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## **BELIEFS ABOUT LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE – EXPERIENCE OF DEAF AND HARD-OF-HEARING POLISH ADOLESCENTS**

**Abstract:** Students' individual characteristics, beliefs about language learning among them, are nowadays perceived as important factors influencing both the increase of knowledge and student's personal engagement in the learning process. This is especially important when we consider teaching students with special educational needs, deaf and hard of hearing students (D/HH) among them. The better foreign language teachers know their students, the more effective the process of learning is. The aim of this paper is to provide empirical data on D/HH secondary school (liceum) students' beliefs on foreign language learning. The empirical study was conducted among 90 D/HH students of several Polish special secondary schools. The data was collected using the *Beliefs About Language Inventory* (Horwitz 1999). The results show both the potential of the students and areas for teachers' intervention, thus providing important input for surdo-glottodidactics.

**Keywords:** deaf, hard-of-hearing, beliefs, adolescents, surdo-glottodidactics.

### **Introduction**

Student's motivation, opinions, attitudes and beliefs about language learning are regarded to be important factors that modify the process of studying a new language. Knowing and understanding them is essential to acknowledge learner strategies and plan appropriate language instruction.

This is especially important in groups of students with special educational needs and more specifically – students with hearing impairment. In Poland they have been regularly taught foreign languages only since 2001 and research on how they learn is really scarce, but growing (Domagała-Zyśk 2013a, 2013b, 2003). The

subject literature (cf. Cornett 2001, Krakowiak 2012) shows that deafness should be understood mainly as a language disability. This calls for specific teaching and learning strategies of both national and foreign language learning.

To date there has been almost no examination of what motivates deaf and hard-of-hearing (henceforth D/HH) students, or what beliefs or attitudes they have towards learning a foreign language. The only studies include the ones conducted by Domagała-Zyśk on motivation (2012, 2013c) and beliefs about foreign language learning by D/HH university students (2013a). The aim of this paper is thus to provide empirical data on DHH secondary school students' beliefs about foreign language learning. The empirical study was conducted among 90 deaf and hard of hearing students of several Polish special secondary schools. The data was collected using the *Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory* (Horwitz 1999) and analyzed statistically.

### **On the importance of research on beliefs about language learning**

In recent years the language learner has started to be perceived not only as a passive receiver of knowledge about language but more as an active participant of the teaching and learning process. Consequently, analyses of the important factors modifying this process were extended and they include not only issues connected with the quality of reading, writing, listening and speaking skills, but also components such as learners' opinions, attitudes, motivations or beliefs. This last element was thoroughly diagnosed recently by different authors (Horwitz 1999, 1998, 1988, Piechurska-Kuciel 2009, 2012; Bernat 2004, 2006, 2008, Bernat, Carter, Hall 2009, Bernat, Gvozdenko 2005, Siebert 2003, Bernat, Piechurska-Kuciel 2009, Bernat, Lyod 2007) in many international and intercultural groups.

Beliefs are defined as “ways of understanding the world, assumptions and proposals that we believe to be true” (Richardson 1996, s.102) and may relate to factors such as the perceived level of difficulty/complexity of a given language (e.g. *English is more difficult than German*), the difficulties encountered in the process of acquisition of different language skills (e.g. *speech is the most difficult thing to learn*), conviction of the superiority of certain learning strategies over the others (e.g. *you can learn a foreign language only while speaking to its native users*), the time needed to master a foreign language, expectations regarding the possibility of success, opinions on learning style or attitudes towards teachers. These beliefs cannot be underestimated, but must be taken into account in the process of creating the study plans and selecting teaching strategies. Teachers should not only know the students' beliefs, but also try to analyze and correct those that might be unfavorable in the process of learning a foreign language (Bernat, Gvozdenko 2005).

Students' beliefs about learning seem to be more important for the results achieved by them than personal characteristics such as intelligence and abilities (cf.

Thomas, Harri-Augustein 1983). Students who have realistic and positive beliefs about language learning do better than those whose beliefs are unrealistic and/or negative. The first group is more active during the lessons and spends more time on learning (Bernat, Gvozdenko 2005). It was also agreed that learners' beliefs about language learning provide an explanation for their choice to use certain learning strategies (Horwitz 1988, Wenden 1986)

Different factors may influence students' beliefs. They can be divided into personal and socio-cultural ones. Personal factors are those that result from the student's previous personal experience (cf. Gaoyin, Alvermann 1995) and individual differences such as gender (Siebert 2003), age or personality (Langston, 1997, Sykes, Furnham, Johnsonm Rawles 2002). Socio-cultural factors may include family characteristics (e.g. material status of the family, parents' educational level), human capital level (e.g. social network) and also institutional characteristics (type of institution where learning takes place, school curriculum, peer relationships).

Studies on the beliefs about language learning have been done in different countries and school environments. Some of them are jointly analyzed in a paper by Horwitz (1999). On the basis of seven major studies performed among different nationalities: American students learning French and Spanish (Horwitz, 1988, Kern 1995), Japanese (Oh 1996), Korean (Truitt 1995), Taiwanese (Yang 1992) and Turkish (Kunt 1997) students learning English as a foreign language, she concluded that beliefs about language learning, personal characteristics of the students (age, stage of life, the context of language learning), levels of foreign language proficiency and the type of language instruction they receive during the language course are more important than the socio-cultural characteristics such as nationality or cultural differences. Similar conclusions are formulated by Berent (2006) who investigated 262 students from 19 different countries learning English as a foreign language in Australia. She summarizes her results by stating that beliefs about language learning are not specific to the socio-cultural factors, but depend on personal factors and the structure of metacognitive knowledge of the person. The latest students show also links between beliefs about language learning and level of anxiety (Tsai 2008), gender (Siebert 2003) and type of educational institution (private or state, small vs large etc., Rifkin 2000).

### **Deaf and hard-of-hearing students – diversity of the population**

The group of deaf and hard-of-hearing students is relatively small, as hearing problems appear in less than 1% of the population. However, this group is extremely diversified, as there are different medical conditions causing hearing impairment and hearing loss is diagnosed at different stages of the child's life. Additionally, there are diverse social, demographical and educational factors influencing the child's development and this makes it really difficult to categorise the group. In the

past, according to the suggestions from the International Office of Audiophonology (BIAP), the population of the deaf and hard-of-hearing persons was characterised mainly according to the level of hearing impairment: persons with mild (20-40 dB), moderate (41-70 dB), severe (71-90 dB) and profound impairment (more than 90 dB). It was presumed that the hearing loss measure could characterize the person best and the therapy types were adjusted accordingly.

Today the reality is more complicated. Digital hearing aids and cochlear implants can help some people even with the deepest hearing loss and turn them into functionally hearing individuals. The mode and intensity of rehabilitation – or lack of it - can also change the actual skills of the hearing impaired person. At the same time there is a large group of persons, both with severe to profound or intermediate hearing loss who choose to communicate in sign language and live according the principles of the so called Deaf Culture – a social movement that promotes Deaf identity, sign language communication and specific culture (history, traditions, language and art) of Deaf persons (Ladd 2003, Domagała-Zyśk 2013b, 166). Generally it seems to be useful to categorize the group of persons with hearing loss into two groups. The criterion of this should be communication style. Thus, we can distinguish: 1. Deaf persons, who communicate in sign language and identify with the Deaf community; 2. Hard-of-hearing persons, who use their national language as their means of communication and think of themselves as belonging to the national community. When we take this perspective, the medically diagnosed level of hearing loss does not play a crucial role.

The population of the D/HH persons is not easy to study. Its extreme diversity, low abundance and radical changes arising from technological support make it difficult to assess purely homogeneous groups. Due to not having them, it is difficult to generalize the research results. Therefore studies of DHH population are mainly case studies or small group studies and help to understand only a part of this complex reality.

As it was mentioned before, to date there has been almost no research on language learning beliefs of deaf and hard-of-hearing students. Today interest in foreign language methodology for this group is a growing one (Domagała-Zyśk 2013b, Kontra 2013, Pritchard 2013, Ochse 2013), mainly thanks to implementation of the ideas of normalization and inclusion of persons with disabilities into regular education. So far research on beliefs about language learning were conducted by Domagała-Zyśk (2013a) in an international group of 146 deaf and hard-of-hearing university students. The results of the latter research showed that the participants perceive foreign language fluency as an important factor to receiving a high quality education and to gaining better job opportunities. Almost 70% of the participants show a high motivation to learn a foreign language. This is not a low percentage, but definitely lower than the 90% found in the hearing students (Siebert 2003, Bernat 2006). Deaf and hard-of-hearing students believe that reading and writing are the easiest components of foreign language learning, while as the most difficult

they regard speech recognition. The interesting fact is that neither the nationality, nor the age, sex, level of hearing loss and preferred mode of communication differentiate the study participants.

### **Aims of the present study**

The purpose of this study was to analyze DHH Polish secondary school students' beliefs about foreign language learning and locate them within the taxonomy of language learning beliefs using BALLI survey instrument. Identification and educational analysis of these beliefs and reflection on their potential impact on language learning of DHH subjects can be beneficial for surdo-glottodidactics and can influence future syllabus design and teacher practice in the course. An additional purpose was to check whether these beliefs are similar to, or different from beliefs of hearing subjects reported in other studies in which BALLI questionnaire was used.

### **Method and research procedure**

The *Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory* (BALLI, Horwitz 1988) originally consists of 34 items on a Likert type scale and assesses the students' beliefs in 5 fields: 1) Foreign language aptitude; 2) The difficulty of language learning; 3) The nature of language learning; 4) Learning and communication strategies and 5) Motivation and expectations. BALLI was designed specifically with language learners in mind. It does not usually present any challenges in terms of language comprehension. However, after preliminary checking in a group of 7 DHH students it appeared that the English versions were too difficult for them to use so the text was translated into Polish by the author of this paper and back translated by two independent experts in the field. One of the questions was changed so as to suit better the studied population. Item 26 of the original scale, *It is important to practice with cassettes or tapes* was excluded from the inventory as DHH students usually do not use them. Instead of that, one more item was introduced. This new item aimed at checking the students' general belief about language usage for their education, *It is important for me to learn a foreign language as I want to be well educated*. Finally this 34-item version was used in the study, accompanied by a short personal questionnaire. Students were allocated 45 minutes to complete the test; those who used sign language as their main means of communication could have benefited from the presence of their English teachers who knew sign language as they were there to explain unknown phrases. However, none of the students asked for such support to complete the questionnaire. Finally the data was entered into SPSS for statistical analysis.



## Participants

A research sample included 90 DHH students recruited from DHH students studying at four Special Schools for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in four different Polish towns. All of them were secondary school students. Their age was between 16-21 and the mean was 17,2. The male students were slightly predominant (53%). In term of their hearing loss 10% of the students had slight hearing loss (henceforth HL, 21-40dB), following by 10% of moderate HL (41-69 dB), 15% of severe HL (70-89 dB) and 42% had profound HL (90 dB or more). They usually communicated in different ways: using Polish Sign Language (50%), Signed Polish (35%) or speech and speech reading (52%).

At secondary schools in Poland students usually learn two foreign languages, but individuals with serious hearing or speech problems can be waived from the classes of a second foreign language. It might be of a certain help for the DHH students to continue education without learning a second foreign language, but on the other hand it causes a significant disadvantage for this group. While their peers have a chance to get to know during their education two or three foreign languages and the culture of the countries where these languages are used, DHH students usually learn only one foreign language and it is most often English. It can also be illustrated by the characteristics of the study group: 97% students have been learning English and 20% attended German classes. Nine students have been learning other languages: Russian (4 persons), French (2 persons), Spanish, Italian and Latin (1 person each).

## Results

In this part BALLI questionnaire results will be presented and analyzed. BALLI items 1,2,6,10,11,16,19, 30, 31 relate to the beliefs about general foreign language aptitude and beliefs about characteristics of successful and unsuccessful language learners. It can be stated that these items address the issues of individual potential for achievements in language learning. In this study the DHH participants generally mildly support the belief about special abilities necessary for language learning. Less than half of the participants believe that some people have special language abilities and about 40% assume that it is easier for children than for adults to learn foreign languages. Consequently – in a way – they do not believe in their own potential and language abilities - 39% declare they disagree with the statement *I have special language abilities*. They also generally disagree with the statement that women possess better language abilities than men (26%). Students' responses are shown in Table1 below.

Table 1. Foreign language aptitude

No	BALLI statement	Mean	Agree	Disagree
B1	It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language	3,3	42	16
B2	Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages	3,5	48	9
B6	People from my country are good at learning foreign languages	3,0	6	4
B10	It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one	3,0	11	11
B11	People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages	2,5	3	39
B16	I have a special ability for learning foreign languages	2,5	2	39
B19	Women are better than men at learning foreign languages	2,7	4	26
B29/30	If I learn a foreign language very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job	2,9	12	15
B32/31	I would like to have friends from the country where they use the language I am learning	3,0	21	10

\*Agree – means percent of answers *I agree* and *I strongly agree*; Disagree indicates a choice of answers *I disagree* and *I strongly disagree*

Next category of items describes difficulties in foreign language learning and comprises items no 3,4,15,25 and 34. In the study only 12% of the respondents believed that a foreign language is an easy or a very easy subject. More of the respondents (19%) were instead convinced that a foreign language is a difficult or very difficult subject for them. At the same time they believed that it is really hard to learn a foreign language – they mostly answered that one needs 5 to 10 years to learn it. They admitted that it is easier for them to understand to read and write than to speak in a foreign language.

Table 2. The difficulty of language learning

No	BALLI statement	Mean	Agree	Disagree
B3	Some languages are easier to learn than others	3,2	34	12
B4	A foreign language that I learn is a very difficult language	2,5	12	19
B15	If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take them to speak the language very well: (a) less than a year (b) 1-2 years (c) 3-5 years (d) 5-10 years (e) You can't learn a language in 1 hour a day	2,4	26	1
B25	It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language	2,8	9	21
B33/34	It is easier to read and write in a foreign language than to speak and understand it	3,0	21	13

The third category includes six items describing the nature of language learning (8,12,17,23,27, 28). These concern the role of cultural knowledge and language immersion in the language learning, item 26 determines if a learner views language learning as different from other types of learning and items 17,23,27 assess the learner's conception of the focus of the language learning. The study found that DHH students believed that learning a foreign language means mainly translating from a native into a foreign language (24%), learning vocabulary (22%) and learning grammar (14%). Students are partially convinced that in the process of language learning it is valuable to get to know the culture of foreign countries (19%) and learn language in a country where it is used (24%). Table 3 shows students' responses.

*Table 3. The nature of language learning*

No	BALLI statement	Mean	Agree	Disagree
B8	It is necessary to know a lot about the culture of the country where they use the language you learn	2,9	19	24
B12	It is best to learn a foreign language in a country where it is spoken	3,0	24	14
B17	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary	3,2	22	4
B23	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar	2,8	14	15
B26/27	Learning a foreign language is different than learning other academic subjects	2,9	7	15
B27/28	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning how to translate from my native language	3,2	24	2

The fourth BALLI category comprises seven items (7,9,13,14,18,21,22), which address language and communication strategies. These items are the most directly related to the DHH students learning strategies. The participants strongly endorsed repetition as their main learning strategy (29%). Interestingly, although many of them experience severe problems in speech production, they believe that it is important to pronounce the foreign words correctly (29%). They do not see themselves as shy while communicating with foreigners (only 7% do), but at the same time not more than 13% of them like using a foreign language. Table 4 below details their responses.

*Table 4. Learning and communication strategies*

No	BALLI statement	Mean	Agree	Disagree
B7	It is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent pronunciation	3,2	28	1
B9	You shouldn't say anything in a foreign language until you can say it correctly	2,7	9	27
B13	I enjoy practicing a foreign language with native speakers of it	2,9	13	22



B14	It is o.k. to guess if you don't know a word in a foreign language	2,9	6	29
B18	It is important to repeat and practice a lot	3,2	29	6
B21	I feel timid speaking a foreign language with other people	2,7	7	23
B22	If students – beginners are permitted to make errors in a foreign language, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on	2,9	14	12

BALLI items 5,20,24,29,31 and 32 relate to motivations, expectations, desires and opportunities that the students associate with the learning of their target language. The DHH students express an intermediate level of belief that they will be able to get to know a foreign language well (28%). Still, they seem to be mildly convinced that they want to learn a foreign language well (24%) in a contemporary world, knowing a foreign language means the possibility of getting a better job (28%) and a good quality of education (19%). Students' responses are shown in Table 5 below.

*Table 5. Motivation and expectations*

No	BALLI statement	Mean	Agree	Disagree
B5	I believe that I will learn to speak a foreign language very well	3,3	28	9
B20	People from my country feel that it is important to speak a foreign language	3,1	19	4
B24	I would like to learn a foreign language so that I can get to better know people from the country where it is used	3,0	23	14
B28/29	If I learn a foreign language very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job	3,2	28	7
B30/31	I want to learn to speak a foreign language well	3,0	24	12
B31/32	I would like to have friends from the country where they use the language I learn	2,9	22	16
34	It is important for me to study a foreign language in order to be better educated	3,0	19	7

### **Estimated differences and similarities between secondary school DHH students and hearing students from Poland**

As it was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, BALLI has been used extensively to assess beliefs about language learning in different groups of students. One such study was conducted by Piechurska-Kuciel (2009) in a group of 488 hearing Polish secondary school students in one of Polish towns. The students were 17-19 years old so their age and type of school are similar to the participants of the study presented in this paper. Disparities in the number of participant (N=488 and N=90) do not allow for a detailed statistical comparison, but still the research results

can be analyzed so as to formulate some practical advice for surdo-glottodidactisc.

Generally DHH students' results show their "conservatism". If we assume that mean values 1.0-2.0 counts for low level of beliefs, 2.1-3.9 – medium and 4.0-5.0 – high level, then all their beliefs can be located within the medium interval, while the beliefs of the hearing students as described by Piechurska-Kuciel (2009) vary in their intensity and some of them reach the highest interval. Detailed analysis of the items shows that hearing students are much more certain that it is important for Polish people to know a foreign language (B20; 3.1- 4.13), every person can learn a foreign language well (B31/24: M=3.0 - M=4.1), some people have special language abilities (B2: M=3.5 – M=4.25), it is better to learn a foreign language abroad in a country where it is spoken (B12: M=3.0 – M=4.20) and a good command of a foreign language helps in getting a good job (B28: M=3.2 - M=4.25). Although DHH students are convinced that language learning is mainly about revising and repeating language material, the hearing students are much more certain as for that (B18; M=3.2; M=4.23). Interestingly, some of the results are similar. Students from both groups express similar medium level beliefs as far as the meaning of correct pronunciation (B7: M=3.2 – M=3.6) and tolerance for pronunciation mistakes are concerned (B9: M=2.7 – M=1.96). Although DHH students experience potentially more severe difficulties in communication with other people, the level of theirs and the hearing students' beliefs concerning their eagerness to communicate with people from other countries is similar and of medium intensity (B13: M=2.9 – M= 2.88). Hearing and DHH students are also similar in their doubt as far as the predominance of language abilities in women is concerned – both groups express medium level of beliefs concerning that item (B19/22: M=2.7 - M= 2.62). Table 6 presents data of chosen items of BALLI as received in these two studies.

*Table 6.* Selected results of hearing secondary school students (Piechurska-Kuciel, Bernat 2009) and D/HH students described in this paper

Item No	Item content	Mean (M) DHH students, present study	Level L-low M- medium H- high	Mean (M) Hearing students (Piechurska-Kuciel, Bernat 2009)	Level L-low M- medium H- high
2	Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages	3,5	M	4,45	H
7	It is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent pronunciation	3,2	M	3,66	M
9	You shouldn't say anything in a foreign language until you can say it correctly	2,7	M	1,96	M

12	It is best to learn a foreign language in a country where it is spoken	3,0	M	4,20	H
13	I enjoy practicing a foreign language with native speakers of it	2,9	M	2,88	M
17	The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary	3,1	M	3,59	M
18	It is important to repeat and practice a lot	3,2	M	4,23	H
19/22	Women are better than men at learning foreign languages	2,7	M	2,62	M
20	People from my country feel that it is important to speak a foreign language	3,1	M	4,13	H
26/27	Learning a foreign language is different than learning other academic subjects	2,9	M	3,72	M
28/29	If I learn a foreign language very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job	3,2	M	4,25	H
29/30	People who speak more than one language are very intelligent	2,9	M	3,30	M
31/32	I would like to have friends from the country where they use the language I learn	2,9	M	3,47	M
32/34	Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language	3,0	M	4,01	H

## Conclusion

Researchers generally agree that deeper knowledge about a learner leads to more effective teaching strategies being found. This is especially important when we consider teaching special needs students, DHH students among them. Usually language teachers have not had any training in special education. It is not easy for them to accomplish the task of teaching these special groups. Making the bulk of

specialist knowledge in the field of surdoglottodidactics more accessible is thus an important task nowadays. The research results discussed in this paper call for concrete teaching strategies.

One of the most important results is that one showing that only 1/5 of the DHH students considers a foreign language a difficult subject. This result informs that generally DHH students perceive foreign language classes as a manageable subject and are ready to learn it. They know it takes a long time to master it but almost 1/3 of the respondents admitted that they are sure they will learn a foreign language well. At the same time almost 40% of the respondents state that they do not have any language abilities and only 1% admitted that they do have a talent for language learning. It is worth mentioning that in Domagała-Zyśk's international research (2013a) conducted among 146 DHH university students, just 16% expressed the conviction that they have language abilities. This comparison shows that the participants of the study analyzed in this paper present rather low self-esteem as far as their potential is concerned. It needs to be boosted by their teachers and school counselors. Hearing impairment poses a serious barrier for language acquisition, but at the same time does not mean that a person is bereft of language abilities.

The second conclusion is that in this research students indicated their preferences for certain learning strategies. It is easier for them to read, write and understand a foreign language than to speak it. They also admitted that in order to learn a foreign language well they need a lot of repetition and translation. These results call for teaching strategies that involve work based on reading, translation and writing. At the same time an astonishingly large group of about 28% admitted that it is very important to pronounce a foreign language well. This result is ambiguous. It may mean that some DHH students also want to learn foreign pronunciation, as 52% of them already use Polish speech as their means of communication. At the same time, when a sign language user agrees with such a sentence, it may mean he/she perceives a foreign language as an unattainable goal that cannot be reached by them – and this may provoke a feeling of helplessness and resignation. This phenomenon calls both for the teachers' precise observation and for future surdoglottodidactical research.

Thirdly, it is important to notice not only differences, but also similarities of the study results with the results reported in studies among hearing subjects. The sketchy comparison shows that DHH students' results cannot be interpreted in isolation, but calls for a thorough knowledge of research results amongst hearing students. The first such comparison shows many similarities. This is an important argument for using similar approaches and methods both in general foreign language methodology and in surdo-glottodidactics. They should be, however, adjusted to the special communication needs of the DHH students. All these phenomena call for future detailed research.

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