

Investigating EFL Master Learners' Beliefs..... By Dr Touati Mourad

**Investigating EFL Master Learners' Beliefs about Formal  
Research and Academic Writing**

**The Case of the Department of English at M'sila University**

**By Dr Touati Mourad M'sila University**

**Abstract**

This paper reports on an investigation of EFL Master Learners' Beliefs about formal research and academic writing, which remain partially unexplored in our learning institutions. The survey instrument used in collecting data was adapted from 'Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory' (Horwitz 1987). Through the 24 items survey we have intended to identify learners' beliefs about formal research and academic writing in order to provide some valuable information for syllabus designers and EFL practitioners about the links between learners' aptitude, motivation and expectations at formal research and academic writing and their beliefs. Moreover, the data provided insights on learners' beliefs about the nature of formal research and academic writing and how to conduct it, the difficulties they often face and the strategies they used in order to overcome the hindrances while carrying out their research assignments. The results indicated that because of the difficulties faced and the relative failure of implementing strategies, students' motivation and expectations to better achieve at research remained low. It was concluded that it is very indispensable for teachers to consider respondents' reflections while teaching and monitoring.

**Key words:** Master learners', beliefs, formal research

**L**anguage educators have always recognized that foreign language learners bring to the classroom a complex set of attitudes, experiences, expectations, and beliefs (Benson 1991, Nyikos & Oxford 1993). Researchers have always investigated learners' beliefs about language learning in an attempt to account for learners' individuals' differences, learning potential, analytical and acritical appraisal of knowledge and teaching implications. There is a growing body of evidence which suggests that beliefs play an essential role in learning experience and determine one's achievements (Ryan, 1984, Sakui & Gaies 1999).

Generally speaking beliefs about language learning consist of 'assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning and the nature of language teaching' (Victori & Lockhart 1995). These beliefs vary in degrees of validity and are always consistent with foreign language scholars' opinions, experiments, selected samples and targeted objectives.

Not only former and current language learning experiences have ample influence, whether negative or positive, on learners' beliefs, but also on cultural backgrounds, and individual characteristics, learning styles and personality traits, that shape learners' attitudes towards foreign language learning.

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Learning behaviour is always subject of influence on learners' attitudes, perceptions and beliefs that have been shaped before being engaged in learning English as a foreign language and especially when it comes to an advanced level. The impetus of this study is not to determine particularly EFL masters learners' beliefs about English language learning, but to investigate these learners' beliefs with relation to formal research and academic writing.

On the one hand, being a subject that learners have taken for nine semesters and had served them in developing their linguistic, knowledge and critical outcomes. On the other one, because such a learning experience should culminate by the end of their studies by a submission of dissertation as a partial fulfilment for the requirement of a Master degree in English language, literature and civilisation. Moreover, this investigation will unveil the nature of these beliefs ; whether they are positive and realistic, and their consistency with learners' motivation and expectations.

### **The Scope of the Research**

Generally, studies related to beliefs about language learning are coined with Horwitz and the development of **BALLI** and his investigations on students, teachers and pre-service teachers (1983, 1985, 1987, and 1988). His studies paved the way to small and large scale studies and researchers enriched literature on both teachers' and learners' beliefs with relation to different. However, when it comes to investigating EFL learners' abilities, motivation and expectations and realistic beliefs about formal research and academic writing, its nature, difficulties and strategies used to overcome the hindrances daily encountered accounts on classroom practical research is so scarce.

### **Aims**

The purpose of this study was to identify and analyze EFL Master students's beliefs about formal research and academic writing at the department of English language at M'sila University. We tried to locate these beliefs using an inventory adapted from BALLI's (beliefs About Language Learning Inventory. Identification of these beliefs and reflections and their potential impact on students' ability would help us gather information while conducting our investigation, to present this data into constructed

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meaning and to provide valuable insights for teachers to help them in course and lesson design in formal research and academic writing.

Moreover, we have intended to discover whether students' motivation and expectations for well achieving at formal research is the outcome of their beliefs, and we attempted to find correlation between students' aptitude and their expectations and motivation.

**BALLI** : Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory

### **Methodology**

The study used a survey questionnaire to obtain relevant information from participants. Self-report questionnaires though sometimes more complex are thought to be more reliable, for they combine the opportunity for a flexible response with the ability to determine frequencies, correlations and other forms of quantitative analysis. They afford the researcher the freedom to fuse measurement with opinion, quantity and quality (Cohen, Manion & Morrison .2005). The survey was developed to assess students' opinions on a variety of issues and controversies related to English as a foreign language and practically at formal research and academic writing as a basic course in their curriculum that begins with studying basic skills, develops through practice to reasonably produce better academic essays, projects, reasearch articles, and culminates with dissertations or theses (Lyons& Heasley2006).

Eventually, students would have been able to systematically investigate into and study of material resources...in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions (Thompson, 1996). The assessment targeted five major areas : 1)-aptitude at formal research and academic writing ; 2) - the nature of formal research ; 3) - the difficulty in conducting formal research ;4) –formal research strategies ; 5)- motivation and expectations.

### **Context of the Research**

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This investigation set out to discover EFL Master Learners' beliefs about formal research and academic writing of a group of 07 male and 25 female learners aged

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
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between 23 and 29 with an average age of 23.28 years. The study participants have all experienced a period of nine semesters in EFL learning; six semesters as undergraduates and three semesters as Master learners. They were required to undertake various courses in general English courses in order to develop competencies in English language, literature, civilisation, and academic research. Their English proficiency levels are ranged on the Algerian Standards of Higher Education between A level and C level.

**Data Analysis & Findings**

BAFR items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, relate to the general existence of specialized abilities for formal research and beliefs about the characteristics of successful and unsuccessful learners at research. Thus, these items address the issue of individual potential for achievement in English as a foreign language learning and particularly at formal research. In this study, the respondents generally endorsed the concept of special abilities for formal research, Some (56.24%) either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: “ *EFL Students who are good at studies are good at research* ”, but only (18.75%) strongly agreed and (18.75 %) agreed « *that they have outstanding abilities to apply any approach along their research works* ». However, (59.37% ) of respondents did believe that « *EFL Master students who had learnt about some research works in other languages can carry out their research works easily* ». Table 1 below shows students' responses.

*Table 1 Aptitude at formal research and academic writing*

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\* Note: 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree.

**The Difficulty in conducting research**

BAFR items 7,8and 9 concern the general difficulty in conducting research and the investigation about the easiness of research in EFL in comparison with other academic

1	It is quite easy for any EFL Master student to conduct some kinds of research.	12.50%	18.75%	21.87%	<b>34.37%</b>	12.50%
2	Some EFL students have outstanding abilities to apply any approach along their research works.	15.62%	21.87%	<b>25.00%</b>	18.75%	18.75%
3	All EFL group mates are good at manipulating research variables.	18.75%	15.62%	<b>28.12%</b>	12.50%	25.00%
4	EFL Master students who had learnt about some research works in other languages can carry out their research works easily.	09.37%	12.50%	15.62%	<b>37.50%</b>	25.00%
5	EFL Students with some scientific traits and backgrounds tend to be better young researchers.	21.87%	<b>28.12%</b>	21.87%	21.87%	06.25%
6	EFL Students who are good at studies are good at research.	<b>34.37%</b>	21.87%	18.75%	9.37%	15.62%

fields. Moreover, learners are always exposed to a great deal of theoretical information and through the statements we attempted to unveil learner's ability when it comes to follow up assignments and to apply what they have learnt into practice. Collecting data is a basic step in conducting research, but what is more important is using this data in providing reasonable analysis and interpretation.

In this study, (37.50%)of respondents were neutral and provided no agreement or disagreement with the statement,*As far as research is concerned EFL research is easier than others.* Additionally, (62.50%) strongly agree or agree *that learning about research is always easier than doing it.* Moreover, the study provided information about data collection, interpretation and analysis, (68.75%) agree or strongly agree with the statement,*Collecting data is much more easier than interpreting and analyzing it.* Table 2 below shows students' responses.

**Table 2** *The difficulty in conducting research.*

**The Nature of formal research**

BAFR items 10, 11, 12, and 13 include a broad range of issues related to the nature of formal research. Item 10 concerns learners' investment in learning about the research topic in order to manipulate it with ease. Item 11 and 12 determine if the learner

7	As far as research is concerned EFL research is easier than others.	06.25%	06.25%	<b>37.50%</b>	28.12%	21.87%
8	Learning about research is always easier than doing it.	<b>37.50%</b>	25.00%	25.00%	09.37%	03.12%
9	Collecting data is much easier than interpreting and analyzing it.	31.25%	<b>37.50%</b>	18.75%	06.25%	09.37%

gives importance to learning about concepts, theories and approaches to conduct research easily. Item 13 relates learners' views on research methodology learning in comparison with other learning subjects. Interestingly, we found that (62.49%) of respondents believed that, *it is very basic to learn a lot about the research topic to be able to manipulate it easily*, and that (42.87%) disagree or strongly disagree with the idea that *learning about all research theories and approaches is very useful to conduct research*. Furthermore, 53.12% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with BAFR item 13, which stated that *“Learning research methodology is more difficult than learning other academic subjects*. Students' responses are shown in Table 3 below.

**Table 3** The nature of formal research

10	It is very basic to learn a lot about the research topic to be able to manipulate it easily.	<b>34.37%</b>	28.12%	21.87%	06.25%	09.37%
11	The most important part in research is to know a lot of concepts.	21.87%	18.75%	12.50%	<b>28.12%</b>	18.75%
12	Learning about all research theories and approaches is very useful to conduct research.	18.75%	15.62%	18.75%	<b>25.00%</b>	21.87%
13	Learning research methodology is more difficult than learning other academic subjects.	<b>28.12%</b>	25.00%	06.25%	18.75%	21.87%

**Research Strategies**

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BAFR items 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, and 19 address research strategies and are probably the most directly related to a student's actual language learning research practices. Items 15 and 16 refer to collaborative work and interaction with peers, and item 14 cognitive readiness before engaging in research assignments, Item 17 concerns learners' psychological states whenever they are given some research works, Item 18 is related to mistakes tolerance while doing some mini-projects and if it negatively impacts students achievements while carrying out their final dissertations, and Item 20 concerns learners' imitation of other research works. Some (59.37% ) of respondents enjoyed doing research work with peers, and ( 75.00%) of respondents did not believe that *If EFL Master students are permitted to make some mistakes in research mini-projects it will negatively impact their achievements at the requirements of the degree.*

Moreover, (65.62%) of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that, *"It is very essential to imitate research works formerly discussed and adopt them"*. Table 4 below

shows students' responses.

**Table 4** *Research strategies.*

14	I shouldn't attempt any research unless I know totally what to do.	28.12%	<b>34.37%</b>	09.37%	12.50%	15.62%
15	I enjoy doing research works with peers.	<b>34.37%</b>	25.00%	06.25%	18.75%	15.62%
16	It is important to know about peers' research achievements.	<b>40.62%</b>	34.37%	09.37%	06.25%	09.37%
17	I feel disappointed whenever I am given a research assignement.	<b>31.25%</b>	28.12%	3.12%	09.37%	28.12%
18	If EFL Master students are permitted to make some mistakes in research mini-projects it will negatively impact their achievements at the requirements of the degree	09.37%	06.25%	09.37%	<b>43.75%</b>	31.25%
19	It is very essential to imitate research works formerly discussed and adopt them.	28.12%	<b>37.50%</b>	03.12%	09.37%	21.87%

***Motivations and Expectations***

BAFR items 20, 21, 22, and 23 concern, confidence, desires and expectations about learners' achievements and what they foresee for their future. Items 20 and 22 relate students' beliefs about their ability to carry out any type of research assignments with respect to deadlines. However, Items 23 concerns students' self- confidence not only in succeeding at research, but to reflect on their learning successfully. Meanwhile, Items 21

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and 24 concerns learners' expectations about developing the traits of future researcher and how many of them do expect themselves to be a great future researcher.

Data revealed that only (43.75%) of respondents believed that they can fulfill their research work before deadlines. Moreover, (53.12%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, "I feel that I have a strong flair to carry out research activities at any time". Unexpectedly, less than a fifth of the respondents (i.e), (18.75%) do expect themselves to be outstanding researchers' someday. Table 5 below shows students' responses.

**Table 5 Motivations and expectations.**

20	As an EFL student I can fulfill my research work before deadlines.	18.75%	<b>25.00%</b>	06.25%	25.00%	28.12%
21	It is obvious that EFL Master students should develop the traits of future researchers.	<b>25.00%</b>	15.62%	06.25%	12.50%	34.37%
22	I feel that I have a strong flair to carry out research activities at any time.	18.75%	25.00%	03.12%	<b>37.50%</b>	15.62%
23	As an EFL Master student, I am sure that I can reflect on my learning and succeed at my research work .	15.62%	15.62%	06.25%	15.62%	<b>34.37%</b>
24	I would like to be an outstanding researcher	12.50%	06.25%	25.00%	15.62%	<b>34.37%</b>

Furthermore, (53.12%) of the respondents believe that they are not able to carry out their research works whenever required to do so. The results converged with those

**Discussion & Interpretation**

Firstly, the analysis of findings has shown that despite the respondents' relative experience and practice with formal research and academic writing ,they still hold a number of 'negative' beliefs, they remain quite pessimistic about their future language learning and achievements at formal research and academic writing. They exhibit relatively low levels of motivation. For example, though working to deadlines is always a targeted behaviour by both the respondents and their teachers,(53.12%) believe that they are not able to fulfill their research works before deadlines and some (06.25%) neither expresses agreement or disagreement , hence (69.37%) of the respondents' have not yet developed a perseverant behaviour to do their works on time..



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reached with **Item 1** where (46, 87%) of the learners disagree or strongly disagree with the statement, *It is quite easy for any EFL Master student to conduct some kinds of research*; added to a (21.87%) of them who provided neither agreement nor disagreement. Consequently, (69.74%) of the respondents do hold negative beliefs about their aptitude hence, they showed little motivation and low expectations about their achievements.

It was revealed that of all the respondents' , only ( 18.75%) hold positive beliefs and have agreed or strongly agreed with the BAFR **Item 24** , *I would like to be an outstanding researcher* , such a ratio converge with respondents' outlooks on formal research and academic writing ( 12.50%) do agree or strongly agree with the statement *as far as research is concerned EFL research is easier than others*.

Horwitz (1988) argues that the concept of foreign language learning can be the source of negative outlook on language learning.

Students who believe that some people are unable - or less able - to learn a second language can lead to negative expectations about their own capability. Thus, students who feel that they personally lack some capacity necessary to learn and to achieve at formal research and academic writing probably doubt their own ability as language learners and do not expect to do well in language study. This study, unfortunately, supports this view.

Secondly, data revealed that students held a number of positive beliefs. Some reported beliefs which seem rather interesting from a pedagogical point of view, are the beliefs expressed in **Item 14**, *I shouldn't attempt any research unless I know totally what to do*, **Item 15** *I enjoy doing research works with peers* and **Item 16** *It is important to know about peers' research achievements*, respectively some (62.49% ) , (59.37%) and (75.00%) agree or strongly agree with the content of the statements. The importance of in-depth knowledge about research topic for learners' is quasi-fundamental and cooperative work seem to be valued by Master EFL learners at formal research and such type of learning had been often undermined by language educators.

Hence , if we establish links between learners' aptitude expressed in the statement , all EFL group mates are good at manipulating research variables , where (65.62%) of them expressed negative beliefs and ( 68.75%) of them found difficulties in interpreting and analyzing data with relation to ( 59.37%) of them who views research methodology credit as a very difficult one compared with other learning subjects. Moreover, if we

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consider the (59.37%) who are disappointed whenever given research assignments and the (46, 78%) who have no flair to conduct research activities and (03.12%) who were neutral, then we can establish a link between learners' beliefs and their motivation.

**Pedagogical Implications**

Researchers who have investigated learners' beliefs have repeatedly emphasized the value of insights gained. Teachers can draw on findings to facilitate more effective instructional planning and implementation, greater consideration for choice of teaching methods and materials, lesson content and sequence. Moreover, the knowledge of students' beliefs will make it possible for teachers to create a mode of instruction in which students' needs and goals are satisfied (Sakui & Gaies 1999). For example, the respondents in this survey strongly endorsed the idea of collaborative learning and eagerness to know about peers' achievements.

In fact, 75% had reported knowing about peers' achievements and (59.37%) favoured cooperative work. Equipped with this knowledge, the teacher of such learners could ensure that the curriculum, lesson planning and learning modes meet the perceived needs and expectations of the learners. However, if the degree of importance placed upon one aspect of language learning (such as research ) is unrealistically high, the teacher could discuss its relative importance compared with other aspects of language learning and negotiate its weight in the course with his/her class. This will provide for a more learner-centred approach to formal research teaching, where different learning styles are accommodated and the curriculum is negotiated.

It is estimated that when language classes fail to meet student expectations, students can lose confidence in the instructional approach and their ultimate achievement can be limited (Horwitz 1987). Consequently, it will take too much time and energy to investigate negative beliefs and then to foster positive beliefs that lead to effective learning strategy use and minimizing negative beliefs that inhibit learning. Teachers can remove students' misconceptions by providing knowledge and training on formal research strategies with adequate follow up assignments and learning modes that develop learners' competencies.

Finally, it is important that teachers' methodologies should be compatible consistent with learner beliefs. As Horwitz (1988) put it: 'knowledge of the relationship of

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learners' beliefs about language learning and strategy use should provide teachers with better understanding of the students' expectation of, commitment to, success in, and satisfaction with their language classes'.

Possessing clear insights on learners' aptitude, and providing learners' with enough knowledge and practice about the nature of formal research and how to conduct it, minimizing hindrances for learners through adequate strategy use to meet students' expectations can lead to a more effective learning and better achievement at formal research. Thus, it is quite urgent to consider any negative belief that affect learning behaviour .therefore, continuous and empirical research of language classroom is always required to maintain foreign language achievement.

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Aptitude at research	N 32	1	2	3	4	5
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1	It is quite easy for any EFL Master student to conduct some kinds of research.	4	6	7	11	4
2	Some EFL students have outstanding abilities to apply any approach along their research works.	5	7	8	6	6
3	All EFL group mates are good at manipulating research variables.	6	5	9	4	8
4	EFL Master students who had learnt about some research works in other languages can carry out their research works easily.	3	4	5	12	8
5	EFL Students with some scientific traits and backgrounds tend to be better young researchers.	7	9	7	7	2
6	EFL Students who are good at studies are good at research.	11	7	6	3	5
<b>The Difficulty in conducting research</b>						
7	As far as research is concerned EFL research is easier than others.	2	2	12	9	7
8	Learning about research is always easier than doing it.	12	8	8	3	1
9	Collecting data is much more easier than interpreting and analyzing it.	10	12	6	2	2
<b>The Nature of conducting research</b>						
10	It is very basic to learn a lot about the research topic to be able to manipulate it easily.	11	9	7	2	3
11	The most important part in research is to know a lot of concepts.	7	6	4	9	6
12	Learning about all research theories and approaches is very useful to conduct research.	6	5	6	8	7
13	Learning research methodology is more difficult than learning other academic subjects.	9	8	2	6	7
<b>Research Strategies</b>						
14	I shouldn't attempt any research unless I know totally what to do.	9	11	3	4	5
15	I enjoy doing research works with peers.	11	8	2	6	5
16	It is important to know about peers' research achievements.	13	11	3	2	3
17	I feel disappointed whenever I am given a research assignment.	10	9	1	3	9
18	If EFL Master students are permitted to make some mistakes in research mini-projects it will negatively impact their achievements at the requirements of the degree	3	2	3	14	10
19	It is very essential to imitate research works formerly discussed and adopt them.	9	12	1	3	7
<b>Motivations and Expectations</b>						
20	As an EFL student I can fulfill my research work before deadlines.	5	8	2	8	9
21	It is obvious that EFL Master students should develop the traits of future researchers.	8	7	2	4	11
22	I feel that I have a strong flair to carry out research activities at any time.	6	8	1	12	5
23	As an EFL Master student , I am sure that I can reflect on my learning and succeed at my research work .	5	7	2	7	11
24	I would like to be an outstanding researcher	4	2	8	7	11

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