

# Prospective EFL Teachers: What Language Learning Beliefs Do They Hold?

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**Abstract** Beliefs, a complex web of multifaceted dimensions, have a tremendous impact on the expectations learners hold and the learning actions they take. Learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) hold different preconceptions and sometimes misconceptions about language and language learning that may influence their learning experience negatively. Despite the abundance of many studies that investigated EFL learners' beliefs, there is a paucity of studies on discipline-specific learner beliefs. Therefore, this study investigates prospective EFL teachers' beliefs about EFL learning using a 40-item revised version of the beliefs about language learning inventory on a sample of 200 (75 males and 125 females) who represent the four-year program they are enrolled in and three proficiency levels (low, intermediate, and advanced). Results indicate that the beliefs of motivation are the strongest, while those associated with the difficulty of language learning are the weakest. Additionally, the findings support differences associated with gender, proficiency level, and academic year.

**Keywords** EFL learning beliefs · Language aptitude · Learner expectations · Motivation · Prospective EFL teachers · Jordanian undergraduates

## Introduction

Language learning beliefs, defined as learners' general conceptions about themselves, the nature of language learning, and the factors that influence their learning

experience (Victori and Lockhart 1995), play a decisive role in shaping the type of expectations students have and the learning actions they take (e.g., Horwitz 1987; Wenden 1987). Motivated initially by Gardner's motivational research in the early 1970s, studies have recently addressed learners' beliefs and aptitudes that describe internal autonomous properties of the mind in association with L2 attainment (Gabillon 2005). These studies confirm a tremendous effect for affective, metacognitive knowledge, and beliefs on academic learning, thinking, reasoning, and problem solving (Kardash and Scholes 1996).

Students' misconceptions and negative beliefs, which typically lead to adoption of ineffective strategies and negative attitudes toward autonomy and language learning, are associated with poor language learning (Victori and Lockhart 1995). Therefore, understanding students' expectations, dedication to excellence, and satisfaction with the language learning experience (Horwitz 1988) is quintessential towards identifying learner beliefs that relate to both successful and unsuccessful learning. It is quintessential also to develop students' self-awareness and arrive at ways that help them adapt their beliefs to facilitate their EFL learning process (Yang 1999). This understanding is of paramount significance given the very recent research findings showing that successful students are capable of using their beliefs to self-direct their own expectations and strategies (Trinder 2013).

In fact, most previous research on learner beliefs focused on learners "in native contexts" (Debreli 2012, p. 367) and targeted novice EFL learners only (e.g., Ariogul et al. 2009; Daif-Allah 2012). It also addressed a limited number of variables simultaneously; mostly gender (e.g., Bernat and Lloyd 2007; Daif-Allah 2012; Rieger 2009; Tercanlioglu 2005). However, it rarely addressed the beliefs of discipline-specific students. Accordingly, several

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calls have been made recently (e.g., Daif-Allah 2012; Trinder 2013) to investigate EFL students' beliefs and learning approaches across various contexts particularly given the "paucity of research that narrows down the tertiary educational sector further by focusing on specific university disciplines" (Trinder 2013, p. 1).

In response, the current study aims at investigating English major undergraduates' beliefs about EFL aptitudes, English difficulty, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation and expectations. It also investigates the variability in students' beliefs according to three independent variables: (a) gender, (b) proficiency level, and (c) academic year. This study is significant not only because understanding beliefs about L2 learning can help in raising awareness of how languages are learned and how they should be taught (Horwitz 2008), but also because it addresses the beliefs held by prospective EFL teachers whose views "may exert a notable impact on the educational experiences of students in tertiary contexts (cf. Özmen 2012, p. 2).

## Study Background

Research addressing beliefs has generally been situated within a theoretical framework that benefits from both a cognitive perspective and a sociocultural one. The debate between a cognitive perspective that assigns a heavy weight for students' mental representations at an individualistic level and a sociocultural one that acknowledges the contribution of circumstantial variables beyond the individual learner (Kern 1995; Roberts 1992; Trinder 2013) has produced a realization that the two perspectives are complementary, with none excluding the other. Today, there is consensus among language learning and teaching researchers that second language (L2) learners hold a variety of stable, strong, and resistant to change beliefs (Bernat and Lloyd 2007) that reflect both: (a) previous language experiences as well as (b) cultural background assumptions (Bangou et al. 2011). Not only this, but also within the same culture, context specific and stable differences (e.g., age, stage of life, learning style, educational experiences, learning circumstances, instructional levels, family, and language learning contexts) can play a role that is no less significant than that of cross-cultural differences (Horwitz 1999).

In light of this understanding, investigators (e.g., Abidin et al. 2011; Altan 2006; Bangou et al. 2011; Bernat and Lloyd 2007; Samimy and Lee 1997; Madrid et al. 1993; Mattheoudakis 2007; Özmen 2012; Peacock 1999, 2001; Sakui and Gaies 1999; Trinder 2013; Truitt 1995; Wen and Johnson 1997; Yang 1999) have addressed several factors that shape the language learning experience including EFL learners' beliefs about language learning, autonomy,

motivation, and language learning strategies. Further, investigations addressed the contribution of several independent variables such as gender, academic level, proficiency level, etc. to shaping learner beliefs. These investigations have reported ambivalent results.

Pertinent to gender, the most explored construct, some found significant differences (Abidin et al. 2011; Bacon and Finnemann 1992; Daif-Allah 2012; Mori and Gobel 2006; Siebert 2003) whereas others reported no or marginal differences (Bernat and Lloyd 2007; Fakeye 2010; Tercanlioglu 2005). Taken holistically, however, EFL context-based findings seem to suggest that whereas males tend to value and have higher self-perception in math, female students value English more and hold higher self-perception in it. Daif-Allah (2012) also found differences in English language aptitude, learning and communication, and motivation and expectations in favor of female students. Females also surpass male fellows in motivational and attitudinal aspects associated with effective language learning as they lean toward a more integrative type of motivation compared to an instrumental one (cf. Mori and Gobel 2006). At a more specific level, females use more global strategies in dealing with authentic input and interact more actively using the target language (Bacon and Finnemann 1992). Female students also favor speaking more than one language, show higher intelligence, and link speaking more than one language to higher intelligence, while males tend to show higher preference to practicing English with native speakers (Bernat and Lloyd 2007).

Pertinent to EFL students' proficiency level as well, Peacock's (1999) findings on university EFL students and pre-service EFL teachers in Hong Kong revealed that high proficiency learners disagree that English learning is a matter of learning vocabulary and grammar. In another study, Peacock's (2001) found that learners' beliefs may lead them to over-emphasize the role of vocabulary and grammar compared to other language components and influence their future progress negatively. L2 learners' beliefs, Samimy and Lee (1997) revealed, impact students' performance measured through final grades.

So are the results related to the academic level. Whereas Abu-Ghazaleh and Hijazi (2011) found positive beliefs about English learning in favor of graduate compared to undergraduate students, Abidin et al. (2011) revealed no impact for the year of study on Libyan secondary school students' attitudes towards learning English.

The above studies indicate an insufficient investigation into EFL students' beliefs about English language learning. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the areas that need further enhancement and those in need for additional effort to modify. It should also help in identifying the best strategies students should develop at a cognitive and emotional, hence behavioral level. Moreover, such

important constructs as gender and proficiency level, and academic level may be important sources of variability within student groups in shaping language learning beliefs (Horwitz 1999); thus, they should be taken into account in investigating students' beliefs about English language learning (Diab 2006), which this study does.

## Research Questions

This study aimed at answering the following two questions:

1. What do prospective EFL teachers believe about English language learning in terms of: (a) motivation and expectations; (b) foreign language aptitudes; (c) English difficulty; (d) the nature of language learning; and (e) learning and communication strategies?
2. To what extent do prospective EFL teachers' beliefs about English language learning vary according to differences in their gender, proficiency level, and academic year?

## Methods

### Participants

Two hundred (75 male, 125 female) English major undergraduates were randomly selected to participate voluntarily in this study. They represented the four academic years (freshmen, 38; sophomores, 57; junior, 45; and senior, 60). According to their perceived proficiency level, they were classified into three groups: low, intermediate, and advanced ( $N = 54, 65, \text{ and } 90$ , respectively). Based on course offerings and their corresponding student year levels, specific courses were purposefully selected to ensure that the participants represent the four-year study program at a major Jordanian public university.

### Instrument

This study used a revised version of Horwitz's (1987) beliefs about language learning inventory (BALLI), a tool that has been widely used to assess beliefs about second or foreign language learning (Altan 2006; Ariogul et al. 2009; Kunt 1997; Tanaka and Ellis 2003; Yang 1999; Siebert 2003). BALLI "can be helpful to language teacher educators by determining popular beliefs of their students who are going to be teachers in future" (Altan 2006, p. 50). The instrument is not a test since it does not offer an overall score that reflects learners' beliefs but measures opinions and aptitudes toward various language learning beliefs. It consists of 34 items among which 32 elicit responses on a Likert scale that ranges between *strongly disagree* and

*strongly agree*. While one of the remaining two questions asks about language difficulty, the other asks about the time required for learning a foreign language.

The item addressing English difficulty, which typically elicits responses on a range between very difficult and very easy, was converted into the item *English is difficult to learn*. Moreover, the question about how long it takes to speak English, which typically elicits responses that range between *less than one year* and *you cannot learn a language in 1 h per day*, was converted to an item addressing variability in learning different language skills. Seven items were also added to the survey. Among these, three were related to motivation and expectations; namely, *Learning English will help me communicate with people from other countries because English is an international language*, *English is important for higher education level, especially graduate programs*, and *I want to learn English well because it can help me access information from around the world*. These items were intended to elicit information about the type of motivation learners had; the first reflects an integrative motivation whereas the other two reflect a heuristic type. Two items were related to learning and communication strategies (*Learning English involves a lot of memorization* and *It is important to practice by listening to TV or radio programs in English*) to test one common belief about EFL learning strategies, memorization, and the extent to which students intentionally immerse themselves in the culture of the target language and practice language outside the regular classroom. The last two items were: (a) *In learning English, reading is easier than speaking and listening* and (b) *It is difficult for people in Jordan to learn English because of the difference in the alphabet system*.

To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, it was presented to a panel of five professors three of whom had expertise in EFL teaching methodology and two in psychology, particularly measurement and evaluation. Reliability was ensured through distributing the questionnaire twice (a month apart) to thirty students who were excluded from the study. Cronbach's calculated value was 0.80 which indicated that the instrument was reliable. The questionnaire had a total of forty items in its final form: nine for English learning aptitude, six for English difficulty, six for the nature of English language learning, ten for learning and communication strategies, and nine for motivations and expectations with responses elicited on a 5-point Likert scale (*strongly disagree* (1), *disagree* (2), *neutral* (3), *agree* (4), and *strongly agree* (5)).

### Data Collection and Analyses

The questionnaire was administered during class time in courses purposefully selected to ensure the comprehensive

coverage of the four academic levels. Approached in their regular classes, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and presented with a confidentiality statement. Then they were requested to sign the informed consent form and respond to the items on the survey. The time students took on the task was around 15 min. Questionnaires were collected during the same session, which guaranteed a 100 % return rate. Data analysis was carried out using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) 20. The study used both descriptive, mainly the mean and standard deviation, and inferential statistics, mainly *t* test and analysis of variance (ANOVA). When there were significant difference, Bonferroni was used in post-hoc analyses. It should be noted that whereas some studies may cluster BALLI's individual items under subcategories as motivation, aptitude, etc., BALLI was designed on the premise of providing each individual item as a stimulus for discussion and a descriptor for a dimension that relates to language learning (Horwitz 1985). Thus, in instances where items are clustered in this study, it is for the purpose of giving the reader a general idea about the students' responses only.

## Findings

Overall, the result indicated that participants held various beliefs about language learning. Among the five subcategories of BALLI, the beliefs of "motivation" ( $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = 0.34$ ) were the strongest followed by "nature of language learning" ( $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = 0.44$ ), "communication strategies" ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = 0.36$ ), "foreign language aptitude" ( $M = 3.37$ ,  $SD = 0.35$ ), and "difficulty of language learning" ( $M = 2.96$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ ). These results are comparable to those of Chang and Shen (2010) who reported EFL students' strongest agreement with motivation, followed by the nature of L2. Similarly, Rieger (2009) found that Hungarian undergraduates' least agreement was associated with language difficulty. Abu-Ghazaleh and Hijazi (2011) also found that Jordanian students believed English is an easy language to learn. Following are the detailed results pertinent to each subcategory.

### Foreign Language Aptitude

The total mean response for this domain, which aims to understand whether students believe in the existence of special abilities for EFL learning, was relatively low. The strongest beliefs (Table 1) were associated with the ideas that: (a) it is easier for children than adults to learn English; and (b) some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages such as English. Less agreement was associated with: (a) people who speak more than one

language are intelligent; (b) every one can learn to speak a foreign language; (c) it is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one; and (d) I have a special ability for learning foreign languages. Students did not report agreement with the idea that people in Jordan are good at learning foreign languages or that women are better than men at learning foreign languages. The least agreed upon was the idea that those who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages.

In discussing these results, it should be noted that whereas students' positive attitudes toward language and the language learning experience may assist the language learners' task, negative aptitude may lead to anxiety, low cognitive achievement, and negative attitudes (Victori and Lockhart 1995). The participants' strongest beliefs in this study were pertinent to the easiness of learning English by children compared to adults, which reflect an awareness of the importance of age in English learning. Students believed that some people have a special ability for learning English; they believed there is such a thing as foreign language aptitude, which is common among L2 learners (Yang 1999). However, this belief may lead to negative consequences on learners' performance, especially when they foresee themselves as poor language learners, leading them to question their potential in language learning and feel unwilling to make effort towards language learning (Horwitz 1987).

The participants in this study held relatively lower agreement with the belief that speaking more than one language is associated with intelligence. One way to interpret this result comes from an early study by Genesee (1976) who assessed the role of intelligence, measured by IQ tests, in L2 acquisition in terms of reading, language usage, listening comprehension, and interpersonal communication. Whereas intelligence correlated with performance in reading and language usage, it did not correlate with listening comprehension and interpersonal communication skills. The fact that EFL students' problems in oral communication are more severe compared to other skills might stand behind students' conception that speaking more than one foreign language does not necessarily reflect intelligence.

Less agreement was associated with students' possession of a special ability for learning English, which means they were not very optimistic about their English learning potential even though they reported a relative lower belief in the idea that people in Jordan are good at learning foreign languages. Thus, probably because they were English majors, they presumed their potential for learning English was higher than other Jordanians'. They also did not endorse women's better performance in learning English, which gives an idea about the little role gender has on

**Table 1** Descending mean responses for students' beliefs associated with "foreign language aptitude"

Item	<i>M</i>	SD
It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language	4.45	0.69
Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages such as English	4.14	0.89
People who speak more than one language are intelligent	3.69	1.07
Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language	3.68	1.07
It is easier for someone already speaking a foreign language to learn another	3.61	1.02
I have a special ability for learning foreign languages	3.07	1.16
People in Jordan are good at learning foreign languages	2.91	0.91
Women are better than men at learning foreign languages	2.86	1.18
People good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages	1.95	0.99

English learning, according to their belief. Students also strongly disagreed that those who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages, too, which goes in line with their general belief that language learning does not require a special innate ability different from that required for learning other topics.

#### English Difficulty

Among the six statements that represented this domain (Table 2), the strongest agreement was pertinent to the belief that some language skills are easier to learn than others. Students agreed that reading in English is easier than speaking and listening. However, they were either undetermined or disagreed that writing was easier than speaking and understanding English. They also disagreed that it is difficult for people in Jordan to learn English because of the difference in the alphabet system or that English is very difficult to learn. The lowest mean response was associated with the belief that speaking English is easier than understanding it when spoken by others.

Pertinent to these results, research findings suggest that students' beliefs about L2 difficulty should be realistic since both extremes on the continuum of difficulty may have negative consequences on learning. Students' strongest agreement was associated with the belief that languages vary in their level of difficulty, a result that has been supported by other findings. For example, O'Sullivan

(2008) pointed out that motivation is usually higher when trying to learn a difficult language due to the higher persistence and determination required.

Moreover, students' agreement in this study that reading in English is easier than speaking and listening reflects the belief that written communication, manifest in reading, is easier than oral communication. This result is supported by their agreement that writing is easier than speaking and listening. Students also did not approve that the differences between Arabic and English in the alphabetical system is a source of difficulty for Arab EFL learners or that English is difficult for Jordanians to learn. Students' strongest disagreement was associated with the idea that speaking English is not easier than understanding it when spoken by others. This is justifiable given that although both speaking and listening are oral skills, speaking is a productive skill that has more requirements than listening, a receptive skill.

#### The Nature of Language Learning

The way students perceived the nature of English learning was represented by six items (Table 3). Central to students was the significance and fruitfulness of learning English in an English-speaking country such as England or USA and the significance of learning new words. Relative agreement was linked to learning how to translate from Arabic as an integral part of English learning, distinction between learning English compared to other academic subjects, and

**Table 2** Mean responses for students' beliefs associated with "English difficulty"

Item	<i>M</i>	SD
Some languages are easier to learn than others	4.09	0.92
In learning English, reading is easier than speaking and listening	3.37	1.17
It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it	2.78	1.19
It is difficult for people in Jordan to learn English due to difference in alphabets	2.77	1.03
English is very difficult to learn	2.47	1.12
It is easier to speak English than to understand people say it	2.27	1.13



the importance of grammar-based learning. The least agreed with was the necessity of knowing the target culture.

Students' strong belief in the significance of learning English in a native English-speaking country reflects their eagerness to have chances for authentic use of English. They also reported strong beliefs about the importance of learning new words and practicing translation. It should be noted that students who believe in the importance of translation as a learning strategy are usually aware of the importance of new vocabulary. Calis and Dikilitas (2012) found that the students who held positive ideas in support for the use of translation in learning believed that translation helped them memorize target words, which in turn reflects a focus on formal accuracy accompanied with focus on grammatical patterns compared to fluency.

Samimy and Lee's (1997) study in the Chinese context showed that students supported the importance of accurate pronunciation, vocabulary learning, and using translation. It should be noted that Asassfeh et al. (2012) found that the shift in EFL instruction in Jordan from traditional form-focused instruction towards a communicative meaning-oriented type is still insufficient to meet students' needs and expectations.

Additionally, since most foreign language learning takes place in formal educational contexts similar to that of other subjects, students embark on foreign language learning with some preconceptions that seem not to correspond to what specialists consider as functional in L2 learning (Gabillon 2005). The results of this study reflect some healthy beliefs about language learning yet these beliefs are not devoid of misconceptions. For example, students' least agreement was associated with the importance of learning about the target culture despite the fact that, as educators agree, language is inseparable from the cultural context in which it resides and functions.

#### Learning and Communication Strategies

This domain, represented by ten items (Table 4), elicited beliefs, the strongest of which were associated with practice; practicing a lot and practicing by listening to TV or radio

programs in English elicited the highest mean responses, together with the importance of speaking English with a correct pronunciation. Relative lower agreement was pertinent to enjoy practicing English with native speakers students met, accepting the guessing strategy when encountering an unknown word, practicing with cassettes or tapes, and emphasizing memorization in learning English. There was a slight agreement with the beliefs: (a) allowing beginners to make mistakes will make the task difficult for them to speak correctly later on; (b) speaking English with native speakers is accompanied with a feeling of shyness, and speaking English should be delayed until we can say it correctly.

Students' strong belief in the importance of practice, especially in oral skills through listening to English radio or TV programs, and producing correctly pronounced English goes in line with the researcher's observations in this study that some students, especially distinguished ones, do their best in regular classes not only to produce correct pronunciation, but also serious attempts to show a native-like accent, American in particular, as a sign of distinction. Whereas, beliefs about the importance of practice reflect a healthy sign, beliefs regarding correct pronunciation usually correlate with foreign language anxiety. Horwitz et al. (1986), for example, found that anxiety correlates with feeling afraid of making mistakes, leading to reduced language production, and seeking immediate correction for pronunciation errors.

However, it cannot be denied that there is some tendency towards communicative language learning in students' beliefs despite the contextual constraints they have. Thus, relative lower agreement was associated with the enjoyment experienced in using English with native speakers, which is probably due to the limited chance for English practice with native speakers. Even with non-native speakers of English, some students have frequently expressed their fear of being misunderstood as showing off when using English on-campus outside classroom boundaries. Speaking, as Asassfeh et al. (2011) found, is the most difficult skill to those students compared to other language skills.

Whereas students endorsed guessing as a learning strategy, they held less agreement with the value of memorization in learning English. They also held a reasonable level of

**Table 3** Descending mean responses for beliefs associated with "the nature of language learning"

Item	<i>M</i>	SD
It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country such as England and USA	4.40	0.93
The most important part of learning English is learning new words	4.26	0.86
Learning how to translate from Arabic is an important part of learning English	3.93	0.95
Learning English is different from learning other academic subjects	3.79	1.00
The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning grammar	3.69	1.07
It is necessary to know the customs and the ways of life of English-speaking people	3.60	1.08

**Table 4** Descending mean responses for students' beliefs associated with "learning and communication strategies"

Item	<i>M</i>	SD
In learning English, it is important to practice a lot	4.59	0.77
In learning English, it is important to listen to TV or radio programs in English	4.26	0.86
It is important to speak English with a correct pronunciation	4.21	1.04
I enjoy practicing English with the native English speakers I meet	3.98	1.08
It is OK to guess if we don't know a word in English	3.81	0.94
In learning English, it is important to practice with cassettes or tapes	3.73	1.05
Learning English involves a lot of memorization	3.46	1.02
Beginning students should not be allowed to make mistakes in English	2.92	1.34
I feel shy speaking English with English native speakers	2.88	1.41
We should not say anything in English until we can say it correctly	2.70	1.44

self-efficacy manifest in their lower agreement with feeling shy when using English. They also disagreed that allowing beginners to make mistakes will make the task difficult for them to speak correctly later on, which reflects students' awareness that making mistakes is part of language learning. Students also reported low agreement that speaking English should be delayed until one can speak it correctly. A similar finding was reported by Abidin et al. (2011) who found that Iranian EFL students' least agreed was related to the importance of delaying speaking until one can say English correctly. This suggests that students believe it is not important to have errors while speaking, an expectation that will be unfulfilled when the teacher insists on correct speaking and may lead to students' reluctance to produce language.

#### Motivation and Expectations

Students' motivation was assessed using nine items, eliciting the highest total mean score. Among these, the strongest belief was associated with students' determination to learn to speak English well. Their strongest motive behind learning English was to communicate with people from other countries since English has become an international language, followed by the realization that learning to speak English very well will improve their opportunities for having a good job. Next was the motive shaped by English importance for higher education, especially graduate programs. However, learning English to make friends with English-speaking people, to use it as a vehicle for accessing information from around the world, and to get to know people who speak English better elicited relatively lower mean responses. The belief people in Jordan feel that it is very important to speak English elicited the lowest mean response (Table 5).

Generally, students' strong determination to learn to speak English well with the strongest motive behind learning being to communicate with people from other countries

at an era when English has become an international language reflects their awareness of the current status English occupies globally and hints to an integrative motivation. Nonetheless, it is of paramount importance to understand students' instrumental motives represented by the role English has in opening wider opportunities for better jobs as well as in pursuing higher education. These findings are in concordance with those of Shaaban and Ghaith (2003) whose study of Lebanese college students' attitudes toward L1 (Arabic), French, and English revealed that students perceived French and English as more useful than Arabic in science, technology, and business. Most Lebanese students considered English the language of future whose mastery opens wider gates for higher education and global trade and communication. Diab's (2006) study on 284 Lebanese students also revealed that "most students revealed strong instrumental motivations for learning English and agreed that it is more important to learn than French" (p.86). Similarly, Abu-Ghazaleh and Hijazi (2011) reported that Jordanian EFL learners' highest mean response on attitudes toward English was associated with the belief that learning English is useful ( $M = 4.42/5.00$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ).

Since language learning does not take place in a vacuum, variety, and strength across motivation types is not independent of students' individual experiences and communities' collective consciousness. This necessitates interpreting results about beliefs within a wider social, cultural, and economic context. For example, whereas, the participants in this study regarded English language learning as important for widening opportunities for a good job, different findings were reported by Al-Mutawa (1994) suggesting that Kuwaiti students did not regard English as beneficial for a better job and future career. The competitive job market which has demanding requirements in Jordan that include English proficiency could possibly stand behind such difference. By the same token, different educational systems assign variable weights to different languages, which impacts students' beliefs about the usefulness of learning a particular

**Table 5** Descending mean responses for students' beliefs associated with "motivation and expectations"

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I want to learn to speak English very well	4.83	0.44
Learning English, an international language, helps me communicate with people from other countries	4.68	0.61
If I learn to speak English very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job	4.62	0.67
English is important for higher education level, especially graduate programs.	4.48	0.76
I believe that I will learn to speak English well	4.36	0.87
I want to make friends with English-speaking people	4.14	0.82
I want to learn English because it helps me access information from around the world	4.10	0.82
I would like to learn English to get to know people who speak English better	3.90	0.99
People in Jordan feel that it is very important to speak English	3.84	1.08

language. Learning English in Jordan, for example, is unarguably fed by the policies higher education is adopting. For instance, as mandatory by regulations, it is impossible for a student in Jordan nowadays to be admitted to any graduate program before passing the TOEFL test or the equivalent national English proficiency (competency) test. Until very recently, passing the TOEFL test was a requirement for graduation from, rather than admission into, a graduate program in Jordan. The observation that some graduate students had already prepared their theses or dissertations but failed to pass the TOEFL after sitting it for several times seems to stand behind the shift towards the decision of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. This reality, in turn, is likely to make students assign more weight for English as a means towards the pursuit of higher academic degrees.

Jordanian students' instrumental motivation is supported in this study by their relatively lower agreement with learning English to make friendships with English speakers, to use it as a vehicle for accessing information from around the world, or to get to know people who speak English better. Moreover, there seems to be some paradox in students' responses as they report less agreement with the belief that people in Jordan feel that it is very important to speak English. This superficial paradox is contextually interpretable when realizing that in their daily communication, students rarely find themselves in need to use English, but their anticipations about future careers and education suggest a need for it. In support for this argument, it should be noted that Abu-Ghazaleh and Hijazi (2011) study on Jordanian graduate and undergraduate students revealed that "there are statistically significant differences in favor of the science group [since] English is the language of instruction at the College of Science but not at the College of Arts" (p. 635). This is likely to lead students to the misconception that learning English is comparable to learning Mathematics or Physics, rather than to learning *a language*.

## The Impact of Demographics

### Gender

Among the 40 survey items, *t* test results (Table 6) showed that seven items yielded significant differences associated with gender. Two were related to motivation, two to aptitudes toward EFL learning, and three to learning and communication strategies. Thus, females ( $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) had a stronger desire than males ( $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ) to learn English, so that they can get to know people who speak English better,  $F(198) = 10.81$ ,  $p = 0.03$ . Females ( $M = 4.54$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ) also assigned a higher level of importance than males ( $M = 4.04$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ) to learning English for higher education, especially graduate programs,  $F(198) = 10.67$ ,  $p = 0.03$ .

In terms of aptitudes toward English learning, females ( $M = 1.86$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ) expressed stronger disagreement than males ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) that those who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages,  $F(198) = 11.38$ ,  $p = 0.001$ . Females ( $M = 3.76$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ) also held a stronger belief compared to males ( $M = 3.21$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ) about the connection between speaking more than one language and intelligence,  $F(198) = 0.843$ ,  $p = 0.02$ . However, in association with learning and communication strategies, male students ( $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 0.741$ ) held a stronger belief than females ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ) that learning English involves a lot of memorization,  $F(198) = 2.06$ ,  $p = 0.02$ , yet females ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ) reported greater willingness than males ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ) for guessing when one does not know a word in English.  $F(198) = 1.33$ ,  $p = 0.001$ . Females ( $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) also assigned a higher level of importance than males ( $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ) for practicing English with cassettes or tapes,  $F(198) = 8.58$ ,  $p = 0.04$ .

These results point to the general consensus that female students surpass male partners in arts and language learning. Several studies (e.g., Asassfeh et al. 2011) reported



**Table 6** Results of independent samples *t* test for beliefs by gender

	<i>t</i> test for equality of means						
	<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean diff.	Std. error diff.	95 % conf. interval of the diff.	
						Lower	Upper
People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages	3.89	198	0.000	0.81	0.21	0.34	1.22
People speaking more than one language are intelligent	-2.38	198	0.018	-0.55	0.23	-1.00	-0.01
It is OK to guess if we don't know a word in English	-5.60	198	0.000	-1.07	0.19	-1.44	-0.69
In learning English, it is important to practice with cassettes or tapes	1.98	198	0.049	0.45	0.23	0.00	0.90
Learning English involves a lot of memorization	2.14	198	0.034	0.47	0.22	0.04	0.91
I would like to learn English so that I can get to know people who speak English better	-2.11	198	0.036	-0.46	0.22	-0.88	-0.03
English is important for higher education level, especially graduate programs	-3.09	198	0.002	-0.50	0.16	-0.82	-0.18

that female students have higher competence in language arts, suggesting that females have higher curiosity and enjoyment scores than males, who tend to prefer challenge. A study on 13,000 Hungarian students showed that females are generally more motivated to learn a foreign language (Carreira 2011).

The results of this study suggest that whenever there were differences associated with gender, female students' beliefs tended to be in favor of language learning whether in motivation, aptitudes toward EFL learning, or learning and communication strategies manifest in integrativeness as well as in the value assigned for English towards the pursuit of higher academic degrees. These results go in line with the findings of Mori and Gobel (2006) who investigated the motivational aspects of 453 second-year non-English majors and found a significant difference in favor of female students in integrativeness. Mori and Gobel (2006) cite several studies in both ESL and EFL settings that indicate greater motivation and more positive attitudes in favor of females.

Females in the current study also strongly agreed that being good at mathematics does not guarantee excellence in English learning which requires intelligence. In terms of learning strategies as well, females approved such strategies as guessing word meaning from context and practicing English with cassettes or tapes. Males, on the other hand, held stronger beliefs about memorization as a learning strategy.

Whereas, some studies (e.g., Bidin et al. 2009) found no significant differences in language learning motivational variables associated with gender, other studies (Chang and Shen 2010) found that female learners generally had stronger overall beliefs about language learning. For example, Diab (2006) found females were better language learners and held significantly higher confidence in their speaking ability. Rnyei and Clement (2001, cited in Mori

and Gobel 2006) found that female students surpassed males in most of the target languages in their beliefs about the seven motivational dimensions (direct contact with L2 speakers, instrumentality, integrativeness, vitality of L2 community, and cultural interest). Asassfeh et al. (2011) also found that female Jordanian undergraduates reported significantly lower perceived difficulty in EFL learning at listening, speaking, and writing, with a relative though insignificant difficulty that extends to reading as well. Females encountered lower difficulty in familiarizing themselves with the many words native speakers of English use, distinguishing the English consonants that do not exist in Arabic and the English vowels that are different from Arabic ones, using grammatically correct language, and getting ideas through to the listeners, and finding the appropriate word that fits the context.

#### Proficiency Level

It should be recalled that students were categorized according to their reported proficiency level into three groups: low, intermediate, and advanced. Variability in the proficiency level was analyzed using ANOVA with results suggesting significant differences pertinent to eight items (Table 7); two relate to English learning aptitude, two to the nature of English learning, two to learning and communication strategies, and one to each of motivation and expectations and English difficulty. Notably, advanced proficiency students were involved as a source of difference in each instance of difference. Thus, the advanced proficiency group ( $M = 4.72$ ,  $SD = 0.46$ ) held a stronger belief that it is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language than the intermediate proficiency group ( $M = 4.35$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ) and stronger confidence ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) in having a special ability for learning English compared to the low ( $M = 2.58$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ) and

intermediate ( $M = 3.07$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) proficiency groups. In terms of the nature of English learning as well, compared to low ( $M = 3.97$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ) and intermediate ( $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ) proficiency groups, they reported the lowest belief ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) in the importance of learning grammar as the most central part of learning English, yet they ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.120$ ) expressed a stronger belief in the significance of learning how to translate from Arabic into English as a learning strategy compared to intermediate proficiency students ( $M = 4.04$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ).

With pertinence to English learning and communication strategies, advanced students ( $M = 4.41$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ) also expressed higher enjoyment in practicing English with the native English speakers they meet than both low ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ) and intermediate ( $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) proficiency groups and they reported less shyness ( $M = 2.87$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ) in speaking English with English native speakers compared to low ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ) and intermediate ( $M = 2.33$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ) groups. In terms of motivation, advanced proficiency students ( $M = 4.85$ ,  $SD = 0.43$ ) held a firmer belief in the idea that they will learn to speak English well in relation to low ( $M = 4.00$ ,

$SD = 0.84$ ) and intermediate ( $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ) proficiency colleagues. However, in terms of difficulty, they reported less agreement ( $M = 3.03$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) that reading English is easier than speaking and listening to it than did the low proficiency group ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ).

Noticeably, the advanced proficiency group was involved in almost all between-group differences. This group held a stronger belief in child language learning and confidence in their English learning ability. They did not assign a heavy weight for learning grammar, but acknowledged translation from L1 into L2 as a learning strategy. Their preference to practicing English with the native English speakers without feeling shy, and their level of assurance that they will learn to speak English well was higher. They also considered speaking to be easier than reading. Comparable findings were reported by other scholars (e.g., Mori 1999; Peacock 2001; Samimy and Lee 1997; Vibulphol 2004). For example, Peacock (2001) found that unlike low-proficiency EFL learners, the high-proficiency group disagreed that learning English was represented primarily by learning grammar. Mori (1999) found that the American college students who performed well in learning Japanese considered it an easy language, did not believe in a fixed innate ability for L2

**Table 7** Results of ANOVA for beliefs by proficiency level

		Sum of squares	df	mean square	<i>F</i>	Sig.
It is easier for children to learn a FL	Between	4.135	2	2.068	4.458	0.013
	Within	91.365	197	0.464		
	Total	95.500	199			
I have a special ability for learning FLs	Between	17.723	2	8.862	7.003	0.001
	Within	249.297	197	1.265		
	Total	267.020	199			
I will learn to speak English well	Between	14.369	2	7.184	10.429	0.000
	Within	135.711	197	0.689		
	Total	150.080	199			
The most important part of learning a FL is learning grammar	Between	15.271	2	7.636	7.125	0.001
	Within	211.124	197	1.072		
	Total	226.395	199			
I enjoy practicing English with the native speakers I meet	Between	9.148	2	4.574	4.081	0.018
	Within	220.772	197	1.121		
	Total	229.920	199			
I feel shy speaking English with native speakers	Between	23.895	2	11.947	6.362	0.002
	Within	369.980	197	1.878		
	Total	393.875	199			
English is very difficult to learn	Between	10.859	2	5.429	4.514	0.012
	Within	236.961	197	1.203		
	Total	247.820	199			
Reading English is easier than speaking, and listening to, it	Between	9.735	2	4.868	3.672	0.027
	Within	261.140	197	1.326		
	Total	270.875	199			

learning. By the same token, Samimy and Lee (1997) found that high-performance American college students learning Chinese agreed that L2 is best learned in a native-speaking social context, enjoyed speaking L2 with native speakers, and believed they had a special ability in L2 learning. They also wanted to learn to speak L2 very well and believed speaking L2 was easier than understanding it.

#### Academic Year

Compared to other demographic variables, students' year of study (Table 8) was the most influential, with eleven items yielding significant differences among which four were related to English difficulty, two to each of: (a) the nature of EFL learning; (b) learning and communication strategies; and (c) foreign language aptitude. One further item was associated with students' motivation and expectations.

Freshmen, post-hoc analysis indicated, were involved in almost all between-group differences. Pertinent to English difficulty, they reported stronger agreement that, (a) understanding spoken English is more difficult than speaking it ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ); (b) it is difficult for people in Jordan to learn English because of the difference in the alphabet system ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ); (c) English is very difficult to learn; and (d) reading is easier than speaking and listening ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ ). In terms of the nature of EFL learning, freshmen reported the least agreement ( $M = 1.67$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ) that it is necessary to know the customs, the cultures, and the ways of life of English speakers and that translation is importance for learning English. In association with the learning and communication strategies as well, freshmen reported the strongest agreement ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ) that learning English involves a lot of memorization. They also reported the least agreement ( $M = 1.83$ ,  $SD = 0.40$ ) that, (a) people in Jordan are good at learning foreign languages; (b) people who speak more than one language are intelligent ( $M = 4.67$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ); and (c) it is important to speak English with a correct pronunciation ( $M = 4.67$ ,  $SD = 0.591$ ).

These findings suggest that students' transition from school to university is critical in altering their beliefs. First year students who had just finished their school held beliefs that differ significantly in contrast to those held by sophomore, junior, and senior colleagues. More importantly, the beliefs they have inherited from their schools (e.g., culturally decontextualized language learning, strong belief in memorization and translation) were demotivating for language learning. In agreement with the findings of other studies (e.g., Özmen 2012), the findings of the current study suggest that students' learning experience at the university level is helpful in reshaping their beliefs in a positive way.

#### Implications

This study used a 40-item revised version of BALLI (Horwitz 1987) to expose the language learning beliefs held by undergraduate prospective teachers of English and explore differences associated with gender, proficiency level, and academic year. Overall, the findings indicate that the study participants are strongly motivated to learn English, yet their motivation leans more toward an instrumental compared to an integrative type. They also believe in the existence of language aptitude but believe they do not have a special ability to learn English. Their beliefs about the easiness of English are exaggerated, and those about the difficulty of learning English posed by Arabic–English alphabet difference indicate underestimation of this difference. Pertinent to the nature of language learning, students have some misconceptions as they assign a heavy weight for the role of translation and grammar-based instruction, but a lower weight for learning about the target culture.

Additionally, the findings of this study illustrate the contribution of individual differences to students' beliefs. Students differ in their beliefs according to gender (seven items) in favor of female students, proficiency level (eight items) in favor of efficient learning by the advanced proficiency students, and academic year (11 items) in favor of students who have spent a longer period at the university.

Given the above findings, the fact that beliefs constitute a complex web of internal cognitive and emotional factors that function within a social context should invite EFL educators to address the importance of beliefs explicitly. Giving students the chance to reflect on their beliefs, especially those associated with communication strategies, and come to understand how these beliefs are shaped is very essential so that they can reconstruct those beliefs that go against EFL learning in a way that serves rather than hinders or impedes the EFL learning experience. There seems to be little attention directed to the philosophy behind teaching foreign languages. And the general EFL teaching practice that takes for granted that learners will develop positive beliefs about EFL language and its learning strategies may in many cases disqualify.

Moreover, the intersection between a cognitive perspective and a sociocultural perspective in addressing students' beliefs—that constitute a complex web of internal cognitive and emotional factors that function within a social context—should invite EFL educators to address the importance of beliefs explicitly. As in many other EFL settings, Jordanian students' exposure to authentic communication in English is limited, precipitating an encounter to a significant number of challenges and difficulties in English learning. Other than the oral communication that might incidentally take place when running into an English

**Table 8** Results of ANOVA for beliefs by academic level

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	Sig.
It is easier to speak English than to understand people say it	Between	24.956	3	8.319	7.137	0.000
	Within	228.464	196	1.166		
	Total	253.420	199			
It is difficult for people in Jordan to learn English because of the difference in the alphabet system	Between	12.878	3	4.293	4.238	0.006
	Within	198.542	196	1.013		
	Total	211.420	199			
English is very difficult to learn	Between	14.669	3	4.890	4.111	0.007
	Within	233.151	196	1.190		
	Total	247.820	199			
In learning English, reading is easier than speaking and listening	Between	25.099	3	8.366	6.672	0.000
	Within	245.776	196	1.254		
	Total	270.875	199			
It is necessary to know English speakers' customs and ways of life	Between	9.766	3	3.255	2.900	0.036
	Within	220.029	196	1.123		
	Total	229.795	199			
Learning how to translate from Arabic is an important part of learning English	Between	9.807	3	3.269	3.806	0.011
	Within	168.348	196	0.859		
	Total	178.155	199			
It is important to speak English with a correct pronunciation	Between	14.132	3	4.711	4.638	0.004
	Within	199.048	196	1.016		
	Total	213.180	199			
Learning English involves a lot of memorization	Between	10.108	3	3.369	3.342	0.020
	Within	197.572	196	1.008		
	Total	207.680	199			
People in Jordan are good at learning foreign languages	Between	9.042	3	3.014	3.754	0.012
	Within	157.338	196	0.803		
	Total	166.380	199			
People who speak more than one language are intelligent	Between	8.934	3	2.978	2.679	0.048
	Within	217.846	196	1.111		
	Total	226.780	199			
I want to make friends with English-speaking people	Between	5.798	3	1.933	3.000	0.032
	Within	126.282	196	0.644		
	Total	132.080	199			

native speaker tourist and oral or written communication when communicating with an English native speaker using the Internet, students have to find their own way for developing their communicative competence. An effective English teacher, given this scenario, is the major if not the only source of English language input and output assessment. In this and similar contexts, this implies that the EFL teacher be equipped with not only the knowledge and skills deemed important for helping students develop and improve their competence, but also the positive attitudes and beliefs about students, the target language (English) and its speakers, and the learning/teaching process. It would be illogical to assume, for instance, that a teacher

who believes the major component of language is grammar and the ultimate goal of language learning is accurate production spend the time carrying out meaning-oriented interactive activities, for behaviors typically mirror the assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs one holds.

Despite the commonality in the conditions and circumstantial variables EFL students undergo, one limitation to this study is the sample size, which might not be adequate enough to make generalizations about all EFL prospective teachers in Jordan. One recommendation with this in mind is conducting further research at a larger number of students. Additionally, future research may compare and contrast the language learning beliefs held by prospective

EFL teachers who receive education courses and those who do not. Last but not least, longitudinal research that documents the transition from school to university education can be very beneficial for informed interventions pertinent to students' beliefs about language learning.

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