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The Effects of Learner Beliefs on the Structural Model of English Achievement

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Although students' beliefs about L2 learning may not be supported by perfectly with empirical evidence, there appears to be a relationship between their beliefs and achievement. The purpose of this study was to identify student beliefs about English learning in a Korean EFL context and to examine the structural relationships among belief factors affecting English achievement. It furthermore investigated the effect of gender on the causal relationships between beliefs and L2 achievement. A total of 247 L2 students (126 girls, 121 boys) at a public middle school completed a questionnaire consisting of 26 Likert-scale items. The study yielded a six-factor solution: *self-efficacy of English learning, role of teacher feedback, Importance of school classes, importance of grammar learning, nature of English learning*, and *importance of accuracy*. The path model indicated that *self-efficacy of English learning* was the most significant predictor of L2 achievement, while student beliefs in *role of teacher feedback* and *nature of English learning* were positively related to the students' L2 achievement through the mediating role of self-efficacy. Student gender, however, did not operate as a moderator variable in the structural relationship between L2 beliefs and achievement.

[L2 learning beliefs/L2 achievement/gender differences/structural equation modeling]

I. INTRODUCTION

The role of learner beliefs about second or foreign language (L2) learning in understanding L2 learning processes and outcomes has been widely researched from multiple perspectives. A line of such research has investigated individual learners' beliefs that students bring into the L2 classroom (Cotterall, 1999; Horwitz, 1985; 1987; Sakui & Gaies, 1999) and attempted cultural and situational comparisons of L2 learning beliefs across various learner groups (Diab, 2006; Horwitz, 1999; Kouritzin, Piquemal, & Renaud,

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2009; Rifkin, 2000). A second line of research has examined matches and discrepancies in beliefs between students and teachers (Harrington & Hertel, 2000; Kern, 1995; Peacock, 1999; Polat, 2009). The general finding of these studies is that students' beliefs are often consonant with those of their instructors (Harrington & Hertel, 2000; Kern, 1995). However, learners with mismatches seem to blame for their difficulties in L2 learning, and show slow progress and failure of learning L2, leading to further lack of confidence, frustration, and dissatisfaction (Peacock, 1999). A final line of previous research concerns the relationship between learner beliefs and other learner variables, such as L2 learning strategies (Park, 1995; Yang, 1999), L2 anxiety (Horwitz, 1988; Truitt, 1995) and attitudes (Mantle-Bromley, 1995), and L2 proficiency (Huang & Tasi, 2003; Hinenoya & Gatbonton, 2000; Kim, 2003; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Peacock, 2001).

It should be noted, however, that with some exceptions (e.g., Cotterall, 1999; Hinenoya & Gatbonton, 2000), most of the previous studies have their roots in the work of Horwitz (1985, 1987), who developed the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI). The BALLI has been used in several L2 learning settings with U.S. students (Kern, 1995; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Rifkin, 2000). Furthermore, a number of studies also used the translated version of the BALLI to investigate learner beliefs about learning English as an L2 (Diab, 2006; Park, 1995; Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Yang, 1999). Thus, a methodological weakness could be leveled due to the use of the same survey items across different cultural and learning backgrounds, including the failure to account for the social contexts of L2 learners, and distinct settings and programs, as argued by Barcelos (2003) and Kouritzin et al. (2009). In a survey of more than 6,000 university students in Canada, Japan, and France, Kouritzin et al. (2009) found differences in language learning beliefs in the three countries. In particular, learners from Japan believe that knowledge of an L2 carries value in and of itself, thereby indicating that beliefs are situated within the socially and culturally conditioned context where learning takes place. Therefore, further research, in which survey items to explore learner beliefs deal with socially conditioned and contextually driven ideas would seem necessary.

A few researchers have examined the relationship between learner beliefs and L2 proficiency, results of the previous studies, however, are inconclusive as shown in Table 1. These inconsistent findings suggest that factors composing learner beliefs are contextual and differ across learning situations and the languages that learners study. Furthermore, although research has found that learner beliefs have an impact on L2 achievement, majority of such research performed descriptive statistics, *t*-test, or correlation for each survey item to compute the relationship between two related factors, indicating that direct and indirect paths that lead to learners' L2 achievement are not identified. Accordingly, it is still open to question which learner belief factor has the predictive power in accounting for variances associated with L2 achievement. Thus, it is necessary to systematic

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investigation into the relationship between learner belief variables and L2 achievement using an instrument embedded in the L2 learning setting with a more rigorous statistical analysis. To date, less (with the exception of Mantle-Bromley, 1995) is known about middle school students' beliefs related to L2 learning. No studies have examined the structural relationships between subtypes of learner beliefs and L2 achievement in an EFL context. Similarly, although the literature is replete with studies delving into L2 learner beliefs, relatively few studies (Bernat & Lloyd, 2007; Tercanlioglu, 2005) have examined gender differences in learner beliefs.

The aims of the present study are to (1) identify underlying constructs of Korean EFL middle school students' beliefs about English learning, (2) investigate the structural relationships among potential belief factors that directly and indirectly influence English achievement, and (3) examine potential sex differences in the structural relationship.

TABLE 1
Summary of Studies Exploring the Relationship between Learner Beliefs and L2 Proficiency

Study	Analysis	Sample	Findings
Mantle-Bromley (1995)	Exploratory	American	Learners with realistic and informed beliefs are more likely to behave productively in L2 class and work harder outside class.
Peacock (1999; 2001)	ANOVA	Chinese	Mismatched beliefs between learners and teachers were negatively associated with ESL proficiency.
Hinenoya & Gatbonton (2000)	Partial correlation	Japanese	The higher the participants' beliefs as expressed through myths and proverbs, the lower their L2 proficiency.
Huang & Tasi (2003)	*t*-test	Taiwanese	High-proficient English learners tended to have more positive beliefs about L2 learning.
Kim (2003)	Correlation	Korean	Some of learner beliefs positively or negatively affected L2 achievement.
Polat (2009)	Descriptive statistics	Georgian	Beliefs did not seem to contribute to overall language achievement.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

1. Participants and English Learning Context

The final sample included 247 (126 girls, 121 boys) students from a public middle school in a metropolitan city. All of them were Korean natives. The proportion of participants enrolled in their 7th, 8th, and 9th grade year was 44.9 (n=111), 31.9 (n=79),

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and 23.1% (n=57), respectively. They all have previously studied English as a compulsory school subject for at least 4 years from their grade 3 in the elementary school. When asked to rate themselves on their self-perceived English proficiency 34.0% (n=84) rated themselves as either "very poor" (3.6%) or "not good" (30.4%), and 29.1% (n=72) rated themselves "good" (26.3%) or "excellent" (2.8%). Ninety-one (36.8%) students rated their level as "medium" compared to other students in their class.

The goal of the middle school English course is to encourage basic communicative competence in all areas of language use, with particular emphasis on the development of listening, speaking, and reading. Instruction is conducted in both Korean and English depending on course objectives, instructors' beliefs, and students' proficiency level. Class time is spent on vocabulary and grammar presentations, listening, speaking, and reading comprehension activities, and small-group activities to integrate language skills. Classes meet four hours per week and Korean teachers teach 3 hours and one hour is taught by a native English-speaking teacher. Performance on midterm and final exams is a primary determinant of the course grade. To reduce variability in the assessment, all the English instructors across different classes of the same grade participated in the process of developing the midterm and final exam questions, which used to measure students' English achievement.

2. Measures

1) Beliefs about English Learning

To assess students' beliefs about English learning, the present study initially adapted 9 items from Horwitz's studies (1987, 1988, 1999). Additional items were included to explore Korean EFL middle school students' culture- and setting-specific beliefs, which were constructed based on discussion with Korean middle school English teachers and learners and the review of previous studies (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Cotterall, 1999; Kim, 2003; Loewen et al., 2009; Pae, 2008; Polat, 2009; Sakui & Gaies, 1999). These items reflect the Korean EFL learning context such as teacher feedback, grammar learning, and importance of school classes for L2 success. The items included in the questionnaire were confirmed through an iterative item analysis procedure. If an item showed a low or negative item value, the item was deleted. The final set of questionnaire comprised 26 items. All the items were based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree) for the students to self-report the extent to which the statements applied to themselves.

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2) English Achievement

For the English achievement measure, the present study employed the raw score of the final exam. The exam included vocabulary, grammar, and reading sections with a chiefly multiple-choice format and few short-answers. The researcher acquired students' test results from their English instructors based on individual participants' agreement to disclosure of their scores. A total of 230 English achievement data were collected for the analysis.

3) Procedure

Classroom teachers administered the questionnaire to their students during their regular English class period around the 11th week of the fall semester in 2010. The questionnaire return rate, thus, 100% for the 7th graders, but it was lowered to 96%, and 87% for the 8th and 9th, respectively. Students were also asked to check whether they consent to release of their final exam scores. The entire data collection process took approximately 20 minutes.

4) Data analysis

As an initial step, in order to identify the underlying factors of learner beliefs about English, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted. A Principal axis factoring with oblique rotation method was chosen because there is theoretical and empirical basis for assuming psychological constructs (e.g., motivation, belief, attitude) to be correlated to one another. Accordingly, this may yield a more accurate and realistic representation than Principal components analysis (Costello & Osborne, 2005; Fabrigar, Wegener, MacCallum, & Strahan, 1999; Preacher & MacCallum, 2003). The extracted factors then served as the subscales (e.g., latent variables) throughout the rest of the analyses. Cronbach's alphas were calculated to estimate the internal consistency for each subscale of L2 beliefs.

Next, structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis was performed among factors influencing English achievement using Amos 18 (Byrne, 2001) via maximum likelihood estimation procedure. Specifically, a theoretical structural relationship model of EFL achievement was proposed and specified based on previous literature. The proposed SEM model was tested in order to determine the SEM model that best fits the sample covariance matrix observed in the present study.

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III. RESULTS

1. Student Beliefs about English Learning

The results of the factor analysis produced six factors based on eigenvalues greater than 1, inspection of the scree plot, and interpretability, accounting for 61.4% of the variance. Table 2 presents the factor loadings, means, and standard deviations for the six factors.

TABLE 2
Factor Solution for EFL Learner Beliefs

Item	*Loading*	*M*	*SD*
Factor1: Self-efficacy of English learning			
3. I will ultimately learn to speak English very well.	.79	3.11	1.06
12. I know my strengths and weaknesses in English learning.	.74	3.24	1.02
2. I have the ability to learn English successfully.	.73	2.70	1.05
6. I know how to study English well.	.72	2.57	1.13
23. I set my goals for learning English.	.63	3.13	1.20
13. Everyone can learn to speak English.	.62	3.45	1.11
1. It is easier for young students than adults to learn English.	.47	3.37	1.03
Factor2: Role of teacher feedback			
19. Teachers know best how well I am learning.	.84	3.36	0.99
14. Teacher feedback plays a constructive role in my English learning.	.71	3.34	1.07
18. Feedback from the teacher makes me study.	.70	3.34	1.01
15. Teacher comments on my learning encourage confidence.	.61	3.41	1.03
22. Teacher feedback helps me learn English effectively.	.57	3.60	1.01
Factor3: Importance of school classes			
20. English education at school is enough to speak English well.	.87	2.38	1.05
21. English success depends on what I learn in the classroom.	.86	2.44	1.11
16. English success depends on what I do outside the classroom.	.70	3.45	1.34
17. I can improve my English by taking English lessons at school.	.63	3.05	1.15
Factor4: Importance of grammar learning			
25. The most important part of learning English is learning grammar.	.91	2.85	1.05
24. Grammar learning is equal to English learning.	.87	2.91	1.09
26. Knowing grammar rule helps communication in English.	.86	2.97	1.03
Factor5: Nature of English learning			
8. Girls are better than boys at learning English.	.83	2.96	1.13
7. The most important part of learning English is learning new vocabulary.	.76	3.31	1.02
10. Those who love to talk will learn English better.	.72	3.21	1.06
5. It is necessary to know the English culture in order to speak English.	.48	3.31	1.00
Factor 6: Importance of accuracy			
11. English speaking is not good if it has a lot of grammar errors.	.83	3.37	1.15
9. If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning, it will be difficult to get rid of them later on.	.77	3.66	1.07
4. It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.	.57	3.71	1.01

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Factor 1, labeled *self-efficacy of English learning,* contained items that concerns students' beliefs and confidence in their ability to succeed in English learning (Bandura, 1984). Some items (e.g., Items 1 & 13) assessing this factor have parallels in Horwitz's (1985, 1987) construct, *L2 aptitude*. Factor 2 was labeled a *role of teacher feedback* because the items in this factor related to the role of teacher intervention. Factor 3 addressed the *importance of school classes* in relation to English learning success. Factor 4, containing three items, demonstrated the *importance of grammar learning.* Factor 5 was labeled *nature of English learning* because involving items reflected characteristics of L2 learning. Although the label of this factor is identical to one from the BALLI studies (Horwitz, 1985, 1987; Kim, 2003), containing items under the same labeling are different from one another. Factor 6 demonstrated the *importance of accuracy* while learning English.

Table 3 displays a short description of six subscales, along with the corresponding reliability evidence as measured by Cronbach's alpha. Each subscale indicated reasonably good internal consistency having a value greater than .70. The mean scores on each of subscales except for *importance of grammar learning* (M = 2.91) were above the median score of 3.0, meaning that the participants characterized themselves as believed in relation to five factors.

TABLE 3
Reliabilities and Descriptive Summary for EFL Learner Beliefs Scales

Subscale	*Number of items*	*Alpha*	*M*	*SD*
Self-efficacy of English learning	7	.83	3.03	.81
Role of teacher feedback	5	.76	3.41	.73
Importance of school classes	4	.78	3.44	.86
Importance of grammar learning	3	.87	2.91	.94
Nature of English learning	4	.75	3.23	.74
Importance of accuracy	3	.76	3.58	.89

The results indicated that the participants had a strong belief in the *importance of accuracy* (M = 3.58), while they did not endorse *importance of grammar learning* (M = 2.91). The two findings seem to contradict each other because the role of grammar instruction in L2 acquisition theory can be framed in relation to an accuracy issue (Ellis, 2001, 2006; Loewen, 2005; Long, 1991). However, such finding can be justified by the following explanations: 1) students' lack of awareness of the relationship between accuracy and grammar learning; and 2) their dissatisfaction with the grammar instruction they have received. Students might think that the grammatical accuracy of English production is essential and teachers' error correction is imperative, but the participants who are all middle school students could not perceive that one of the positive roles of grammar

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instruction is to reduce errors and achieve accuracy by drawing their attention to linguistic elements (Long, 1991; Spada, 1997). Furthermore, the students might have negative attitudes toward grammar instruction in which rote learning and memorization of arbitrary linguistic rules and an application of those rules in disconnected sentences and exercises have been emphasized. Thus, although students may believe that accuracy is important in L2 learning, they do not know how this accuracy should be achieved.

2. Structural Relationship between Learner Beliefs and L2 Achievement

For the SEM analysis although some of the six subscales (e.g., *self-efficacy of English learning*, *role of teacher feedback*) had more than three items that loaded strongly, the present study limited the number of indicator items per subscale to three. Furthermore, of the 18 indicator items, one for *importance of accuracy* was removed because (1) the factor loading of it tended to be weaker than others, and (2) removal provided a more acceptable fit index for the structural model. Thus, the proposed model consisted of latent variables (larger ovals) and observed variables (survey items shown in rectangles) with the errors (circles) associated with each observed variable, as displayed in Figure 1.

In order to test the quality of a given structural model's fit chi-square goodness-of-fit test and the ratio of chi-square to degrees of freedom (e.g., chi-square divided by degrees of freedom) were used. Generally, a ratio of 2.0 or below suggests a good fit. However, chi-square statistic is sensitive to the sample size, hence two more fit criteria were employed: comparative fit index (CFI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). CFI values that approximate or exceed .95 represent a good fit of the model (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Unlike the CFI, the RMSEA is a more parsimonious fit index and a value of less than .05 is required to judge the model fit as 'good.' (Browne & Cudeck, 1993).

TABLE 4
Model-fit Indices for the Beliefs and English Achievement

Model	Latent variables	χ^2	*p*-value	χ^2/df	CFI	RMSEA
1	SE, TF, SC, GR, AC, NA	348.96	.001	2.48	.89	.078
2	SE, TF, GR, AC, NA	163.55	.001	2.02	.93	.065
3	SE, TF, GR, NA	85.77	.001	1.56	.97	.044

Note. SE: Self-efficacy; TF: Teacher feedback; SC: School classes; GR: Grammar learning; AC: Accuracy; and NA: Nature of L2 learning.

Table 4 summarizes model-data fit statistics of each model tested. Models 1 and 2, which tested the relationships among English achievement and latent variables, resulted in unsatisfactory fit indices. Model 3, however, showed the best fit to the data (χ^2 = 85.77,

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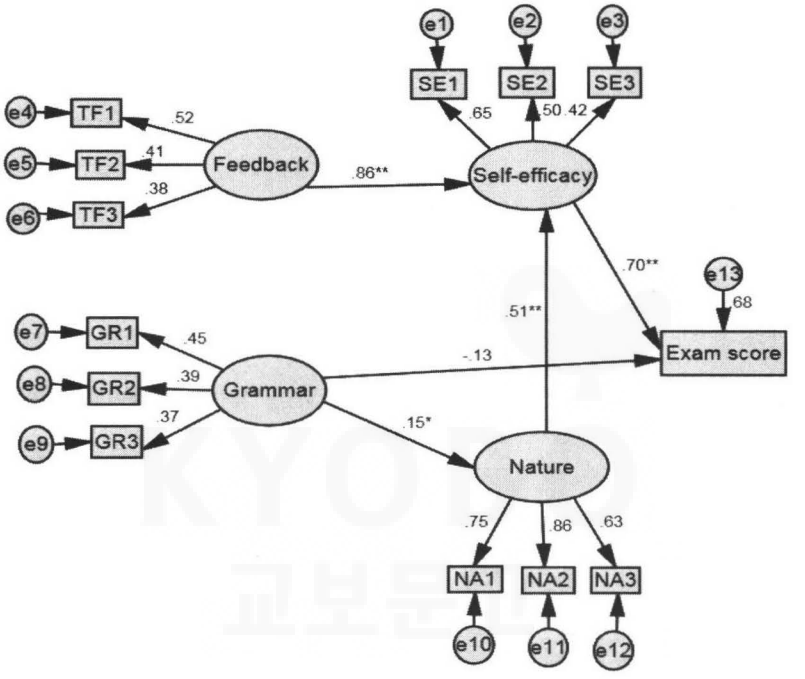
CFI = .97, RMSEA = .044). This demonstrates that student beliefs in the *importance of school classes* and *importance of accuracy* were not significant predictors of their English achievement; instead, these two latent variables played a minimal role in the EFL classroom and thus removed from the model. This final model was utilized for the subsequent analysis of gender differences.

FIGURE 1
Structural Model of the Relationship between Learner Beliefs and English Achievement



Note. *means significant path loading at $p < .05$ and ** at $p < .001$.

The path diagram of Model 3 is presented in Figure 1 for close investigation of the structural relationship between learner beliefs and English achievement. Students' belief in *self-efficacy of English learning* was the most significant predictor of English achievement in the Korean EFL context. Furthermore, students' level of beliefs in the *role of teacher feedback* and *nature of English learning* showed a positive direct relation to their *self efficacy of English learning,* which in turn significantly predicted their English achievement as measured by final exam scores. This means that EFL students who tend to appreciate teacher feedback and perceive the characteristics of L2 learning are likely to believe they are capable of performing tasks by heightening self-efficacy, and these students tend to have willingness to study an L2, which in turn make a significant

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contribution to their L2 exam scores. This finding demonstrated that the *role of teacher feedback* was positively and indirectly related to L2 achievement mediated by *self-efficacy of English learning,* which is in line with previous studies (Kim, 2003; Magogwe & Oliver, 2007; Yusuf, 2011). It implies that teacher feedback or learner perception about nature of L2 learning alone is not sufficient to bring about the increase of English achievement for Korean middle school students.

On the other hand, students' belief in *importance of grammar learning* was not related to L2 achievement, although it was a significant predictor of the level of belief in the *nature of L2 learning.* This unexpected finding contradicts with previous studies reporting the positive relationships between the role of grammar and grammar achievement (Horwitz, 1988; Peacock, 1999; Polat, 2009). It is plausible that such a negative non-significant path loading may have been attributed to the characteristics of test items. The final exam was comprised of vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension items. As Horwitz (1988) and Peacock (1999) stated that students with high positive beliefs in the role of grammar in L2 proficiency may focus on grammar rules, the students in the present study who deem grammar learning important seemed to study grammar more as opposed to other language skills such as vocabulary and reading.

3. Sex Differences in the Structural Relationship between Beliefs and English Achievement

As shown in Table 5, although girls students showed a relatively higher mean scores than boys in English achievement, which is in line with several previous studies (Andreou, Vlachos, & Andreou, 2005; Bacon & Finnemann, 1992; Kim, 2006; Lee & Eom, 2009; Payne & Lynn, 2011), *t*-tests yielded statistically insignificant differences (t = -1.727, p = .086). Furthermore, the model for girls than boys showed a better fit to the data, as evaluated by several fit statistics. Imposing equality constraint on each of the structural paths did not make the fit of the model significantly worse than Model 3, hence demonstrating that the final achievement model of English works for both gender groups.

TABLE 5
Model-fit Indices for the Beliefs and English Achievement by Gender

	Mean	*SD*	χ^2	*p*-value	χ^2/df	CFI	RMSEA
Girls (n = 118)	74.66	22.29	67.02	.001	1.27	.97	.046
Boys (n = 112)	69.31	25.29	87.02	.002	1.64	.94	.074

The standardized parameter estimates for boys and girls appear in Table 6. For both girls and boys, the students' level of belief in *self-efficacy of English learning* was the most

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powerful variable that is related to L2 achievement, as demonstrated by the significant path coefficient. The importance of self-efficacy in L2 learning has been consistently supported by empirical data (Cotterall, 1995, 1999; Magogwe & Oliver, 2007; Wenden, 1999; Yusuf, 2011). The parameter estimates also revealed the minimal role of belief in *importance of grammar learning* played as *importance of grammar learning* was directly related neither with *nature of English learning* nor with the students' L2 achievement. However, *role of teacher feedback* and *nature of English learning* were positively indirectly related to the students' exam scores through the mediating role of *self-efficacy of English learning*.

TABLE 6
Standardized Parameter Estimates for Beliefs and English Achievement by Gender

Path	TF → SE	NA → SE	GR → NA	GR → Score	SE → Score
Girls (n = 118)	.38*	.55**	.10	-.02	.38*
Boys (n = 112)	.66**	.43*	.12	.14	.65**

Note. *means significant path loading at $p < .05$ and ** at $p < .001$.

IV. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study showed several significant findings. First, it identified Korean EFL middle school students' multifaceted beliefs in learning an L2. These multidimensional characteristics of L2 beliefs supported Horwitz's (1987, 1988, 1999) claim. However, certain sub-components of L2 belief factors (e.g., *role of teacher feedback, importance of school classes,* and *importance of grammar learning*) were socially conditioned and contextually dependent beliefs about how to learn the L2 in the Korean EFL middle school context. Second, the study provided empirical evidence that students' judgments of their capability to perform academic tasks (Bandura, 1984; Bandura & Schunk, 1981), that is, their self-efficacy beliefs proved to be the most influential determinant of L2 achievement. Furthermore, the SEM analyses suggested that student beliefs in *role of teacher feedback* and *nature of English learning* are necessary but not sufficient for successful L2 achievement, because they were only indirectly related to L2 achievement through the mediating effects of *self-efficacy of English learning*. Third, student gender did not operate as a moderator variable, with both genders demonstrating the same path model although the magnitude of the path coefficients was different from one another.

The pedagogical implications of the present study are straightforward. Students' self-efficacy beliefs should be promoted in a way where the students feel confident about what they can achieve and are highly resilient in relation to failure; teacher feedback aims to enhance students' L2 competence in a constructive way; and characteristics of L2 learning are quite understandable for the students (Magogwe & Oliver, 2007; Pae, 2008).

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By and large, by investigating contextually constructed beliefs about L2 learning, EFL teachers can lead to more effective instructional design and implementation of lessons (Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Sakui & Gaies, 1999); simultaneously, students can lead to more effective L2 learning behavior as well as greater self-knowledge and autonomy (Cotterall, 1999; Horwitz, 1988).

Finally, limitations must be acknowledged in this study. Myriad factors, which were not included in the questionnaires, can affect students' beliefs. The use of qualitative data along with the questionnaire would facilitate the identification of reliable patterns of learner beliefs. In spite of these limitations, this study provides a snapshot of EFL learners' beliefs in relation to their L2 achievement. Further investigations are advised to use a longitudinal design to explore the changes in student beliefs over time and by instructor intervention. The interaction between beliefs and other learner characteristics, such as attitudes, motivation, and style and strategy use is an area worthy of further exploration.

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Examples in: English
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Applicable Levels: Secondary

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