



Beliefs about Language Learning of Thai Students Learning Chinese and Japanese: Relationships with Past Learning Experiences and Target Language Variations

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Abstract

The objective of this study was (a) to investigate the nature and structure of the language learning beliefs of Thai students, and (b) to determine whether there was any significant difference in terms of the language learning beliefs among groups of students with different past educational experiences and students learning different foreign languages. Horwitz's Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) was administered to Thai students learning the Japanese or Chinese language (N = 189) at a university. Through a principal component analysis, a six-factor structure was identified for the beliefs. Only in terms of one of the six factors was a significant difference identified between the groups of students who had graduated from different types of secondary schools and had different experiences of the preparatory pre-university English language course. Similarly, the language learning beliefs were significantly different for the groups of students learning two different languages only in terms of one factor. With the wide range of similarities in the participants' past experiences in learning English and other foreign languages, the findings suggest that language learning beliefs are shared if the learners had similar learning experiences.

1 Introduction

It is common for any second or foreign language teacher to encounter very successful learners as well as less successful learners in his or her classes. In fact, this could be true in any other subject area, but it seems that the gaps between the two groups of students are much larger and more noticeable in language learning. Naturally, students are also different in terms of many other aspects, such as learning styles, learning strategies, attitudes and motivations. These individual differences have been considered important by language teachers and researchers because of their potential impact on the behaviours of language learners and, consequently, on the ultimate outcomes, that is, the success of their language learning (Diab, 2006; Dörnyei, 2005; Ehrman, Leaver, & Oxford, 2003; Horwitz, 1999; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003). One of the learner variables examined extensively over the last two decades and attracting a renewed interest recently are learners' beliefs about language learning (Bernat, 2004; Brown, 2009; Horwitz, 1999; Wenden, 1999). Beliefs about language learning are defined as "opinions on a variety of issues and controversies related to language learning" (Horwitz, 1987, p. 120). Horwitz (1987) argues that the language learning beliefs are influenced by both students' previous experiences as language learners and their cultural backgrounds. However, still little is known about this relationship, and the potential origins and determinants of the language learning beliefs. The purpose of this research was to investigate this

issue, expanding the scope to one of the least explored groups of individuals: Asian students learning an Asian foreign language.

1.1 Learners' beliefs about language learning

Since the two pioneering studies by Wenden (1987) and Horwitz (1987), learners' beliefs about language learning have been examined systematically by a number of researchers. In particular, the measurement instrument called Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), developed by Horwitz (1987), has attracted many researchers' attention and interest in this area of study (Bernat, 2004; Horwitz, 1999; Kuntz, 1996; Loewen et al., 2009; Nikitina & Furuoka, 2006). The measurement instrument has been widely used in a number of studies, while other questionnaires have been created using some items from BALLI. Horwitz (1987) categorized the 34 BALLI items into the following five areas: (a) foreign language aptitude; (b) the difficulty of language learning; (c) the nature of language learning; (d) learning and communication strategies; and (e) motivation and expectations. Over the past two decades, the focus of investigation has been extended to various groups of learners in different settings of learning: foreign language learners and English as a foreign or second language learners in the US (e.g. Horwitz, 1988; Kern, 1995; Loewen et al., 2009; Schulz, 1996) and outside the US (e.g. Diab, 2006; Peacock, 2001; Riley, 2009; Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Yang, 1999).

In spite of the accumulated findings from such studies, there has been almost no research examining how the beliefs about language learning might differ among groups of learners with different cultural backgrounds (Horwitz, 1999). This situation prompted Horwitz (1999) to compare the findings from the BALLI studies to explore similarities and differences across different cultural groups of learners. Although some differences were identified, Horwitz acknowledged that the participants in these studies differed in important aspects other than their cultural backgrounds. This made it difficult for her to conclude whether the differences could be attributed to the cultural or other variables. In addition, it was the frequencies of the modal response options (i.e. the responses selected by the largest number of participants) in each of the BALLI items that Horwitz used as a unit of comparison in her meta-analytical study. Variations manifested in the other response options supported by a smaller number of participants were not considered in this method of comparison at the item levels, as noted by Horwitz. Consequently, Horwitz had to admit that "clear-cut conclusions do not seem possible" (Horwitz, 1999, p. 574), in spite of a large number of variations in the beliefs about language learning identified across several groups of learners.

As far as the target languages are concerned, learners of Asian languages have been examined by only a few studies published in English in terms of their beliefs about language learning (e.g., Mori, 1999; Wang, Spencer, & Xing, 2009). Learning Asian languages is certainly different from learning English in various respects, because Asian languages are linguistically different from English (e.g. the writing systems of the Chinese and Japanese languages are different from that of English). Thus, it is likely that learners of Asian languages may have learning experiences different from English language learners. Moreover, the beliefs about language learning held by Asian individuals learning an Asian foreign language have not been examined yet by any study published in English to my best knowledge. It is also very plausible to speculate that Asian learners have learning experiences different from non-Asian learners, even if both of those groups of individuals are learning the same Asian language, such as Chinese or Japanese.

It is important to investigate the beliefs of learners of Asian languages and the beliefs of Asian individuals, because the findings would cast light on the potential origins and determinants of beliefs about language learning. Judging from the possible effects from education on individuals' beliefs, it is reasonable to speculate that beliefs about language learning may vary depending on the types of education that language learners previously received and on the target language itself. This study intended to examine this aspect of language learning beliefs through an investigation of Thai students learning Chinese and Japanese at a Thai university.

Over the last two decades, several studies have examined the beliefs about language learning held by Asian learners of the Japanese language and they were published in Japanese (e.g. Itai, 1999, 2000; Katagiri, 2005; Takahashi, 2006; Wada, 2007). Yet none of them explored the relationships between learners' beliefs and their past learning experiences or their target languages. In most of the studies, their analyses remained descriptive, and they simply reported the frequencies of the participants' responses at the level of each item of the measurement instrument.

1.2 Chinese and Japanese languages in Thailand

It is necessary to consider the particular contexts of foreign language teaching and learning in Thailand for an investigation of Thai students learning foreign languages. Thai is the national and official language in Thailand, and it is used as the medium of instruction and communication in all educational institutes in Thailand, including colleges and universities. Meanwhile, English is used as the medium of instruction in a limited number of degree programmes both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. However, Thai is still the language of instruction in most degree programmes in higher education in Thailand.

English is considered the most important foreign language in Thailand, and undoubtedly it is the most widely taught and learned foreign language. A remarkable characteristic is that Chinese and Japanese are both among the next most popular foreign languages after English. This characteristic is illustrated by the two situations described below. First, it is exemplified by Thailand's Advanced National Educational Test (A-NET; Commission on Higher Education, n.d.). This is a nation-wide examination required for admission to undergraduate degree programmes in Thai state universities. Under A-NET, in addition to English, six other foreign languages are tested as subjects. These are French, German, Pali, Arabic, Chinese and Japanese. In 2009, Chinese had the largest number of test-takers among the six languages, followed by French and Japanese.

A similar pattern is also noticeable from the students enrolment numbers for foreign language courses at a particular Thai university. In the undergraduate programmes where the participants of this research were enrolled, the students are free to study one of four foreign languages as a part of their general education requirements. Chinese has been always the most popular language and generally attracts nearly half of the total student population. Japanese is usually selected by about one-fourth of the students. Another quarter selects one of the two European languages: French or German. To summarize, in Thailand, Chinese and Japanese are among the most popular and commonly taught foreign languages after English.

1.3 Purpose of the study

This study explored the relationships between the learners' language learning beliefs and their past learning experiences and the target language by investigating a population which had never been investigated by any study published in English, that is, Asian students learning an Asian foreign language at an Asian university. Groups of language learners with different past learning experiences and learning different target languages were compared to investigate variations in their language learning beliefs. The participants shared otherwise common demographic characteristics, enabling us to attribute the identified variations to these two aspects of difference of the learners.

The research questions of this study were as follows:

1. What is the nature and structure of the beliefs about language learning held by Thai university students learning the Chinese and Japanese languages?
2. Are the beliefs about language learning different among groups of learners with different educational experiences (i.e. secondary education and preparatory pre-university English course)?
3. Are the beliefs about language learning different between groups of learners of Chinese and Japanese?

2 Method

2.1 Participants

The participants ($N = 189$) were recruited from students who were learning either Chinese or Japanese as a foreign language in elementary-level classes in international undergraduate degree programmes. The programmes were offered by a large state research-oriented university in the Bangkok metropolitan area in Thailand. English was used as the medium of instruction in all classes in the international programmes.

The participants were all Thai native speakers. The age range was between 17 and 25, and the mean was 19.52. Most of the participants were either 18 (16.4%), 19 (29.6%), 20 (27.0%), or 21 years old (14.8%). The female students were predominant (65.1%). In terms of their subject major, business administration was the most frequently studied (54.0%), followed by travel industry management (21.2%). Other majors included computer science (6.3%), social science (5.8%), food science and technology (4.8%), and biological science (4.2%). Almost all of the participants were either first-year or second-year students.

The participants were divided into four groups based on their secondary education backgrounds. The largest group of students (50.8%) graduated from local Thai high schools. This was followed by those who graduated from high schools abroad (32.3%), mainly in English-speaking countries. The third category of students (10.6%) graduated from international schools in Thailand where English is used as the language of instruction. The fourth and smallest group (5.8%) was composed of students who graduated from bilingual schools in Thailand where the English or Thai language is used in the classrooms depending on the school subjects.

In terms of past language learning experience, one characteristic needs to be distinguished among the participants. Approximately half of the students (49.2%) attended the pre-university preparatory English course for a period of at least 10 weeks before starting their undergraduate programme. This was required as their English language proficiency level was considered not high enough for immediate acceptance to the undergraduate degree programmes taught entirely in English.

Among the 189 students, 105 students (55.6%) were taking a Chinese language class, while 84 students (44.4%) were in a Japanese class. All the classes were of elementary level.

2.2 Materials

A questionnaire was developed for this study based on the English Learning Questionnaire devised by Yang (1999). It was composed of the following three parts: Horwitz's (1987) Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), and demographic questions.

The first part had 35 items with statements on beliefs about language learning.² The participants were asked to rate the statements on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree) in 33 items. The remaining two items had a different scale and response options. They measured the difficulty level of the target language (Item 4) and the period of time necessary to learn a new foreign language (Item 15), respectively. The statement wording in the questionnaire used in this study was basically the same as Yang's (1999) questionnaire and the original BALLI, except the term "English" was changed to "Chinese" or "Japanese," depending on the target languages of the participants. Other necessary changes were also made in the following three cases. First, the term "Americans" was replaced by "Chinese people" or "Japanese people" in two items (Items 13 and 24). In another item (Item 32), "American friends" was replaced by "Chinese friends" or "Japanese friends." Furthermore, "English-speaking country" (Item 12) and "English-speaking cultures" (Item 8) were replaced by "China" or "Japan" and "Chinese cultures" or "Japanese cultures," respectively. Additionally, another change was made to the wording for another reason. The phrase "cassettes or tapes" (Item 26) was replaced by "audio-visual materials

(such as CDs and DVDs)” in order to conform to the current technological situation. The third part of the instrument included demographic questions about age, gender, nationality, native language, type of secondary school, and so forth. This paper reports the results from the first part of the questionnaire (i.e. BALLI) in conjunction with those from the third part.

2.3 Procedure

The questionnaire was administered to the participants during the last week of the 11-week trimester. The instructors teaching the elementary-level Chinese and Japanese courses distributed the questionnaire to the students in their classes. In many cases, at the instructors’ convenience, the students were given several minutes to complete the questionnaire in class, while in the other cases the participants were asked to complete it after the class and to return it by the next session. Participation in this survey was voluntary. No reward was given upon returning the questionnaire.

3 Results

3.1 Dimensional structure of language learning beliefs

The responses to the 35 items were analyzed by a principal component analysis in order to investigate the underlying dimensional structure of the participants’ beliefs about language learning. Prior to the principal component analysis, the suitability of the data for factor analysis was assessed. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy, $KMO = .624$, and Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity, $p < .0005$, both supported the factorability of the data.

Through an exploratory principal component analysis (Direct Oblimin rotation), six factors were extracted. The six factors explained 38.57% of the total variance. Each of the six identified factors explained 11.25%, 7.12%, 5.68%, 5.49%, 4.68% and 4.35% of the variance, respectively. The number of the factors was determined by the following criteria: an inspection of the scree plot, the eigenvalue of each factor, and the results of a parallel analysis. The interpretability of the factors was also considered. The Cronbach’s coefficient alpha for each factor was .577, .614, .486, .517, .327 and .383, respectively. Table 1 represents the six identified factors, together with the items constituting each factor. The numbers express the factor loadings of the items.

	Items	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6
<i>Factor 1 – Goals, expectations, and ways of learning Chinese/Japanese (8 items; $\alpha = .577$)</i>							
31.	I want to learn to speak C/J well. ^a	.663					
29.	If I learn C/J very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job.	.604					
18.	It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	.546					
32.	I would like to have C/J friends.	.529					
12.	It is best to learn C/J in C/J-speaking countries.	.512					
1.	It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.	.413					
9.	You shouldn’t say anything in C/J until you can say it correctly.	-.360					
15.	If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take him/her to speak the language very well? ^b	.320					
<i>Factor 2 – Aptitude and nature of learning Chinese/Japanese (8 items; $\alpha = .614$)</i>							
10.	It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.		.599				
28.	The most important part of learning C/J is learning how to translate from my native language.		.566				
34.	It is easier to read and write C/J than to speak and understand it.		.547				
26.	It is important to practice with audio-visual materials (such as CDs and DVDs).		.490				
11.	People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages.		.479				

30.	People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.	.440
19.	Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.	.427
24.	I would like to learn C/J so that I can get to know C/J people better.	.368
<i>Factor 3 – People’s abilities and perspectives (3 items; $\alpha = .486$)</i>		
2.	Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	-.635
20.	People in my country feel that it is important to speak C/J.	-.615
25.	It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language.	-.408
<i>Factor 4 – Self-efficacy and feelings about using Chinese/Japanese (7 items; $\alpha = .517$)</i>		
5.	I believe that I will learn to speak C/J very well.	-.692
16.	I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	-.585
21.	I feel timid speaking C/J with other people.	.539
13.	I enjoy practicing C/J with C/J people I meet.	-.516
8.	It is necessary to know about C/J cultures in order to speak C/J.	-.344
35.	Language learning involves a lot of memorization.	.333
6.	People from my country are good at learning foreign languages.	-.256
<i>Factor 5 – Nature and uniqueness of language learning (4 items; $\alpha = .327$)</i>		
27.	Learning a foreign language is different than learning other academic subjects.	.640
33.	Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	.415
3.	Some languages are easier to learn than others.	.375
4.	C/J is: (1) a very difficult language/ (5) a very easy language. ^c	-.374
<i>Factor 6 – Nature and strategies of language learning (5 items; $\alpha = .383$)</i>		
23.	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar.	-.655
22.	If beginning students are permitted to make errors in C/J, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on.	-.467
14.	It is OK to guess if you don’t know a word in C/J.	.397
7.	It is important to speak C/J with an excellent pronunciation.	-.389
17.	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary words.	-.374
^a C/J indicates Chinese or Japanese, and the target language (i.e., Chinese or Japanese) was printed on the questionnaires given to the respondents.		
^b The response options for this item were: 1, Less than a year; 2, 1-2 years; 3, 3-5 years; 4, 6-10 years; and 5, You can’t learn a language in one hour a day.		
^c The response options for this item were: 1, a very difficult language; 2, a difficult language; 3, a language of medium difficulty; 4, an easy language; and 5, a very easy language.		

Table 1: Dimensional structure of Thai students’ language learning beliefs

3.2 Identified factors of language learning beliefs

All the six factors had a complex structure, including items from two or more of the five conceptual themes representing the different aspects of language learning beliefs. This structure made it difficult to interpret the nature of the factors and to name them. Nevertheless, the six factors were labelled as follows: Factor 1 – Goals, expectations and ways of learning Chinese/Japanese; Factor 2 – Aptitude and nature of learning Chinese/Japanese; Factor 3 – People’s abilities and perspectives; Factor 4 – Self-efficacy and feelings about using Chinese/Japanese; Factor 5 – Nature and uniqueness of language learning; and Factor 6 – Nature and strategies of language learning. Table 2 specifies the mean score and standard deviation of each of the six factors. For the 17 items with a loading larger than .5 or smaller than -.5, the response frequency distribution in percentage

at each item levels is also described in Table 3, together with their mean scores and standard deviations.

Factors	<i>M</i> ^a	<i>SD</i>
Factor 1 – Goals, expectations, and ways of learning Chinese/Japanese	3.96	0.387
Factor 2 – Aptitude and nature of learning Chinese/Japanese	2.94	0.532
Factor 3 – People’s abilities and perspectives	2.57	0.670
Factor 4 – Self-efficacy and feelings about using Chinese/Japanese	2.98	0.407
Factor 5 – Nature and uniqueness of language learning	3.92	0.497
Factor 6 – Nature and strategies of language learning	2.52	0.518

^a The mean score of each factor was calculated after the responses in the 14 items with a negative factor loading were reversed. Thus, the mean scores of Factors 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6 do not correspond to the mean score of the items grouped together within those factors.

Table 2: Identified factors with mean score and standard deviation

Items	5 ^a	4	3	2	1	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Factor 1 (eight items in total)</i>							
31. I want to learn to speak C/J well. ^b	62 ^c	32	5	0	0	4.57	0.594
29. If I learn C/J very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job.	46	40	12	2	0	4.30	0.763
18. It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	69	29	2	0	0	4.67	0.514
32. I would like to have C/J friends.	36	41	20	3	0	4.10	0.824
12. It is best to learn C/J in C/J-speaking countries.	42	35	16	6	0	4.13	0.907
<i>Factor 2 (eight items in total)</i>							
10. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.	3	21	35	35	7	2.77	0.943
28. The most important part of learning C/J is learning how to translate from my native language.	5	25	33	30	6	2.94	1.001
34. It is easier to read and write C/J than to speak and understand it.	9	16	23	33	20	2.61	1.213
<i>Factor 3 (three items in total)</i>							
2. Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	29	49	16	5	1	4.02	0.834
20. People in my country feel that it is important to speak C/J.	11	30	43	13	4	3.30	0.956
<i>Factor 4 (seven items in total)</i>							
5. I believe that I will learn to speak C/J very well.	7	36	45	11	1	3.38	0.814
16. I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	2	16	54	25	3	2.88	0.770
21. I feel timid speaking C/J with other people.	4	20	49	21	5	2.95	0.884
13. I enjoy practicing C/J with C/J people I meet.	21	41	33	4	1	3.77	0.858
<i>Factor 5 (four items in total)</i>							
27. Learning a foreign language is different than learning other academic subjects.	16	40	24	16	3	3.50	1.052
<i>Factor 6 (four items in total)</i>							
23. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar.	11	34	37	19	1	3.35	0.920

^a The numbers indicate: 5, strongly agree; 4, agree; 3, neither agree nor disagree; 2, disagree; and 1, strongly disagree.

^b C/J indicates Chinese or Japanese, and the target language (i.e., Chinese or Japanese) was printed on the questionnaires given to the respondents.

^c The percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number, and therefore the total of all the percentages of one item isn't always one hundred.

Table 3: Response frequency (in percentage), mean and standard deviation of the major items

The factor-level mean scores (displayed in Table 2) were not calculated simply from the mean scores of the items grouped together in the particular factors (displayed in Table 3). As a first step, the values of the mean scores of the 14 items with a negative loading in the results of the factor analysis (i.e. Item 9 in Factor 1; Items 2, 20 and 25 in Factor 3; Items 5, 16, 13, 8 and 6 in Factor 4; Item 4 in Factor 5; and Items 23, 22, 7 and 17 in Factor 6, as displayed in Table 1) were re-

versed. In this process, the value 5 was replaced by 1, 4 by 2, and so forth for these 14 items. Then, using those reversed values, the factor means were calculated. This first step was necessary, because items with a negative loading indicated their relationship to the factor in a direction opposite from those with a positive loading. Due to this process of reversing, very careful consideration is required to interpret the relationships between the mean scores of the factors shown in Table 2 and the mean scores of each item grouped together within each factor shown in Table 3. The larger mean scores in Table 2 do not necessarily indicate that the respondents were more likely to agree with the ideas in all the items within each factor in a uniform manner. This is the case for all the factors except Factor 2. All of these five factors (Factors 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6) included one or more items with a negative loading. On the other hand, the mean scores of each item in Table 3 were calculated using the original values, not the reversed ones. Thus, at the item levels, the larger mean score always indicates the stronger agreement to the idea expressed in the item.

In the following sections, the major characteristics of the language learning beliefs of the Thai students are described based on the item-level response frequencies and mean scores exhibited in Table 3. In Factor 1, a high level of agreement was manifested in the five items, with their mean scores ranging from 4.10 to 4.67. The respondents expressed a very strong wish to learn to speak the target language fluently, as well as to have friends from the country where their target language is spoken. They also believed that foreign language skills would provide a brighter future for their professional career. The importance of repeating and practicing frequently was overwhelmingly endorsed by the majority of the participants. In addition, the Thai students highly believed that a person could learn the language most effectively in the country where it is spoken.

In Factor 2, the situation was quite different from Factor 1. The three items had a mean score between 2.61 and 2.94. The distribution of the participants' agreement level in each item was large, indicating the respondents' differing strength of beliefs. More than one third of the students were neutral about the belief that it was easier for someone who already spoke one foreign language to learn another one, but many other students disagreed or agreed with the belief. This distribution pattern was also apparent for the item about the importance of translation in language learning. Regarding the nature of Chinese and Japanese languages, more than half of the students rejected the idea that it was easier to read and write the target language than to speak and understand it. However, still many participants were neutral to this belief.

The two items in Factor 3 had a high mean score. Most of the participants acknowledged that the special ability for learning foreign languages was shared only by gifted learners. Many of the Thai students (41%) supported the belief that Thai people thought that it was important to speak their target language, whereas many other students (43%) were neutral about this idea.

The mean scores of the four items in Factor 4 ranged between 2.88 and 3.77. In three of the four items listed in Table 3, the neutral position received the strongest endorsement. The belief about their self-efficacy to become a good speaker of the target language was supported by many students, but the majority neither agreed nor disagreed with this belief. They were not willing to admit that they themselves were gifted in foreign language learning with a special ability. More than half selected the neutral position for this item. A similar pattern of responses was observed for the item regarding their feeling shy in speaking the target language with other people. However, most of the learners appreciated the chance of practicing the target language with native speakers.

The mean score of the item in Factor 5 was high. Most of the Thai learners acknowledged the difference between language learning and learning other academic subjects. The item in Factor 6 received slightly less support from the respondents than the item in Factor 5, but still had a high mean score. Many of the Thai learners believed that grammar was the most important part of learning a foreign language. Nevertheless, still many respondents (37%) neither agreed nor disagreed with the idea.

3.3 Secondary education and language learning beliefs

A one-way between-participants MANOVA was conducted to examine whether there was any difference in terms of the language learning beliefs among the groups of students with different types of secondary education backgrounds. The mean scores of the six identified factors were used as the dependent variables. The type of the secondary school which the participants attended before their undergraduate education was the independent variable.

Preliminary assumption testing was conducted in order to assess normality, linearity, univariate and multivariate outliers, homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices, and multicollinearity. No serious violations were observed except for the following univariate outliers. Six participants were deleted, because their mean scores were considered as univariate outliers in one of the dependent variables.

A statistically significant difference was identified among the four groups of students educated in the different types of secondary school on the combined dependent variables, $F(18, 422) = 2.556, p < .0005$; Wilks' Lambda = .746; partial eta squared = .093. An alpha level of .05 was used for all the statistical tests throughout this study, except for those with a Bonferroni adjusted alpha. When the results for the dependent variables were considered separately, a statistically significant difference was identified only in Factor 2, $F(3, 154) = 7.624, p < .0005$, partial eta squared = .129, using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .008.

A one-way between-participants ANOVA with post-hoc comparison using the Tukey HSD test disclosed that the mean score of the local high school graduates ($M = 3.083, SD = .488$) was significantly different from that of the international school graduates ($p = .001, M = 2.599, SD = .360$) and also from that of the school abroad graduates ($p = .004, M = 2.800, SD = .526$), using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .008. The effect size, calculated using eta squared, was .118.

3.4 Language education and language learning beliefs

Another one-way between-participants MANOVA was conducted to examine whether there was any difference in terms of the language learning beliefs among the Thai students with different lengths of participation in the preparatory English course. The independent variable for this analysis was the length of period for which the students were at the preparatory pre-university English programme.

A statistically significant difference was uncovered between the two groups of students on the combined dependent variables, $F(6, 150) = 2.445, p = .028$; Wilks' Lambda = .911; partial eta squared = .089. When the results for the dependent variables were considered separately, a statistically significant difference was identified only in Factor 2, $F(1, 155) = 7.629, p = .006$, partial eta squared = .047, using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .008. The students who attended the preparatory English course for at least 10 weeks ($M = 3.056, SD = .515$) had a significantly higher mean score statistically in Factor 2 than the students who did not attend the preparatory course ($M = 2.852, SD = .510$).

3.5 Target language and language learning beliefs

In order to investigate whether there was any difference between the two groups of students learning the two different languages (i.e. Chinese and Japanese) in terms of their beliefs about language learning, a one-way between-participants MANOVA was conducted. The independent variable was the target language that the participants were learning.

A statistically significant difference was identified between the two groups of students on the combined dependent variables, $F(6, 151) = 5.732, p < .0005$; Wilks' Lambda = .814; partial eta squared = .186. When the results for the dependent variables were considered separately, a statistically significant difference was detected only in Factor 3, $F(1, 156) = 20.766, p < .0005$, partial eta squared = .117, using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .008. The students learning Japanese

($M = 2.817$, $SD = .595$) had a statistically significantly higher mean score in Factor 3 than the Chinese language learners ($M = 2.357$, $SD = .621$).

4 Discussion

Using the BALLI questionnaire, a six-factor structure was identified for the language learning beliefs held by the Thai university students learning either the Chinese or Japanese language. The identified factors of the beliefs were labelled as follows: (a) Factor 1 – Goals, expectations, and ways of learning Chinese/Japanese; (b) Factor 2 – Aptitude and nature of learning Chinese/Japanese; (c) Factor 3 – People's abilities and perspectives; (d) Factor 4 – Self-efficacy and feelings about using Chinese/Japanese; (e) Factor 5 – Nature and uniqueness of language learning; and (f) Factor 6 – Nature and strategies of language learning. A significant difference was seen among the groups of students who graduated from different types of secondary school only in terms of Factor 2. Similarly, the students who attended the preparatory English course before their undergraduate degree programmes were significantly different from the students who did not attend the course only in terms of the same Factor 2. Additionally, only in terms of Factor 3 were the Chinese language learners significantly different from the students learning the Japanese language.

The first finding from the factor analysis indicates that the language learning beliefs can be characterized by a dimensional structure. This also endorses the findings by Yang (1999), who had used a methodology comparable to that of this study. Yang also used the BALLI questionnaire followed by factor analysis, as did this study. However, as described earlier, the composition of the items in each factor identified in this study was very complicated, and the factors were not structured in a clear-cut manner. All the six factors included items from two or more of the conceptual themes developed by Horwitz (1987). Similarly, the items from the same conceptual category were scattered across and were divided into two or more of the six identified factors. This factorial structure made it very difficult to interpret the characteristics of each factor. Nevertheless, this identified factorial structure provides a general global picture of the beliefs about language learning held by the Thai university students.

This kind of complex factor structure was also discovered by Yang (1999). In addition, and more importantly, the grouping of the items in each factor in the two studies was very similar, in spite of the different number of the identified factors. For example, all but two items of Factor 1 in this study were also grouped within the same factor in Yang's results. Similarly, all except one item in Yang's Factor 1 were grouped under Factor 5 in this research.

Furthermore, at each item level, judging from the response frequencies (indicated in percentage), this study shared many of the findings reported by Yang (1999). For instance, a strong agreement to the common idea about the best learning environment was equally manifested by the majority of the learners in the two studies. They considered the country where the target language is spoken to be the best place to learn that language. They also displayed a strong belief about the prospect of better job opportunities with a good command of the language. Similar patterns were also noticed with regard to their beliefs about the aptitude. The belief that only a limited number of people have a special ability to learn foreign languages was weakly supported in the two studies. Both groups of the language learners were also equally interested in making friends with native speakers of their target language.

In spite of all the similarities between the findings of the two studies described above, the number of the identified factors was different: Yang (1999) identified four factors, while this study found six. The discrepancies might be partially attributable to the variations in the sample populations: Yang surveyed university students in Taiwan learning English, while this current study examined Thai students learning Chinese and Japanese at a Thai university. More importantly, the learners were also different in their target language proficiency level: Yang's participants were advanced learners at least in the 6th or 7th year of their English learning, but the participants in this study were all elementary-level learners of Chinese or Japanese with only an approximately three- or six-month learning period.

The findings from the comparisons among the groups of students with different types of secondary school experiences were different from what was expected, considering the qualitative instructional variations among the schools. It appeared that the students all shared similar beliefs about language learning, even if they had graduated from different types of secondary schools. The findings seem to contradict Mori (1999), suggesting that learners' beliefs might be modifiable through instructional interactions. This modifiable nature of learners' beliefs was also asserted by Schommer (1990), who investigated students' beliefs about knowledge and knowing in general. In their investigation of Thai university students, Fujiwara and Phillips (2006) also claimed that education appears to play an important role in the development of beliefs about knowledge and knowing in general.

A plausible interpretation of this unexpected finding is that there were large similarities in the language learning experiences among the participants, despite their different overall experiences in their secondary schools. At least two of these similarities were clearly noticeable. First of all, undoubtedly all the participants were very successful learners of English as a second or foreign language. They were all Thai native speakers and, at the same time, they were enrolled in international undergraduate degree programmes where English was used as the sole language of instruction and communication. They needed to have a TOFEL (paper-based test) score of at least 550 to be admitted to the programmes. It is reasonable to speculate that all these students underwent more or less similar experiences in learning English as well as in achieving a very high level of proficiency in English, regardless of their diverse secondary school experiences.

Second, they were all at the beginning stage of learning the target language, either Chinese or Japanese. The participants were attending the classes of either the second-level or third-level elementary course of the target language. Their beliefs about language learning were measured after they received only approximately 90 or 130 hours of classroom instruction of the target language.

Similarities in the language learning beliefs held by the individuals who had parallel past language learning experiences were reported by Mori (1999). Mori discovered differences in terms of the language learning beliefs between beginner- and advanced-level learners. Mori argued that the rich learning experiences might have helped the learners to refine their beliefs about language learning. This argument implies that the language learners at the same stage of learning (such as at the elementary level in this study) share similar beliefs about language learning.

5 Conclusion

To summarize, the participants of this study were highly likely to have had very similar past experiences of foreign language learning: English, and Chinese or Japanese. Because of this similarity, they had similar language learning beliefs. This speculation appears to be additionally supported by the findings from the two other comparisons among the groups of participants in this study. Though only half of the participants attended the extra preparatory pre-college English course, and even if the participants were learning different target languages, their language learning beliefs were significantly different only in terms of one factor. In other words, all the students had similar beliefs. These two aspects of their past learning experiences (i.e. the preparatory English course and the target language) might have been less influential to the formation and development of the language learning beliefs than the other aspects shared by all the participants.

The results of this study suggest that past experiences as language learners are potential determinants of language learning beliefs, as the findings indicate similar beliefs about language learning shared by the participants with similar language learning experiences. However, limitations need to be acknowledged. The limitations indicate the future research directions in the field.

The first limitation is related to the measurement of the learners' past experiences. Although the two variables related to the participants' previous learning experiences were examined in this study, it appears that they were not sufficient. It is necessary to investigate other additional variables in order to achieve a complete picture of the determinants of the language learning beliefs. In particular, the variables related to the learners' English language learning experiences are undoubtedly essential. They would include the length, type and characteristics of the students' Eng-

lish language learning. The students' achievement level in English at the time of investigation could be another important indicator of past learning experiences. It would be more effective to investigate these additional aspects through mixed methods, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. Longitudinal studies will certainly enable richer explanations of how past experiences as language learners influence individuals' beliefs about language learning.

The second limitation concerns the length of the participants' learning of the target languages. The participants had a relatively short period of experience of learning the target language when their beliefs were measured in this study. It seems to be too short to examine the possible impact of the learning on the students' beliefs about language learning. Thus, it might have made it difficult to evaluate the identified belief variations and similarities, as they could be attributable to the different target language or other aspects of the participants.

This study indicates the potential relationships between the learners' language learning beliefs and past experiences as language learners. This further signifies that students' language learning beliefs could be altered through instructional classroom interactions as much of the learners' learning experiences took place in classrooms. In this regard, it is essential for language teachers to have a clear understanding of their students' beliefs about language learning as one of the key factors affecting the ultimate outcome of their learning.

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Notes

¹ The total of all the percentages of the four secondary school categories does not amount to 100, as one participant did not indicate his/her secondary school background. This participant was thus not included in the analyses concerning the secondary school background.

² The original BALLI has 34 items. However, according to Yang (1999), one more item was added in a later version, describing a belief about the role of memorization. In this study, the 35-item version was used.

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