



A Study on English-Learning Beliefs of Overseas Undergraduates in Taiwan

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Introduction

Higher education in Taiwan has undergone dramatic challenges due to the advent of globalization and internationalization (Chin, Wu, & Ching, 2012). To deal with striking competitions among higher-education institutes (HIE) in the world, the Ministry of Education in Taiwan has actively launched numerous projects to strengthen the competitiveness and education quality of its HIE, aiming to stand out in the global academic community (Chin & Ching, 2009). Recruiting overseas students to study at HIE has been a predominant focus in the projects (Ho, Lin, & Yang, 2015).

To equip students, specifically from non-English speaking countries, with abilities to thrive in the global village, English proficiency is an essential capacity. English has become an international language as a communication tool (Crystal, 2003). As Firth (1996) pointed out, “it is 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). HIE in Taiwan has taken initiatives to promote students’ English proficiency, such as offering English-medium courses (Yeh, 2014) and requiring students to reach specific English proficiency levels to fulfill a graduation threshold (Pan & Newfields, 2012). Consequently, it is important for students to develop a good command over English abilities during their university studies.

When it comes to learning English well, a variety of strategies have been proposed by second-language scholars (e.g., Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Oxford, 1990). “Study abroad” is one of the strategies adopted by numerous learners to increase their second-language competence (Paige, Cohen, Kappler, Chi, & Lassegard, 2002). As demonstrated by research (Di Silvio, Donovan, & Malone, 2014; Kinginger, 2011; Martinsen, Baker, Bown, & Johnson, 2011), second-language learners have enhanced their language competence during study abroad programs. How study-abroad affects learners’ second-language learning beliefs, a remarkable individual learner variable to achieve second-language acquisition, has long been an issue worth investigating.

A growing number of overseas students from East and South Asia come to Taiwan for their study abroad during their college studies. Overseas students are required to achieve a certain English proficiency in order to get course credit and/or pass the graduation threshold. As HEI would like to continuously attract more overseas students, it is important to understand their language-learning beliefs,

which are closely related to linguistic achievement (Hsieh, 2004; Kim, 2012; Suwanarak, 2012), so as to better support their learning. Yet, this concern has not been addressed adequately and sufficiently. To fill this gap, the current study aimed to explore the development of English-learning beliefs of overseas students from East and South Asia during their study abroad in Taiwan.

Study Abroad to Learn English in Native English-Speaking Contexts

Because of the increasing mobility of the student population, studying abroad has gained a growing popularity. When it comes to English learning, short-term or long-term study programs in native English-speaking contexts, such as the UK, the US, Canada, and Australia, are favored by numerous English-as-a-second language and English-as-a-foreign-language students. The effect of studying abroad on the development of non-native-English-speaking learners' English competence has attracted attention from researchers and educators.

Research has found mixed results of learning English in such contexts of study abroad. For example, research by Briggs (2015) did not demonstrate a significant relationship between out-of-class, informal contact and English learners' vocabulary knowledge improvement. Moreover, there was no guarantee that English learners had sufficient English-speaking opportunities for communication outside class during their study in ESL contexts (Tanaka, 2007).

Nevertheless, promising findings have been reported. Alcón-Soler (2015) found that, while ESL learners studied in the UK, they could apply what they learned from English classes, and reconstruct the knowledge through more exposure to English, as evident in their improvement of pragmatic competence. Sasaki (2011) identified the effect of varying lengths of studying abroad in native-English-speaking countries on Japanese university students who majored in British and American Studies. She identified students' development in English writing abilities and motivation in relation to the length of their study abroad. Kang (2014) found that 60 Korean university students, who studied English in the US, UK, and Canada, demonstrated significant development in their willingness to communicate in English and in their speaking proficiency. Kang (2014) attributed such progress to study abroad in English-speaking countries. Finally, Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, and Brown (2012) adopted a narrative inquiry approach to describe how nine university students developed satisfactory second-language identities and enhanced their language competence in the context of English-speaking countries.

The Connection between Study Abroad and Beliefs about Second-Language Learning

Language-learning beliefs play an important role in language learning. They are related to learners' "expectation of, commitment to, success in, and satisfaction with" their second-language learning experience (Horwitz, 1988, p. 283). Nowadays, researchers hold different perspectives on language learners' beliefs. Instead of being viewed as stable metacognitive knowledge (Wenden, 1998, 1999), second-language learning beliefs are considered dynamic and context-sensitive (Benson & Lor, 1999).

The situated and changing nature of learners' second-language learning beliefs has been proved to be connected to study-abroad experiences. For instance, Amuzie and Winke (2009) adopted a mixed methods research framework to study 70 non-native-English learners' beliefs when they studied in the US. It was found that learners' beliefs regarding learner autonomy and self-efficacy had changed before their arrival to the US and at the time of the survey. Moreover, Kim and Yang (2010) qualitatively analyzed two Korean university students' development in second-language learning beliefs before and after they studied abroad in North America. They argued that the degree of legitimate peripheral participation in new studying-abroad contexts and sense of belongingness in the contexts contributed to the change in the students' beliefs. Their study further noted that the continuous evolution in second-language-learning beliefs was a result of learners' studying-abroad experiences and their goals in second-language learning. Finally, Kaypak and Ortaçtepe (2014) advanced the scope of studying-abroad contexts to

English-as-a-lingua-franca (ELF) communities where English is a common communication means for people with different first-language backgrounds (Seidlhofer, 2005). They found that 53 Turkish exchange students' studying-abroad experiences in ELF communities were positively related to their language-learning beliefs, which reinforced the assertion that language-learning beliefs are evolving, dynamic, and situational in relation to study-abroad contexts.

As depicted above, several studies have provided empirical evidence that learners' beliefs in second-language learning would change as a consequence of studying abroad in English-speaking or ELF contexts. However, there is the paucity of research on the relationship between language-learning beliefs and English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) contexts where English is mainly used in English classes. To fill this gap, the purpose of this study was to broaden our understanding about this issue. As a growing number of overseas students from East and South Asia come to Taiwan to pursue their degree studies and usually have to take English as a required course, it raises the important concern of exploring how the EFL context provided in Taiwan may affect their English-learning beliefs.

An important research question was answered in the current study: What was the development of overseas EFL students' beliefs about English-language learning during their study in Taiwan?

Methodology

Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted in a private, comprehensive university in northern Taiwan. The university has an established positive academic reputation and is attractive to overseas students. It puts enormous effort into promoting students' proficiency in English. All undergraduates excluding native English-speaking students, are required to take a Freshman English course in their first-year study at the university.

Nineteen participants (four males and 15 females) were recruited in Chinese classes required for all students at the university. According to their Chinese teachers, the participants had functional literacy in Chinese. As shown in Table 1, they all came from English-as-a-foreign-language countries and studied a range of disciplines at the university.

TABLE 1
Participants' Background Profiles

Profile	Participants
Nationality	China: 3 (15.79%); Hong Kong: 3 (15.79%); Indonesia: 1 (5.26%); Malaysia: 10 (52.63%); South Korea: 1 (5.26%); Vietnam: 1 (5.26%)
College of the Participants' Majors	Foreign Languages and Literatures: 5 (26.32%); Management: 2 (10.53%); Science and Engineering: 1 (5.26%); Art: 1 (5.26%); Medicine: 2 (10.53%); Education: 1 (5.26%); Mass Communication: 4 (21.05%); Social Science: 1 (5.26%); Human Ecology: 1 (5.26%)

Instruments

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected via an English-learning belief survey, which was adopted from Zhang and Cui's (2010) study. The rationale for using Zhang and Cui's (2010) questionnaire items (see Appendix) was based on the consideration that their questionnaire fit the EFL context where Chinese was the first language. This was consistent with the present study. The items were translated from English into Mandarin by an English-major research assistant. Ongoing modification was made in the trial stage where two overseas sophomores answered the items and gave revision feedback accordingly. The survey items were presented in both English and Mandarin. The final version of the survey consisted of two sections. The first section investigated the participants' background information. The second section contained one open-ended question to inquire about the participants' difficulties in English and 29 five-point Likert scale items to explore the participants' beliefs about English-language

learning, with 1 referring to “strongly disagree” with the item statement and 5 “strongly agree”. The survey was developed and disseminated using an online Google Forms, which allowed the participants to conveniently respond to the survey with their digital devices.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study lasted for one academic year. At the beginning of the first semester, the researchers visited three Chinese classes specifically for overseas students in the research site, and explained the research purpose to the students. It was explicitly emphasized that the study was not associated with their performance in the Chinese class. They were invited to participate in the study. After giving their consent, they filled out the first survey on Google Forms. At the end of the second semester in the same academic year, the researchers sent out an e-mail to the students, whose information had been obtained from their survey responses, and invited them to complete the survey on Google Forms once again. Nineteen participants filled out the surveys at the beginning and at the end of the academic year.

To examine whether there was a change in the overseas students’ beliefs about English-language learning at the beginning and at the end of their freshman academic year studying abroad in Taiwan, an inferential statistical approach, a paired samples *t*-test, was used to analyze the mean scores of survey responses elicited at two different times from the same participants (Hatch & Lazaraton, 1991). According to George and Malley (2003), the result of the internal-consistency reliability test on the beginning-of-the-academic-year and the end-of-the-academic-year surveys was acceptable (Cronbach’s alpha = .79 and .71, respectively). Moreover, the participants’ English-learning difficulties reported in the two surveys were compared and contrasted, seeking to find association between their English-learning experience and beliefs development.

Results and Discussion

Development in Overseas Students’ Beliefs about English-Language Learning during Their Study in Taiwan

Table 2 displays the results of descriptive and inferential statistics. In the first semester, the participants’ responses to the survey statement ranged from 1.89 (*Making mistakes is harmful in language learning*) to 4.47 (*Different people learn languages in different ways*), whereas, in the second semester, responses to the survey statements ranged from 2 (*Making mistakes is harmful in language learning*) to 4.37 (*Language learning takes a long time*). Furthermore, paired samples *t*-test revealed that there was no statistically significant difference in the participants’ survey responses produced in the first and second semesters.

TABLE 2

Descriptive and Inferential Statistics for English-Learning Beliefs Statements

Categories	1st Semester		2nd Semester		<i>t</i> _{.95(18)}	<i>p</i>
	M	SD	M	SD		
Nature of English learning	3.36	.30	3.33	.35	.22	.83
Role of teacher	3.58	.51	3.35	.55	1.55	.14
Role of feedback	3.33	.58	3.40	.61	-.48	.64
Strategies	3.29	.57	3.34	.49	-.41	.69

Note. 1: strongly disagree; 2: disagree; 3: neutral; 4: agree; 5: strongly agree

These findings were in line with Kaypak and Ortaçtepe’s study (2014), which revealed that there were no significant changes in language learners’ beliefs before and after they had studied in ELF contexts. Yet,

the participants in the present study came to Taiwan, an EFL context, from their home countries where English is also a foreign language. Studying English in EFL contexts has its drawbacks, such as few opportunities to use English for communicative purposes and limited linguistic input from non-native English-speaking teachers in class (Chen & Yang, 2014). These disadvantages were mentioned by the participants to describe their difficulties of learning English. In Table 3, several participants complained about the context issues, which were disadvantageous to their English learning, in the two semesters.

TABLE 3
Difficulties Participants Mentioned in Two Survey Administration

Theme	Category	1st Semester	2nd Semester
Context	Insufficient English input	2	1
	Few opportunities to use English	6	5
	Different English accents	0	7
Learner's own English abilities	Weak grammar	3	0
	Limited amount of vocabulary	5	0
	Little understanding of English cultures	1	0
	Low confidence in abilities	1	0
	No interest in English	1	0
Teaching	Teacher with different teaching styles	1	0
	Too much emphasis on test skills in English class	1	1

Despite some similarity between the former and current EFL contexts where the participants were situated, some differences were found. Numerous difficulties identified by the participants in the first survey administration were not reported in the second survey. This implied that individual EFL contexts had their own hindrances. For example, five participants complained about their limited amount of vocabulary when they studied English in their home countries, but they did not mention it in the second semester. However, English-accent issues were brought up as a major difficulty in the second semester as seven participants needed to overcome this when studying English in Taiwan. Moreover, English instruction delivered in different contexts were varied. English instructors in the participants' home countries and in Taiwan approached English learning materials differently and put diverse emphasis on certain English skills in their instruction. In consideration of the similarities and differences that occurred in the two EFL contexts, which were the participants' home countries and Taiwan, the participants appeared not to display a dramatic change in their English-learning beliefs.

Conclusion

This study attempted to demonstrate how overseas students developed their beliefs about English-language learning during their first-year study at HEI in Taiwan. The findings indicated that EFL learners' English-learning beliefs did not exhibit a significant change. Given the dynamic, contextual nature of language-learning beliefs, a possible explanation might be that a shift from one EFL context to the other similar EFL context only slightly influenced their English-learning beliefs. Students encountered comparable situations (i.e., few target-language input and output opportunities) in both EFL contexts when it comes to English learning.

These findings have implications for HEI. In order to support learners to develop more positive language-learning beliefs and enhance their English proficiency, an English-learning environment with sufficient and easy-to-obtain opportunities for meaningful and authentic communication purposes is essential. Moreover, it is crucial to encourage students to actively maximize their exposure to English by participating in different activities, such as self-directed learning tasks, offered by HEI.

The study was limited by its few participants, which affected its generalizability. Moreover, only the survey approach was used to collect data. In the next phase of the project, a longitudinal,

qualitative-based, focus-group research methodology would be adopted to explore individual learners' English-learning belief development. As suggested by Kaypak and Ortaçtepe (2014), "language learner beliefs are bi-directionally related to the perceptions of study abroad sojourns... [B]eliefs about English language learning and perceptions of study abroad experiences ...strengthen or weaken simultaneously" (p. 364). Such an approach could better detect the fine transition of learners' language-learning beliefs when they shifted their learning context where English is a foreign language.

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Appendix

Survey Items of English Learning Belief

Nature of English learning

1. Making mistakes is a natural part of learning.
2. Different people learn English in different ways.
3. English learning takes a long time.
4. It is easier for children than adults to learn English.
5. Women are better than men at learning English.
6. I need to know language rules before I can communicate in English.
7. I can communicate in English without knowing the rules.
8. Learning English is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules.
9. Learning English is mostly a matter of translation from my mother tongue.
10. It is possible to learn English in a short time.
11. Making mistakes is harmful in English learning.

Role of teacher

12. Generally speaking, my English teacher helped me learn English effectively.
13. Generally speaking, my English teacher offered help for my English learning.
14. My English teacher told me what to do.
15. My English teacher would say what my difficulties are.
16. My English teacher would tell me what progress I am making.
17. My English teacher would give me regular tests.
18. My English teacher would set my learning goals.

Role of feedback

19. Having my work evaluated by others is helpful.
20. I am good at English learning.
21. I know best how well I am learning.

Strategies

22. I can explain why I need English.
23. I know how to set my own learning goals.
24. I know how to identify my strengths and weaknesses.
25. I know how to find my own ways of practicing.
26. If I heard someone speaking English, I would go up to practice speaking English.
27. I know how to plan my learning.
28. I know how to measure my progress.
29. I know how to check my work for mistakes.