skills required in the job market as he stated, "Learning languages is very good cause in a lot of companies if you don't know anything but you can speak several languages they may take you cause languages are the future and computers of course!" Alaa offered a comprehensive account of the different possible advantages of studying English both inside and outside of Egypt. She explained, "Maybe If I decide to travel abroad, it will help. Mainly every aspect and every job opportunity is involving essentially English. It's a necessity for being applicable to any job or dealing with people or communication. In anything English is involved".

Kareem, a French school graduate, emphasized the necessity of learning English in Egypt and mentioned, "I think it will be more practical to study in an American university because, in Egypt, English is the dominant language. So any field will be related to talk well in English and study in English." Kareem's account of the status of English and French provide insight into the dominance of English in Egypt. This is revealed when he stated, "If I want to live

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in France I would have more opportunities but in Egypt I think the companies don't really care about French and after all it depends on where you gonna work but I'm talking about the majority of the companies." He lamented the time he spent studying French. His words are very telling of how disadvantaged some students who do not study in English language schools feel:

I won't repeat the same mistake my parents did. Of course, it's really not unique but different to speak French here in Egypt but in the real world what really matters is to do what will make you reach faster your goals. So I took the French baccalaureate but at the end I needed SAT and TOEFL and a lot of other English exams so I will make my children take the shortcut and enter an American system or an IG.

### **Beliefs about Immersion**

Participants indicated that living in an English-speaking country is the best way to acquire a language and stressed the importance of speaking the language. "Just live in the place of the language," one participant noted. He reflected on his experience with learning English during an intensive summer program in London. He recounted, "In London, don't even think to talk in other languages except English and that is the best way to learn English, actually." Another participant seemed convinced that immersion is the fastest way to master English, as he explained, "If you speak English in Egypt, it will be okay. But if you went to US or United Kingdom, within a year you will speak more British [sic] than the ten years you are speaking in Egypt cause you are always speaking the language". Interestingly, he recommended an internet chat program as a medium through which students could experience interaction in English with the target-language community, as he suggested, "There is a Skype community. It's about language exchange so I teach others Arabic and I learn English. So you need to speak the language more in order to master it not just reading. It's about more speaking than more reading."

A third participant however, seemed quite concerned about

feeling homesick and the poor treatment she felt immigrants receive as she reflected on her friends' experience of studying abroad. She recounted:

I don't like to feel like an immigrant. I have friends who are studying abroad. They are suffering. Really, it's tragic. It's a global issue that immigrants are not well welcomed. It's bad. We are missing all the benefits from having a multicultural community or society.

Her comments highlight the vital role the target-language community plays in supporting or blocking access to its language.

### **Discussion of Results**

#### **First Research Question**

The first research question aimed at investigating the prevalent beliefs Egyptian university students hold about foreign language learning. The results of the beliefs elicited through administering the questionnaire and conducting the interviews revealed interesting findings with regard to the learners' motivation to learn English.

#### **Motivation**

The triangulation of the questionnaire and the interview indicated that instrumental motivation is a key factor for motivation for English language learning in Egypt. Participants seemed aware of the importance of English for their future career referring to it as the "dominant language" in Egypt and considering learning it as a "must" or a "necessity" to survive in "the real world," i.e. the job market. Some participants even lamented the years they spent studying in non-English medium schools such as Arabic or French schools, because eventually the job market in Egypt primarily demands English language proficiency. Those participants also indicated that they would not repeat the same "mistake" their parents did i.e. not sending them to English schools and that they would send their children to international English schools as a "shortcut."

Within the Egyptian context, the results are supported by Schaub's (2000) study in which he maintained that instrumental motivation has fueled an interest in studying English in Egypt where many Egyptians associate English with "the promise of more money or better jobs" (p. 228). In fact, although Arabic is the official language of Egypt, English competence has become crucial for

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Egyptians involved in many sectors of the economy like aviation, tourism and international trade, to name a few. Haeri (2003) notes that even for some of the high-ranking positions in state institutions, mastering foreign languages has become mandatory. The results thus suggest that the promise of lucrative job opportunities will most likely continue to be a primary motive for English language learning among Egyptian learners. The high rate of youth unemployment in Egypt provides insight into the participant's instrumental motivation to study English. Assad and Barsoum (2009) highlight how crucial it is for young adults to secure a decent well-paid job in Egypt, since it facilitates their transition not only to career advancement but also to personal independence, family formation and active citizenship.

In addition to being instrumentally motivated, participants also expressed an interest in learning English to communicate with the rest of the world. These findings lend support to a number of L2 motivation studies (Kimura, Nakata, & Okumura, 2001; Dörnyei & Csizér, 2002). Lamb (2004) questioned the feasibility of the instrumental/integrative motivation dichotomy, suggesting that the relationship between both kinds of motivation is complex given the possible overlap between them. Integrative Motivation is defined as “motivation for second language learning that is based on a desire to know more about the culture and community of the target language group and even a desire to be more like members of that group” (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 201). MacIntyre, MacKinnon and Clément (2009), for instance, contend that “there is no good reason to believe that a person who sees the value of the target language as a means of communication and social interaction would not also see the value of the language in instrumental terms” (pp. 58-9).

The results of the present study indicated that participants believed that learning English will not only help them secure job opportunities, but also enable them to connect globally. In fact, participants seemed aware of the concept of English as a lingua franca by referring to English as “the dominant language” and “the language of the world”, and by explicitly stating that it is through mastering English that they would be able to communicate with people who do not speak their native language. In this sense,

participants in the present study expressed a different pattern of integrative motivation which is traditionally understood as “a positive interpersonal/ affective disposition towards the L2 community and the desire for affiliation with its members” (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 96). Instead, participants’ motivation to learn English for communicative purposes aligns with McClelland’s (2000) proposed definition of integrativeness which, he postulates, should focus on “integration with the global community rather than assimilation with native speakers” (p. 109). It is recommended therefore to explore both types of motivation on a continuum rather than two mutually exclusive concepts.

### **Beliefs about Learning Grammar**

The results of the “beliefs about the nature of language learning” section of the questionnaire indicated that the participants believed that learning grammar rules and vocabulary items along with learning how to use the language to communicate effectively constitute an important part of language learning. The results in the present study therefore correspond to those in Taha’s (2002) study in which learners believed that learning vocabulary items was an integral part of language learning and emphasized the importance of grammar in achieving fluency in speaking the target language. Both the results of Taha’s (2002) study and those of the present study suggest that language fluency and accuracy should not be perceived in binary oppositions. Instead, it is more enlightening to consider them as two opposite ends of a spectrum where learners are placed according to their proficiency levels in both of them. In fact, the results show that Egyptian language learners are aware of the importance of both aspects in language learning and are keen to attain proficiency in both of them.

### **Second Research Question**

The second research question posed was “Is there a difference between the beliefs Egyptian male and female language learners hold about language learning? If so, in what ways do they differ?” Overall, no significant differences were found between the beliefs male and female participants had about language learning except for one questionnaire item regarding studying English in an English-speaking country. Unlike their male peers, a few female participants disagreed with the statement. In an interview, a female



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participant expressed her concern over being unwelcomed by the host community when studying abroad and reflected on her friends' unpleasant experiences as international students.

Brown's (2009) ethnographic study, in which she investigated the failure of communication between a group of postgraduate international students and the host community at a university in the South of England, sheds light on the problems international students face when studying abroad. The results of the study revealed that members of the Asian and Muslim cohort were the subject of racial and Islamophobic abuse. For instance, a number of veiled female students, one of which was Egyptian, reported being harassed by members of the host community. Brown (2009) suggests that such attacks might result from the international students' "visible manifestation of affiliation" (p. 448) which did not align with that of the host community. Another possible reason for some female students' rejection of the idea of studying abroad is that the idea of young females travelling alone to study or live abroad is still not welcomed by the majority of the Egyptian society, which is quite conservative about the lifestyle Egyptian females are expected to lead. This analysis is supported by Mensch, Ibrahim, Lee, and El-Gibaly (2003) who assert that, unlike their male counterparts, some Egyptian females experience restrictions on their mobility by the age of puberty.

The lack of significant differences between the beliefs of male and female participants in the present study corresponds to the results of Demian's (1989) study in which both male and female participants expressed similar attitudes and motivation to learn English. One interpretation of such lack of gender-based differences is that Egyptian learners' motivation to invest in learning English seems to outweigh any possible gender differences that might exist between the participants.

Sieverding (2012) contends that the Egyptian society has always considered females' participation in the workforce as a choice, while males' participation is seen economically and socially as a necessity which contributes to "the fulfillment of widely held gendered ideals" (p. 1). Yet, the equal degree of motivation among

male and female students in the present study suggests a possible change in such socially prescribed gender roles in Egypt. Amr, El Gilany and El-Hawary (2008), who investigated the gender differences between Egyptian male and female medical students, and found no significant differences between both groups of students, provide an explanation for such a change. They posit that globalization and exposure to Western culture have given rise to alternative gender ideologies in Egypt.

In this sense, it might be more enlightening, perhaps, not to think of the participants in this study as members of two opposite groups based on gender differences. Instead, it is more informative to consider them as members of a community of practice; that of the Academic English for Freshman (AEF) program. Eckert (2005) defines a community of practice as a group of people who share a common interest that brings them together regularly, and who, during their gatherings, develop their own practices which “involve the construction of a shared orientation to the world around them” (p. 16). Accordingly, participants in the present study are freshman students studying in an English-medium university who, irrespective of their gender, share a similar interest in learning English to increase their chances of accessing speech communities that do not speak their mother tongue and securing lucrative job opportunities once they graduate.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

Horwitz (1987) recommends using the BALLI as a discussion stimulus in language classes which helps in providing insights into developing a rigorous curriculum that appeals to learners' different beliefs and expectations. Similarly, Dörnyei (2005) suggests that periodical administration of the BALLI helps as a consciousness-raising tool for learners to understand the nature of language learning. Another implication that is specific to the context of the study is incorporating a business English component into the AEF curriculum, given that learning English for better careers constitutes a main source of motivation for participants in the study. This could be beneficial to the students, especially when they apply for internships.

It is also recommended to address language learning beliefs

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in teacher training programs by raising the student-teachers' awareness of the possible impact such beliefs have on their students' expectations of language teaching approaches. Teachers are encouraged to consider the gender dynamics along with the institutional and social contexts in which their learners are situated to better understand the factors shaping their learners' language learning beliefs.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

The exploratory nature of the present study yields a myriad of ideas for further academic research. It would be worthy of investigation, for instance, to compare the beliefs of learners attending mixed classes to those attending single-sex classes and note any possible gender differences. Studying learners' beliefs across different language proficiency levels and age groups would provide insight into the degree to which learners' language proficiency level and age shape their ideas and expectations about language learning. Similarly, investigating both learners' and teachers' beliefs about language learning would provide significant results for pedagogical implications. Longitudinal studies are also needed to examine how learners' beliefs about language learning progress over the course of time and language instruction.

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### Appendix A

Modified Beliefs About Language Learning Questionnaire with Demographic Data Questionnaire and the Suggested “Gendered Associations with Specific Languages” Section

**What is your gender?**      Male       Female

**What is your age?** \_\_\_\_\_

**What is your nationality?** \_\_\_\_\_

**How long have you been living in Egypt?** \_\_\_\_\_

**What language(s) do you speak at home with your family?** \_\_\_\_\_

**What field of study are you planning to major in?**

- Business
- Global Affairs and Public Policy
- Humanities and Social Sciences
- Sciences and Engineering
- Other

**What high school degree do you hold?**

- American Diploma
- French Baccalaureate
- German Abitur
- IGCSE
- Thanaweya Amma

**Directions:** Below are some beliefs that people have about learning foreign languages. Read each statement and then decide if you: (1) strongly disagree (2) disagree (3) neither agree nor disagree (4) agree (5) strongly agree. There are no right or wrong answers. I am simply interested in your opinions. Mark each answer on this sheet. Questions 20 and 21 are slightly different and you should mark it as indicated.

<b>Example: If you strongly agree with the following statement, write this:</b> The weather is too cold these days.	1 2 3 4 5 <input type="radio"/>
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Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

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	Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.	1	2	3	4	5
	Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.	1	2	3	4	5
	Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages .	1	2	3	4	5
	I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	1	2	3	4	5
	Egyptians are good at learning foreign languages.	1	2	3	4	5
	People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages .	1	2	3	4	5
	People who speak more than one language are very intelligent .	1	2	3	4	5
	It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one .	1	2	3	4	5



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Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
English is easier to learn than other languages.	1	2	3	4	5
It is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures (e.g. American, British) in order to speak English.	1	2	3	4	5
It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country (e.g. USA, UK).	1	2	3	4	5
The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary words and grammar rules.	1	2	3	4	5
The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning how to use the language to communicate effectively.	1	2	3	4	5
Learning a foreign language is different than learning other academic subjects.	1	2	3	4	5
It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.	1	2	3	4	5
In Egypt, people think highly of people who speak English well.	1	2	3	4	5
Although Arabic is the official language of Egypt, learning English is a must.	1	2	3	4	5
I would like to learn English so that I can get to know people from other countries better.	1	2	3	4	5
If I learn English very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job.	1	2	3	4	5

**REMEMBER:**

20. Look at the list of 4 foreign languages below; indicate whether you think males or females would be more likely to be interested in learning that language:

	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>No difference</b>
<b>1. Arabic</b>		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>2. English</b>		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>3. French</b>		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>4. German</b>		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

21. In my opinion, the most important thing about learning English language is

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**Thank You for your Cooperation ☺**

**Appendix B**

Interview Questions

1. Why are you interested in studying in an English-medium university?
2. Do you enjoy your classes of the Academic English Program? Why/why not?
3. What suggestions do you have to make language learning more interesting to you?
4. What foreign languages, other than English, did you study at school? Why did you choose to study them?
5. What type of schools will you send your kids to (national, language, international...)? Why?
6. Are you planning to stay in an English-speaking country in the future?
7. In your opinion, what is the best way to master a foreign language?
8. There is a popular belief that females are better language learners than males, do you agree with this statement or disagree? Why?