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GENDER-RELATED LANGUAGE LEARNING BELIEFS IN POLISH ADOLESCENTS

The aim of the paper is to investigate language-learning beliefs of 488 (164 males and 324 females) Polish high school students in relation to their gender. Their responses to the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory by Horwitz (1988) were explored by means of the U Mann-Whitney test. The main results show that for females English is a language of medium difficulty, but they believe they have a talent for language learning. They are also strongly motivated to learn English and ready to work hard in spite of feeling self-conscious when speaking in front of others. Males believe English is an easy language, and they are not keen to practice.

1. Introduction

Research on learner beliefs has evolved out of a growing interest in individual learner characteristics with a particular focus on learners' affective and cognitive contributions to the language learning process. While affective contributions are central to second language learning (Schumann, 1997), learners' metacognitive knowledge and beliefs have been found to have a pervasive influence on one's academic learning, thinking, reasoning and problem solving (Kardash & Scholes, 1996). Furthermore, it has been shown that one's belief systems, social cognitions and metacognitions are a driving force for intellectual performance (Schoenfeld, 1983), including acquisition of foreign languages.

In the language acquisition context, beliefs have been defined as 'implicit theories' (Clark, 1988), 'self-constructed representational systems' (Rust, 1994), and "general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing learning, and about the nature of learning and teaching" (Victori & Lockheart, 1995: 224). Understanding learner beliefs in this context is essential, since it has been noted that successful learners develop insightful beliefs about language learning processes, their own abilities, and the use of effective learning strategies, which have

a facilitative effect on learning. On the other hand, students can have 'mistaken', uninformed or negative beliefs, which may lead to a reliance on less effective strategies, resulting in a negative attitude towards learning and autonomy (Victori & Lockhart, 1995), classroom anxiety (Horwitz & Cope, 1986), or poor cognitive performance (Reid, Hresko, & Swanson, 1996). For example, a student who believes that learning a new language is mostly a matter of memorizing vocabulary, will spend most of their time and effort on this strategy in hope of eventually achieving a communicative competence. Conversely, a student who believes that a special language aptitude is necessary for the acquisition of a foreign language, but that he or she does not possess such aptitude, may begin language learning with a fairly negative expectation of their own ultimate success.

So far, studies in second and/or foreign language acquisition research have shown that beliefs are quite stable within the learner, strongly held, and resistant to change (Kern, 1995; Weinstein, 1994, Peacock, 2001). Moreover, interdisciplinary research suggests that beliefs are intertwined with factors such as self-concept and identity, self-efficacy, personality traits, and other individual differences (Epstein, 1990, Furnham, Johnson & Rawles, 1985; Langston & Sykes, 1997; Pratt, 1980; Bernat, 2006). Consequently, it has been suggested researchers study how these beliefs differ across language learners, particularly in terms of individual differences such as gender, age, nationality, learning style, and personality type (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005; Wenden, 1999; Horwitz, 1999*a*; Rifkin, 2000).

Establishing the nature of learner beliefs and their relationship to stable individual differences such as gender may shed light on their stability. Current discourse in the field (eg. Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005) centers around the need to establish the strength and stability of learner beliefs before any attempts to change 'negative' or 'unproductive' beliefs are made in the classroom context.

Several empirical studies have investigated relationships between students' beliefs about language learning and factors such as language proficiency, strategy use, motivation and anxiety, among others (for a review, see Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005). These studies found that learners with positive and realistic beliefs tended to hold favorable attitude and higher motivational intensity, used more learning strategies, were less anxious, and attained higher language achievement than learners who held unrealistic beliefs or misconceptions about language learning (eg. Banya & Chen, 1997).

However, there is still paucity in literature on the relationship between language learner beliefs and stable individual differences, such as gender. In psychology, researchers who have long been interested in the relationship of gender to behavior and cognition, have found significant sex-related differences in social behavior, cognitive activity, and general verbal ability (Bacon & Finnemann, 1992). Yet, in the field of second and foreign language acquisition, a comparatively small number of studies report findings in relation to these variables.

Males and females differ in their social roles in various settings, which may be attributed to gender stereotypes assuming that mathematics is a masculine domain, while verbal arts and languages are a feminine domain (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2004). In educational context, significant differences in abilities for learning in general of

males and females have been reported (Halpern, 2000; Weiman, 2001; Whitley, 1997). Cognitive research reporting gender differences in certain areas of learning or knowledge acquisition include differences in cognitive processing and functioning. Researchers have also found that gender can have significant impact on how students learn a language (Oxford, Young, Ito, & Sumrall, 1993).

Several early socio-linguistic studies have shown that female learners generally do better than male on achievement, verbal ability, proficiency, and vocabulary memorization (Burstall, 1975; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Boyle, 1987; Nyikos, 1990), though Bacon and Finneman (1990) found no difference between the sexes in authentic listening tasks. Other studies suggest that females have more positive attitudes to learning a foreign language and higher motivation than males (Burstall, 1975; Gardner & Lambert 1972; Spolsky, 1989). However, some studies report contradictory findings in relation to the type of motivation being dominant. Ludwig (1983) reported that male learners were more instrumentally motivated than female learners, while Bacon & Finneman (1992) reported that female learners had stronger instrumental motivation.

Other studies suggest that women undertake the task of learning a foreign language differently from men. Existing studies show that gender (Kaylani, 1996) is one of the factors which influences choice of strategies used among students learning a foreign language. As gender is an issue with important theoretical and pedagogical implications in second language learning (Tercanlioglu, 2004) it has received some attention in language learning strategy research (e.g. Oxford, 1993; Green & Oxford 1995; Young & Oxford, 1997). An emerging pattern in these studies shows that, although sometimes males surpassed females in the use of a particular strategy, females employ more learning strategies or employ strategies more effectively (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990; Nyikos, 1990; Oxford, 1994; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989), though contradictory findings have been reported (Tran, 1988; Tercanlioglu, 2004).

In a recent study of Turkish foreign language learners, Tercanlioglu (2004) found gender differences favoring males in students' strategy use. The results of her study are inconsistent with several other studies that have reported that female learners use strategies with greater frequency than male learners (e.g. Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Green & Oxford, 1995; Kaylani, 1996). Tercanlioglu's explanation for this result suggests that cultural factors may play a role in strategy reporting.

There are a number of studies reporting the relationship between gender and language learner beliefs. Using the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI, Horwitz, 1987), Siebert (2003) conducted a study of 156 learners studying English at a higher education institution in the US. Siebert found a number of significant belief differences among males and females in relation to language learning abilities and strategy use. Findings revealed that male students were more likely than female students to rate their abilities highly, admit to having a special language aptitude, and be more optimistic about the length of time it takes to learn a foreign language. Males were also more likely to agree that the most important part of learning a language is learning grammar, and endorse audio-visual learning methods.

In another US study, Bacon and Finnemann (1992) investigated gender differences in self-reported beliefs about foreign language learning and authentic oral and written

input. Using a self-developed 109-item questionnaire to obtain data, they surveyed 938 students of Spanish across two large state universities. Bacon and Finnemann found that women reported a higher level of motivation and strategy use in language learning than male students, greater use of global strategies in dealing with authentic input, and a higher level of social interaction with the target language (Spanish).

Recently, Tercanlioglu (2005) examined the beliefs about language learning held by 118 pre-service undergraduate EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers and how they relate to gender, using the BALLI (Horwitz, 1987). Tercanlioglu found no significant differences among males and females, yet she concluded that it is possible that age, stage of life, and contextual differences in the language-learning situation may also be important sources of group variation in learner beliefs.

Finally, Bernat & Lloyd (2006) investigated the gender effect on language learner beliefs using the BALLI in an Australian context, based on data from 262 EFL learners at a university. The study reported only two statistically significant differences between males and females. These related to the belief about the degree of intelligence possessed by multilinguals, and the degree of enjoyment in practicing English with native speakers, with males being more likely to enjoy the experience.

2. Method

The aim of this study is to investigate if Polish secondary school students' language beliefs can be accounted for by gender type. Thus, the main hypothesis this study aims to test is: *male and female students differ in their language learning beliefs*. Moreover, the study aims at finding answers to the following research question:

1. How do females and males differ in their beliefs on the difficulty of language learning?
2. What are female and male views on foreign language aptitude?
3. What are the gender influences on student beliefs on the nature of language learning?
4. Are learning and communication strategies beliefs affected by gender?
5. What are motivations and expectations beliefs differences between male and female students?

Importantly, this study fills a gap in current research on the language beliefs of Polish learners of English, which has – to date – remained unexplored.

The sample consisted of 488 students (164 males, 324 females) attending their third (last) grade of the six secondary schools in Opole, Poland. The secondary school in Poland accommodates students aged 17–19 years of age; in other educational contexts such schools may also be called high schools. Their average age was 19 with the minimum of 18 and maximum – 21 years of age. They all attended classes with the average of three to five hours of English per week, where English was their secondary compulsory foreign language, while French or German was primary, taught more intensively.

The design of the study is differential, as it quantifies the direction and strength of a relationship between the variables while comparing two groups (Graziano & Raulin, 1993). The research was conducted by comparing means and totals obtained on the learner beliefs inventories.

The instrument used in the study was the BALLI (EFL version) questionnaire, a 34-item inventory of language learning beliefs (Horwitz, 1988) created specially for foreign language students. It comprised 5 subscales on the difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies and motivations and expectations, all on a 5-point Likert scale, starting from 1 – *I totally disagree* to 5 – *I totally agree*.

The data collection procedure took place in January 2005. In each class, the students were asked to fill in the questionnaire, taking between 15 to 45 minutes. The participants were asked to give sincere answers without taking excessive time to think. Each part of the questionnaire was preceded by a short statement introducing a new set of items in an unobtrusive manner.

There are two kinds of variables identified in the study. The dependent one is language beliefs, while the independent variable is constituted by gender. All the variables are operationally defined as questionnaire items.

The data were computed by means of a statistical program STATISTICA, with the main operations being descriptive statistics (means – arithmetic average and SD showing how far individuals vary from the mean), together with the student's t-test for independent samples exploring mean differences between two groups of subjects (Graziano & Raulin, 1993, p. 424). There is also the U Mann-Whitney test, a non-parametric statistical significance test assessing if two observed distributions overlap less than would be expected by chance, including the Z test assessing if the difference between the sample mean and the population mean is sufficiently different to be statistically significant.

3. Results

The results obtained for the five learner beliefs subscales show global differences in language learning beliefs in males and females. The main results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Main results on the five subscales

	Mean Females	Mean Males	t	p
Language learning difficulty	19.84	19.79	-.20	,8369
Foreign language aptitude	31.62	30.10	-4.45***	,0000
Nature of language learning	23.98	22.79	-4.08***	,0000
Learning and communication strategies	25.70	25.51	-.53	,5936
Motivations and expectations	16.55	14.97	-6.38****	,0000

There were three statistically significant differences between the two groups: male students rated lower their beliefs on foreign language aptitude, nature of language learning and especially motivations and expectations.

With the U Mann-Whitney test the main differences between responses to subsequent items on each subscale were investigated. The **difficulty of language learning** subscale refers to general language difficulty of learning any language, such as English. There were significantly different responses in Items 3 and 4 (see Table 2 below).

Table 2. Significant differences on the **difficulty of language learning** subscale

	Mean Females	Mean Males	Z	p
3. Some languages are easier to learn than others.	4.51	4.23	-3.13**	.0018
4. The language I am trying to learn (English) is: 1) a very difficult language, 2) a difficult language, 3) a language of medium difficulty, 4) an easy language, 5) a very easy language.	2.89	2.51	-4.18****	.0000

In the study, females are more convinced than males that some languages are easier to learn (Item 3), while they consider English to be slightly more difficult for them than students of the opposite gender (Item 4). As for other results, both males and females believe that they will eventually attain oral proficiency in English (Item 6), and that it is likely to take 3-5 years to become fluent in a language given one spends one hour a day learning it (Item 14). Neither males nor females are of a definite opinion whether it is easier to speak than understand a foreign language (Item 24), and they all are unsure if it is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it (Item 28).

The **foreign language aptitude** subscale is devoted to specialized abilities for language learning, as well as student beliefs about unsuccessful and successful language learners (see Table 3).

Table 3. Significant differences on the **foreign language aptitude** subscale

	Mean Females	Mean Males	Z	p
1. It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.	4.44	4.12	-3.39***	.0007
2. Some people are born with a special ability which helps them to learn a foreign language.	4.66	4.24	-4.90****	.0000
22. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.	2.84	2.39	-4.22****	.0000
29. People who are good at math and science are not good at learning foreign languages.	2.55	2.77	2.13*	.0333

32. People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent.	3.59	3.00	-5.41****	.0000
34. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	4.11	3.91	-2.23*	.0257

Females are quite certain that children learn foreign languages with greater ease (Item 1), and they strongly believe that some people have an aptitude for learning languages (Item 2). At the same time, they do not have an opinion on the superiority of gender in foreign language acquisition, while males tend to disagree with that statement (Item 22). Females are unsure if people who have an aptitude for math and science do not have an aptitude for learning languages, while males do not agree (Item 29). However, males are not convinced whether intelligence plays a role in multiple language acquisition, while females are inclined to show that conviction (Item 32). Female students are more likely to accept the belief that everyone can learn to speak a foreign language (Item 34). Nevertheless, both groups are uncertain if it is easier for someone who already speaks one foreign language to learn another one (Item 10), or if they themselves have foreign language aptitude (Item 15). They are also uncertain whether Poles are good at learning languages (Item 33).

The **nature of second language learning** subscale relates to various issues: the role of the cultural contact, specificity of language learning, the focus of the language learning task and perceptions of structural differences between the mother tongue and the foreign language. Here, three significant differences between groups were found (see Table 4).

Table 4. Significant differences on the **nature of language learning** subscale

	Mean Females	Mean Males	Z	p
11. It is better to learn a foreign language in the foreign country.	4.37	4.02	-3.27**	.0011
16. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words.	3.78	3.40	-4.01****	.0000
25. Learning a foreign language is different from learning other school subjects.	3.88	3.56	-3.29**	.0010

Female students, more than male students, are quite convinced that it is better to learn a language in the foreign country (Item 11). They also have a tendency to believe that learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning vocabulary, while males do not seem to have clear opinion on that matter (Item 16). Females are more convinced than males that learning a foreign language is different from learning other school subjects (Item 25). Both females and males partially agree that the English language is structured differently than Polish (Item 5), and they are uncertain if it is necessary to

know the foreign culture in order to speak the foreign language (Item 8). Both groups are uncertain if learning a language is mostly a matter of learning grammar rules (Item 20), though they tend to agree that it is not mostly a matter of translating from the mother tongue (Item 26).

The **learning and communication strategies** subscale comprises information on the participants' views on the strategies they find useful. There is a difference in only one item of the subscale in reference to communication strategies (see Table 5). Females complain about getting self-conscious while speaking in front of the class (Item 18).

Table 5. Significant differences on the **learning and communication strategies** subscale

	Mean Females	Mean Males	Z	p
17. Learning strategies: It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	4.47	3.99	-5.14****	.0000
7. Communication strategies: It is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent accent.	3.76	3.56	-2.17*	.0298
9. You shouldn't say anything in the foreign language until you can say it correctly.	1.84	2.07	1.97*	.0482
18. I feel self-conscious speaking the foreign language in front of other people.	3.14	2.63	-4.05****	.0000

For female students repetition and practice are most important (Item 17), yet neither males nor females have an opinion on practicing in a language lab (Item 21), which does not come as a surprise as there are no more language labs in schools due to the Audio-lingual approach being out of fashion for quite some time now.

As for communication strategies, females believe more strongly in the importance of speaking a foreign language with an excellent pronunciation (Item 7). Still, males are slightly less inclined to speak in the foreign language when they are unsure if their speech is correct (Item 9).

Both groups have no opinion on their will to practice if they heard someone speaking English (Item 12), though they are slightly more convinced that it is appropriate to guess the meaning of unfamiliar English words (Item 13). Nevertheless, they have no opinion if being allowed to make mistakes in the beginning of language learning leads to 'fossilization' of ungrammatical utterances (Item 19).

The **motivations and expectations** subscale examines desires and opportunities connected with the learning of English. The main differences concern all the items on the subscale (see Table 6).

Table 6. Significant differences on the **motivations and expectations** subscale

	Mean Females	Mean Males	Z	p
23. If I get to speak the language very well, I will have many opportunities to use it.	4.05	3.80	-2.43*	.0151
27. If I learn to speak this language very well, it will help me get a good job.	4.46	4.03	-5.04****	.0000
30. Poles think that it is important to speak a foreign language.	4.35	3.91	-4.86****	.0000
31. I would like to learn this language so that I can get to know its speakers better.	3.69	3.24	-4.25****	.0000

Female students are more inclined to believe that if they become proficient in English, have many opportunities to use it (Item 23), and that this proficiency will increase their employment prospects (Item 30). They are also interested in meeting native speakers (Item 31). In their view, Polish people believe that it is important to speak English (Item 30), while males have no specified opinion on that matter.

4. Discussion

The general purpose of the study is to investigate possible differences in learner beliefs that might be attributed to gender in the context of the Polish secondary school. Consequently, the main hypothesis adopted for the purpose of the present study was: *male and female students differ in their language learning beliefs*. The study results undoubtedly show significant differences to exist. These results do not come as a surprise, due to findings concerning differences in the brain structure and functions of males and females that are hormonally and genetically transmitted (Moir & Jessel, 1992). Such differences are likely to affect various cognitive processes such as language learning, as well as personal beliefs about the process of language acquisition.

As far as students' views on language learning difficulty are concerned, in the present study females admit that languages have different difficulty levels and English is more difficult for them than for male students. That may be a significant stressor for a foreign language learner because the learner's overall assessment of language difficulty is claimed to be critical for the development of their expectations (Horwitz, 1988). Hence, females who expect their language learning process to be more complicated may be threatened with expectations of failure. Still, it has been found that English girls had higher success expectancies in the English language than boys (Eccles, Wigfield, Harold & Blumenfeld, 1993). Consequently, it may be expected that in spite of perceived language difficulty, female students are likely to be successful language learners. As expectancy value is found to rise with age (Greene & DeBacker, 2004),

the mature age participants in this study are likely to have clear objectives for their future. Hence, females can be assumed to be able to attain the final goal of language success, as well as other future goals connected with the language.

Males, on the other hand, seem to be less troubled by worries concerning the language difficulty level, which may be a result of males being generally less anxious than females (Gierl & Rogers, 1996). Still, in view of the research presented so far, it may be expected that Polish male language learners may not be as successful as their female peers due to their lower expectancies of success.

As for other results, an optimistic finding is that Polish secondary school males and females believe that they will learn to speak English after a couple of years if they study it on a regular basis for one hour a day. The finding exposes the students' faith in their efficient linguistic abilities, which is an important discovery, especially in reference to females who assess English as quite difficult. Nonetheless, in spite of the challenge, they still believe they will master it. The finding is important, as it shows that the ultimate language success of a Polish secondary school student has its roots in their positive attitude to learning English. Apart from that, the finding corroborates the gender differences research as far as perceived ability is concerned (e.g. Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2004).

Both groups, males and females, have no definite opinion about the dominance of any of the four macro skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing). This finding can be attributed to the fact that the contemporary approach to teaching foreign languages applied in Poland, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), perceives the four skills as equally important (Richards & Rodgers, 1986) as the implementation of CLT requires students to "work on all four skills from the beginning" (Larsen-Freeman, 1986, p. 134).

The second strand in the language learner beliefs inventory concerns the foreign language aptitude. Although neither males nor females believe to have an aptitude for languages, females seem to have strong faith in the supremacy of women and children as language learners. It has been found that having a possible self (a mental representation of oneself in the future) that is success-oriented is related to performance in a given area (Ruvolo & Markus, 1992). Thus, females who perceive their gender to be identified with languages and success in that domain, are likely to be proficient language learners (see studies on positive attitudes of female language learners quoted in the Introduction).

The value of knowing more than one language seems important for females, who stress the fact that such a person is intelligent. Contrary to that finding, males believe that people who are good at science subjects are very intelligent. That evidently exposes males' attempts to compensate for presumed male lack of talent in languages.

Gender also appears to be an influential variable as far as the nature of second language learning is concerned. For female students, studying abroad is necessary for mastering a foreign language. They believe they need to have a good mastery of foreign words, and that language learning is different from learning any other subject. Once again, females appear to be strongly focused on language learning. Furthermore, both males' and females' beliefs about the nature of language learning proves the domi-

nance of CLT in the Polish educational context, as they all ignore the value of traditional teaching techniques, such as learning grammar rules, translating from the mother tongue into the foreign language, and audio-lingual methods.

As far as learning and communication strategies are concerned, the main differences between male and female opinions concern the value of language practice. Female students strongly believe it is needed for mastering a language. In their opinion, it is also necessary to speak with a good accent, which evidently requires a lot of practice. That view is inwardly connected with the fact that they feel insecure and shy speaking the foreign language in front of other people, as the process of learning a foreign language is connected with feelings of worry and embarrassment (Horwitz, 1999b). Once again, these findings corroborate the general path in gender studies on language learning, where females are found to use more strategies (e.g. Oxford, 1995).

Males, on the other hand, admit that one can speak a foreign language with mistakes. Hence, the results of the study lead to creating an image of Polish male foreign language students who are quite relaxed in a foreign language class, not overly success-oriented as far as language learning is concerned and who do not consider themselves to be talented in that area. Yet, at the same time they are ready to accept their linguistic deficiencies. Conversely, there is also a picture of females presenting themselves as diligent and hardworking students who put a lot of effort in mastering a foreign language that is difficult and who are aware of the necessity of arduous practice. They believe they have a talent for languages and they expect to be successful in spite of the emotional challenge they may have while speaking.

The study also demonstrates that both sexes have different beliefs concerning their motivations and expectations. Females seem to be strongly motivated to learn English from the point of view of both instrumental and integrative motivation, as shown in the studies quoted above. As nowadays Europe presents opportunities for greater employment, mastery of English, the *lingua franca*, is an obvious choice for young Polish people who are often disappointed with national economy. According to research, "future orientation can be a powerful motivator of current behaviour" (Greene & DeBacker, 2004, p. 92). Consequently, it may be expected that Polish females carefully plan their future. Women have already been found to be persistent in their pursuit of long-term goals (Zaleski, 1987), it may then be expected that they are more likely than males to succeed in the task of gaining proficiency in English. Yet, the stress they experience while speaking in public is a price they have to pay for attaining the goal males, who successfully pursue short-range goals, are not likely candidates for attaining FL mastery.

The main results of the study can be summed up in the following points:

1. Polish high school females perceive English to be a language of medium difficulty, yet they believe they surpass males in their talent for language learning.
2. They are strongly motivated to learn English and ready to work hard in spite of potential problems.
3. In spite of their expectations of success they get self-conscious while speaking in front of the class.

4. Polish high school males believe English is an easy language and are ready to accept ambiguity.
5. They are not keen on practice but speaking in front of other people does not stress them.

The limitations of the present study go beyond its contextual and institutional constraints. Given the particularly complex and multi-faceted nature of beliefs about language learning and the myriad factors that can shape learner beliefs, no attempt is made to generalize the findings of this study beyond the local context, although comparison data suggest feasibility of finding general trends across contexts, and individual differences of learners, through replicated studies, as emphasized by Kern (1995). Moreover, it needs to be added that the main instrument used in the study, the BALLI inventory, is a tool used for assessing students' initial beliefs (Horwitz, 1987; 1988). In the present study it was used towards the end of secondary/high school education, which the studies difficult to compare. Horwitz's method of analysis was descriptive, while here it is based on statistical analyses, which limits the opportunity for significant research comparisons.

Finally, language learners' beliefs are found to constitute "guiding principles for our students' behavior and strong perceptual filters" (Tercanlioglu, 2004). They are drawn from the student's previous learning history and their cognitive and affective makeup (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005). Hence, it seems vital to investigate learner beliefs systematically in order to fully understand the language acquisition process.

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