

# On beliefs about difficulty in language learning and learners' factors

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## 1 Introduction

The present study aimed to: 1. explore how beliefs about difficulty in language learning relate to students' background factors and how they differ from beliefs of an integrative nature; 2. investigate relationships between beliefs about difficulty and self-evaluation and proficiency factors. The study processed data from 102 Japanese language learners, proficient in Japanese, and investigated their beliefs about difficulty of Japanese onomatopoeia and difficulty of Japanese language in general. The findings show that, as opposed to beliefs of integrative nature, beliefs about difficulty do not correlate with learners' background factors of length of stay in Japan, length of studying Japanese language, and the ethnic factor. In addition, self-evaluation and proficiency factors were found to be related to beliefs about difficulty: the self-evaluation factors were negatively related to the beliefs about difficulty, while the proficiency factor was positively related to the same beliefs.

## 2 Previous research and research questions of this study

Tsygalnitsky (2006) investigated beliefs of integrative nature<sup>1</sup> about Japanese onomatopoeia, a specific part of Japanese vocabulary, of 102 learners of intermediate and high levels of Japanese proficiency as well as learners' background factors of "length of stay in Japan", "length of studying Japanese", and the "ethnic factor". The results showed that the two beliefs of an integrative nature differed in their correlations with the background factors. Also, the

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<sup>1</sup>The beliefs of an integrative nature in Tsygalnitsky (2006) were "Importance of onomatopoeia and the desire to

“ethnic factor” proved to be related to learners’ beliefs, as Korean learners had weaker beliefs than other learners.

Tsygalnitsky (2006) illustrated that similar beliefs (beliefs of integrative nature) interact in different ways with learners’ factors. Therefore, a distinction between different beliefs should be made and their relationships with learners’ factors should be investigated independently.

Various studies have explored the relationships between beliefs and learners’ factors. The following factors have been identified as affecting or being affected by learners’ beliefs: ethnicity (e.g., Siebert 2003; Yang 1992, cited in Nikitina et al, 2006; Prudie, Hattie and Douglas 1996; Truitt 1995, cited in Kuntz, 1996; Tumposky 1991, cited in Kuntz, 1996; Bernat 2006; Kagami 2004); students’ level or length of studying the language (e.g., Itai 1997); learning environment, such as strategy use (e.g., Wenden 1987; Okita 1995; Yang 1999); gender (e.g., Bacon and Finnemann 1990; Siebert 2003; Banya and Chen 1997, cited in Bernat 2006), and type of language learning institution (e.g., Rifkin 2000).

These studies, however, did not distinguish between different beliefs in terms of their relationships with learners’ factors. In other words, they did not ask the question of whether all beliefs relate to learners’ factors in the same way. Tsygalnitsky (2006) showed that even beliefs of a similar nature differ in their relationships with learners’ factors. Accordingly, in order to understand how different learners’ beliefs affect language learning and affect or are affected by learners’ factors, it is important to analyze different beliefs and their relationships with learners’ factors and conduct a comparison between the beliefs.

This study will, therefore, aim to explore how beliefs about difficulty relate to learners’ background factors and compare them with beliefs of an integrative nature (further, B.I.N. beliefs) that were explored in Tsygalnitsky (2006). Beliefs about difficulty have been chosen because of their importance in the process of language learning. Elaine Horwitz, the pioneer of beliefs research, defines the importance of investigating beliefs about difficulty in language learning as follows: “Student judgments about the difficulty of language learning are critical to

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acquire it” and “Integrative orientation towards studying onomatopoeia”.

the development of students' expectations for and commitment to language learning. If they underestimate the difficulty of the task, they are likely to become frustrated when they do not make progress as quickly as they expect. On the other hand, a belief that it will take ten years or more to learn a language could be discouraging and cause them to make only minimal efforts since good results are so far from hand" (1987: 123).

The first research question of this study is, then, as follows: "How do beliefs about difficulty relate to learners' background factors and how do they differ from B.I.N. beliefs in their relationships with these factors?"

As the above citation suggests, it is also important to explore beliefs about difficulty (further, B.A.D. beliefs) due to the assumption that they affect learning. Research of how B.A.D. beliefs affect language learning is still limited, though. While extensive research using BALLI<sup>2</sup> has provided descriptive data on language learners' beliefs in various language learning contexts, only a few studies have explored how beliefs affect strategies (e.g., Wenden 1987; Okita 1995; Yang 1992, cited in Nikitina et al, 2006; Prudie et al, 1996) and investigated if and/or how beliefs affect language proficiency (e.g., Mori 1999; Banya & Chen 1997, cited in Bernat 2006; Peacock 1998, 1999; Mantle-Bromley 1995; Okazaki et al 2000).

However, none of the studies has investigated the B.A.D. beliefs independently from other beliefs or investigated how they differ from other beliefs in the ways they relate to learners' proficiency factors. In the field of education, Stephanou (2004), who processed data from 272 10<sup>th</sup> grade students in four different school subjects (Mathematics, Language, Ancient Greek and Physics), investigated the role of students' perceptions on their performance. She found that the self-evaluation factor<sup>3</sup> was a powerful factor in discriminating the successful from the unsuccessful group of students. It was concluded that students' beliefs about difficulty and self-evaluation factors are related to their academic performance and their interpretations of

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<sup>2</sup> The popular instrument for measuring language learners' beliefs, Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory, or BALLI, was introduced by Horwitz (1985, 1987, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Stephanou (2004) uses the terms "ability self-perception" and "perceived task difficulty" as opposed to "self-evaluation factors" and "beliefs about difficulty", used in this study.

their performance. Thus, Stephanou's (2004) study connected the B.A.D. beliefs, self-evaluation factors and proficiency factors, and provided evidence that B.A.D. beliefs are negatively affecting proficiency while self-evaluation factors are affecting it in a positive way.

The present study aims to conduct a similar investigation in the area of language learning. As opposed to Stephanou (2004), who observed successful and unsuccessful groups of students, and explored how different factors affected their performance, this study will focus on B.A.D. beliefs and their relationships with self-evaluation factors and proficiency factors. The second research question is, therefore, as follows: "What are the relationships between B.A.D. beliefs and learners' self-evaluation and proficiency factors?"

### **3 The study**

#### **3.1 Method**

To answer the first research question and to assure the validity of the comparison, the present study analyzes data taken from the same sample as Tsygalnitsky (2006) and compares the results with those reported in her study. The same background factors as those used in Tsygalnitsky (2006) are analyzed: "length of stay in Japan" (LSJ), "length of studying Japanese language" (LSJL), and the "ethnic factor". The "ethnic factor" is modified in this study, as the distinction between learners applied in the study of Tsygalnitsky (2006) ("Korean-Non-Korean" and "Chinese- Non-Chinese") appears to have been of limited analytical potential. To improve this point, this study distinguishes the following three categories of learners: "Korean students", "Chinese students", and "Others". The fact that the "ethnic factor" is a different factor in this study limits the validity of the comparison of the results with Tsygalnitsky (2006), but contributes to the validity of the analysis of the relationship between the B.A.D. beliefs and the "ethnic factor".

The self-evaluation<sup>4</sup> factors are: learners' self-evaluation of their Japanese proficiency and

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<sup>4</sup> Although self-evaluation variables are often used as a means for measuring students' level in language learning (e.g., Hifumi 2003), this study differentiates between proficiency factors and self-evaluation factors in order to be consistent with previous research (e.g., Stephanou 2004).

their onomatopoeia proficiency. The proficiency factor is measured by a test of onomatopoeia proficiency.

### 3.2 Instrument<sup>5</sup>

The data were collected by means of a questionnaire, which consisted of 1) Face-sheet, identifying the factors of length of stay in Japan, length of studying Japanese language and learners' ethnicity; 2) Items of beliefs about difficulty (one general item about the difficulty of onomatopoeia, one item about the difficulty of Japanese and eight specific items about the difficulty of Japanese onomatopoeia, originated by the investigator, and measured via a 6-point Likert scale (6= "strongly agree" to 1= "strongly disagree")); 3) 8 items measuring the self-evaluation of Japanese proficiency (7-point Likert scale, adopted from Hifumi (2003); 3 items measuring the self-evaluation of onomatopoeia proficiency (6-point Likert scale), and 4) "Test of Onomatopoeia Proficiency"<sup>6</sup>(40 items), originated by the investigator, consisting of 4 parts, each containing 10 items.

### 3.3 Participants

A multinational sample of 102 learners<sup>7</sup> of Japanese took part in the study. Participants' length of stay in Japan and length of studying Japanese averaged 2.69 and 5.26 years respectively<sup>8</sup>. There were 37 (36.3%) men and 65 (63.7%) women, with ages ranging from 18 to 37 with an

<sup>5</sup> The Likert-scale items of the questionnaire are shown in Appendix.

<sup>6</sup> The items of the test were inspired by Sugiura & Iwasaki (2003), Fukuda (2003), Osaka (1999), and Mikami (2004).

<sup>7</sup> Apart from 2 company employees (former students), all of the participants presently belong to an institution of tertiary education: graduate students (64), undergraduate students (22), research students (9), researchers (2), "Other" or skipped the question (5). Participants came from 31 majors, which were classified by their field of study.

<sup>8</sup> Length of stay in Japan ranged from less than one year to ten years, with the total picture as follows: "under one year" (40), "under 3 years" (31), "under 5 years" (17) and "between 5 to 10 years" (14). As for the length of studying Japanese, the shortest period was "less than 2 years" and the longest "around 16 years" with the following overall distribution of data: "less than two years" (20), "2 to 3 years" (22), "between 3 to 5 years" (19), "between 5 to 10 years" (31), "more than 10 years" (9).

average of 26.7 years (one data was missing). The participants originated from Asia (62), Europe (26), North and Central America (9), South America (1), Africa (3), and Oceania (1)<sup>9</sup>.

### 3.4 Data processing method

The data were analyzed with SPSS (version 13), and the methods of Reliability analysis, Pearson correlation coefficient analysis and ANOVA were adopted as data processing methods.

First, a Reliability analysis was conducted for the factors<sup>10</sup> consisting of several items and the average score of each factor was calculated. One of the three B.A.D. beliefs, which represented specific beliefs about the difficulty of onomatopoeia, was calculated into one factor DIF\_O\_S<sup>11</sup> ( $\alpha=.862$ , 8 items) by summarizing the scores of the items comprising them. The other two beliefs were represented by one item (the belief about the difficulty of Japanese (DIF) and the belief about general difficulty of onomatopoeia (DIF\_O) each, so that a Reliability analysis was not required. Also, the factors of self-evaluation of Japanese language proficiency (JL\_SE;  $\alpha=.949$ , 8 items) and self-evaluation of onomatopoeia proficiency (O\_SE;  $\alpha=.866$ , 3 items) were calculated. The average values of the new factors were then calculated. Finally, the results of the 40 test items were summarized and converted into one factor, titled TEST<sup>12</sup>.

Second, a Pearson correlation analysis checked the existence of correlations between the three B.A.D. beliefs, the two background factors, the two self-evaluation factors and the proficiency factor. Then, an ANOVA was conducted in order to analyze the relationships between the

<sup>9</sup> As the subjects come from 34 countries, a classification by continent was conducted.

<sup>10</sup> The term “factor” as opposed to the more appropriate in discussions of statistical analyses “variable” is used in this study to refer to the analyzed data. “Factor” in this study refers to the background, self-evaluation and proficiency factors and does not refer to factor analysis.

<sup>11</sup> The full versions of the abbreviations of the factors are as follows: Difficulty of Japanese (DIF); Difficulty of Onomatopoeia (DIF\_O); Specific Difficulties of Onomatopoeia (DIF\_O\_S); Self-Evaluation of Japanese Language proficiency (JL\_SE); Self-Evaluation of Onomatopoeia proficiency (O\_SE); TEST of onomatopoeia proficiency (TEST); Length of Stay in Japan (LSJ); Length of Studying Japanese Language (LSJL).

<sup>12</sup> In order to prevent the test influencing the self-evaluation factors, the items of the self-evaluation factors appear before the test items in the questionnaire.

B.A.D. beliefs and the “Ethnic factor”<sup>13</sup>.

## 4 Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Research question (1)

The eight variables of the beliefs and the factors were subjected to a Pearson correlation coefficients analysis. The results of the analysis are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Correlation analysis of B.A.D. beliefs, Background, Self-evaluation and Proficiency Factors

	DIF <sup>14</sup>	DIF_O	DIF_O_S	JL_SE	O_SE	TEST	LSJ	LSJL
DIF	1	.479**	.363**	-.112	-.343**	.049	-.074	.007
DIF_O	.479**	1	.444**	.126	-.234*	.272*	-.217	.097
DIF_O_S	.363**	.444**	1	-.037	-.376**	-.022	-.124	-.055
JL_SE	-.112	.126	-.037	1	.397**	.713**	.289**	.481**
O_SE	-.343**	-.234*	-.376**	.397**	1	.274**	-.052	.072
TEST	.049	.272*	-.022	.713**	.274**	1	.261**	.534**
LSJ	-.074	-.217	-.124	.289**	-.052	.261**	1	.462**
LSJL	.007	.097	-.055	.481**	.072	.534**	.462**	1

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

<sup>13</sup> As the “Ethnic factor” included three groups of learners, it was considered more appropriate to conduct a separate analysis for this factor. ANOVA was chosen as a more appropriate method of analysis due to its ability to identify the existence of statistically significant differences, as opposed to Tsygalnitsky (2006), who used descriptive statistics to analyze the difference between Chinese and Non-Chinese and Korean and Non-Korean students.

<sup>14</sup> The abbreviated titles of the factors are used. The emphasized statistically significant correlations are those that are relevant to the research questions of this study.

First, in order to answer the first research question about the relationships between the B.A.D. beliefs and the background factors, the correlations between the three B.A.D. beliefs and the three background factors were analyzed. It is clear from Table 1 that no significant correlations were observed between the factors LSJ and LSJL and the B.A.D. beliefs of DIF, DIF\_O and DIF\_O\_S. This result indicates that no significant changes in learners' B.A.D. beliefs occurred over time and with the length of their stay in Japan.

As for the "Ethnic factor" and the B.A.D. beliefs, an ANOVA was conducted between the three categories of "Ethnic factor" ("Chinese students" (28)<sup>15</sup>, "Korean students" (27), and "Others" (65)) and the B.A.D. beliefs. As illustrated by Table 2, the ANOVA analysis did not show any statistically significant correlations between the beliefs and the "Ethnic factor". That is, the B.A.D. beliefs in this study are not related to the factor of being Chinese or Korean.

Table 2 ANOVA analysis of B.A.D. beliefs and "Ethnic factor"

B.A.D. beliefs		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig
DIF	Between Groups	8.203	2	4.102	2.036	.135
	Within Groups	235.663	117	2.014		
	Total	243.867	119			
DIF_O	Between Groups	.574	2	.287	.147	.863
	Within Groups	175.232	90	1.947		
	Total	175.806	92			
DIF_O_S	Between Groups	4.172	2	2.086	2.483	.090
	Within Groups	62.163	74	.840		
	Total	66.335	76			

Next, the results are compared to the findings of Tsygalnitsky (2006). While in the present study the three background factors are not related to the B.A.D. beliefs, they were found to be related to B.I.N. beliefs in Tsygalnitsky (2006). She reports on the negative correlations between the B.I.N. beliefs “Importance of onomatopoeia and the desire to acquire it” and “Integrative orientation towards studying onomatopoeia” and the factors of LSJ and LSJL. Thus, while the B.I.N. beliefs weaken with learners’ stay in Japan and their length of studying Japanese, the B.A.D. beliefs of the same students are not affected by these factors. Also, while Korean learners were found to hold weaker beliefs than Chinese learners in Tsygalnitsky (2006), no statistically significant differences due to Korean or Chinese ethnicity were verified in this study. Therefore, as far as the first research question is concerned, the results indicate that the B.A.D. beliefs differ from the B.I.N. beliefs in their relationships with the background factors.

#### 4.2 Research question (2)

The second research question deals with the relationships between the B.A.D. beliefs and the self-evaluation and proficiency factors. As is clear from Table 2, the proficiency factor (TEST) was correlated with the belief DIF\_O (.272). That is, the B.A.D. belief about onomatopoeia is positively related to proficiency. This finding is rather unexpected, as B.A.D. beliefs are found to be associated with poor proficiency (see Stephanou 2004). However, the fact that this study placed emphasis on the B.A.D. beliefs about onomatopoeia, which is only one aspect of Japanese language learning, and that the correlation is relatively weak, calls for further investigation on the issue.

The factor of TEST also correlated with JL\_SE (.713) and O\_SE (.274), which is consistent with the Stephanou (2004), who found that self-evaluation factors positively affect proficiency.

The correlation analysis also showed that only one factor of self-evaluation of onomatopoeia proficiency (O\_SE) was negatively correlated with the three B.A.D. beliefs (DIF (-.343),

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<sup>15</sup> The numbers indicate the number of learners.

DIF\_O (-.234), DIF\_O\_S (-.376)). This result indicates that there is a negative relationship between the beliefs about the difficulty of onomatopoeia and the difficulty of Japanese language on the one hand and the students' self-evaluation of their proficiency in onomatopoeia on the other. As correlation analysis does not indicate cause and effect relations, either the beliefs or the factor of self-evaluation could cause the relation. That is, either the poor self-evaluation of onomatopoeia proficiency strengthens the B.A.D. beliefs about Japanese and onomatopoeia, or the B.A.D. beliefs cause a decrease in the self-evaluation in onomatopoeia proficiency.

The lack of correlations between the factor of self-evaluation of Japanese language proficiency (JL\_SE) and the B.A.D. beliefs suggests that specific beliefs, like beliefs about the difficulty of Japanese language or certain aspects of it (e.g. onomatopoeia), can exist independently, without interfering with learners' beliefs about their language abilities as a whole. In other words, different beliefs about difficulty appear to be functioning on separate levels, without necessarily being related to beliefs about general language abilities (JL\_SE), but relating to beliefs about specific language abilities (O\_SE). In other words, the results indicate that awareness of the difficulty of Japanese and onomatopoeia negatively correlate with the learners' self-evaluation of their onomatopoeia proficiency, without affecting the self-evaluation of their general proficiency in Japanese.

As is clear from the above results, the B.A.D. beliefs differ in their relationships with self-evaluation and proficiency factors. While the factor of self-evaluation of onomatopoeia abilities was negatively correlated with the B.A.D. beliefs, the proficiency factor was positively correlated with the same beliefs.

## 5 Conclusion and Questions for Further Research

The limitation of this study was that two of the B.A.D. beliefs (DIF\_J and DIF\_O) were measured by only one item each. Also, due to the limited data, the main method of analysis was correlation coefficients analysis, which provides no indication of cause and effect relationships. Hence, a further study should apply different methodology in order to verify the

nature of the relationships established in this study.

The answer to the first research question was that the B.A.D. beliefs differed in their relationships with the background factors from the B.I.N. beliefs. The implication of this finding is that there is a need to distinguish between different beliefs in language learning and independently investigate relationships between beliefs and learners' factors.

As for the second research question, one B.A.D. belief was positively correlated to the proficiency factor, which was inconsistent with previous research. As this study investigated mainly beliefs about one aspect of Japanese language learning and other B.A.D. beliefs were not found to be correlating to the proficiency factor, future research of relationships between other components of Japanese language and the B.A.D. beliefs needs to be conducted in order to understand how B.A.D. beliefs affect proficiency. On the other hand, the finding that the self-evaluation factors positively correlated with the proficiency factor was consistent with previous research.

The finding that the self-evaluation factor of onomatopoeia proficiency was negatively related to the B.A.D. beliefs either means that the B.A.D. beliefs cause low self-evaluation or that low-self-evaluation strengthens the B.A.D. beliefs. Further research should shed more light on the nature of the B.A.D. beliefs in language learning.

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## Appendix

(Likert-scale items of the questionnaire<sup>16</sup>)

### 1. B.A.D. belief (DIF\_O\_S)

<sup>16</sup> The questionnaire included both English and Japanese versions of the items, but only English versions are

D1-Do you find onomatopoeia difficult because even when the meaning of onomatopoeic expression is clear, the appropriate word just wouldn't come out?

D2-Do you find onomatopoeic expressions difficult because their meaning is so easy to forget?

D3-Do you think the way Japanese onomatopoeia is used is difficult?

D4-Do you find onomatopoeic expressions difficult because it is hard to memorize them?

D5-Do you find onomatopoeia difficult because at times its exact meaning is not clear even after checking the dictionary?

D6-Do you find onomatopoeia difficult because there are many similar words and it is not clear which one should be used in which situation?

D7-Do you find onomatopoeia difficult because the nuances in the meaning of onomatopoeic words are not clear, for example in words expressing types of pain, like *zuki-zuki* (i.e., throbbing pain), *chiku-chiku* (i.e., pricking pain), *shiku-shiku* (i.e., griping pain)?

D8-Do you find onomatopoeia difficult because it is not clear when it should be used?

## 2. Self-evaluation of Japanese language abilities (JL\_SE)

100% ← 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 → 0%

1-日本語でレポートを書く(Writing a report in Japanese); 2-日本語で会話をする(Conducting a conversation in Japanese); 3-日本語で電話をかける(Making a phone call in Japanese); 4-日本語で手紙を書く(Writing a letter in Japanese); 5-日本語で新聞を読む(Reading a newspaper in Japanese); 6-日本語でマンガを読む(Reading Japanese comics); 7-テレビ(日本語)でニュースを見る(Watching news in Japanese); 8-日本語の本を読む (Reading a book in Japanese)

## 3. Self-evaluation of onomatopoeia abilities (O\_SE) (6-point scale)

1. Do you know many onomatopoeic words?

2. Do you frequently use onomatopoeic expressions in your speech?

3. Do you find your knowledge of onomatopoeic expressions sufficient?

# 言語学習における困難さに対するビリーフと 学習者要因の研究

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本稿では、言語学習における困難さに対するビリーフに焦点を当て、日本語全体の困難さに対するビリーフと日本語オノマトペの困難さに対するビリーフを調べ、以下の二つの研究課題について考えた。第一課題では、困難さに対するビリーフと学習者要因との関係を調べ、Tsygalnitsky (2006) で明らかになった統合的ビリーフと学習者要因の関係との比較を行った。第二課題では、困難さに対するビリーフと自己評価による能力要因とテストによる能力(オノマトペのテスト) 要因との関係を調べた。日本語学習者 102 名からのデータを分析した結果、以下の二点を主張する。第一、困難さに対するビリーフは統合的ビリーフと異なり、学習者要因の日本語学習期間・在日期間・出身地と関連しない。したがって、困難さに対するビリーフは統合的ビリーフと異なる働きを持っているといえる。第二、困難さに対するビリーフは自己評価による能力要因とオノマトペのテストによる能力要因と有意に関係している。具体的には、自己評価による能力要因は困難さに対するビリーフと負の相関があるのに対し、オノマトペのテストによる能力要因は正の相関があることが明らかになった。