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## The Beliefs of Bosnian EFL Learners about Language Learning

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### **Abstract:**

*The aim of this paper is to investigate the Beliefs about Language Learning of non-English majors. The participants responded in this survey were Bosnian non-English major students who were studying in a high school which use English as the language of instruction. The questionnaire that we used in our research was the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) which was designed and developed by Elaine Horwitz, the University of Texas at Austin. We investigated a sample of 431 junior high school EFL learners' language learning beliefs in terms of EFL context. This study also examined the influence of learning variables such as aptitude, attitudes, motivation, and personality on learner beliefs and strategies. Data were collected by using questionnaire. The findings helped teachers to have some pedagogical implications to increase students' level of motivation in an English language classroom. For example teachers can set goals for students in learning English, provide required materials regarding language learning, and inspire students to learn. These findings may also help students to improve their level of English and encourage them to study harder. Horwitz (1988) suggests*

*that better understanding of students' beliefs of language learning may allow language teachers to better understand students' expectations and satisfactions with their language class. Once students are able to face their beliefs, they may understand their weakness and try to solve the problem.*

**Key words:** beliefs, language learning, perception, motivation, expectation

## **Introduction**

It has been recognized that beliefs about language learning play a vital role in EFL. Learners from different countries and cultures may have different attitudes, approaches about learning a new language. Beliefs about language learning belong in the domain of affective variables, such as attitudes, motivation, anxiety etc. Richardson (1996, p. 103) Assessing beliefs that language learners bring to the language classroom is important for both language instructors and curriculum designers because “beliefs are predispositions to action” (Rokeach, 1968, p. 113). If beliefs about language learning are prevalent in the culture at large, then foreign language teachers must consider that students bring these beliefs with them into the classroom Büyükyazı (2010).

Beliefs are a central construct in every discipline that deals with human behaviour and learning (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen, 1988). In the classroom context, the perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and metacognitive knowledge that students bring with them to the learning situation have been recognized as a significant contributory factor in the learning process and ultimate success (Breen, 2001). For example, second or foreign language students may hold strong beliefs about the nature of the language under study, its difficulty, the process of its acquisition, the success of certain learning strategies, the existence of aptitude, their own expectations about achievement

and teaching methodologies. Identification of these beliefs and reflection on their potential impact on language learning and teaching in general, as well as in more specific areas such as learners' expectations and strategies used, can inform future syllabus design and teacher practice in the course. Pedagogy has the capacity to provide the opportunities and conditions within which these learner contributions are found to have a positive effect upon learning and may be more fully engaged (Breen, 2001)

## **Literature Review**

The impact of beliefs about language learning was one of the major concerns in foreign language. A lot of researches have been done to investigate learners' beliefs in terms of different variables such as: aptitude, attitudes, learning differences, motivation etc. Horwitz (1985) and Wenden (1986) were the first ones to study beliefs about language learning. Elaine Horwitz, one of the pioneer researchers of the studies on beliefs about language learning, did not give an operational definition of beliefs about language learning in her articles ( Horwitz, 1985, 1987, 1988). She only refers to "beliefs" using the terms such as preconceptions (1985), preconceived ideas (1987), and preconceived notions (1988) *18,(4) 333-340* without giving specific descriptions about the construct. Similarly, beliefs are defined by Kuntz (1997) as "notions about language learning that students have acquired" (p.4).

In the context of foreign language acquisition, understanding learners' beliefs are essential to discover both teachers and students' potentials about language learning. Wenden (1986) considers that if we are to discover what characterises successful language learning, we need to: . . . discover what . . . students believe or know about their learning, and to provide activities that would allow students to examine these beliefs and their possible impact on how they

approach learning. . . pointed out that if teachers are aware of their learners' perceptions and expectations, they can help them change their beliefs to make learning more effective.

Students who come to the classroom with preconceived ideas may directly influence or even determine a learner's attitude or motivation, and precondition the learner's success or lack of success (Kuntz, 1996). Evidence shows that these beliefs play a decisive role in language learners' success, failure and experiences (Cotteral, 1999). Learners need to believe in the purpose of their own learning and hold a positive notion when they come to the classroom for their performance. Supportive and positive beliefs help to overcome problems and thus sustain motivation, while negative or unrealistic beliefs can lead to decreased motivation, frustration and anxiety (Kern, 1995; Oh 1996). Therefore, beliefs are said to be one's psychologically developed components of feelings, attitudes or behaviours. Furthermore, Schoenfeld (cited in Bernat & Lloyd 2007:79) states that one's belief systems, social cognitions and metacognitions are a driving force for intellectual performance.

### **Purpose of the study**

The major goal of this study is to discover the language learning style difference between students in Bosnia & Herzegovina. It is observed by many English teachers who work at schools that there is an obvious difference in English language proficiency between students. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to search and analyze this particular discrepancy between those students in terms of learning style differences, student backgrounds, attitudes, aptitudes and beliefs toward English language learning, and personal goals of language learning. It is believed that the analysis of data will help both students and teachers to identify the exact reasons for student's failure to achieve reasonable language skills.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

A total of 431 (243 males, 188 females) EFL students from five different major cantons in Bosnia and Herzegovina participated in the study in 2013/2014 academic year. The mean age of respondents was 16.29% from different grades of high school. The participants were Bosnian students in private high school which use English as the language of instruction. Students were required to study English language intensively for one academic year in the first year of high school with a minimum workload of thirteen hours of week of English lessons.

### **Instrumentation**

In this research, Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) developed by Horwitz (1988) was administered to investigate Bosnian foreign language learners' beliefs on language learning. The inventory was translated into Bosnian Language in order to avoid misunderstanding. The original survey BALLI includes thirty-four questions in Likert Scale format assess learners' beliefs in five areas: 1) the difficulty of language learning , 2) foreign language aptitude , 3) the nature of language learning , 4) learning and communication strategies , and 5) motivation and expectations. The Likert Scale questions used a scale ranging from 1(strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

### **Procedure**

All participants completed the questionnaire and the demographic survey consist of questions regarding age, gender, grade and nationality in a regular foreign language classes at the beginning of the 2013/2014 academic year to investigate the students learners' beliefs in five main areas as the above.

## Results and Discussions

**Table 1: Foreign Language Aptitude**

| Item | Statement   | Total | Total Disagree<br>1+2 |      | Neutral<br>3 |      | Total Agree<br>4+5 |      |
|------|---|-------|-----------------------|------|--------------|------|--------------------|------|
|      |   |       | N                     | %    | N            | %    | N                  | %    |
| 1    | It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.                        | 429   | 36                    | 8.3  | 26           | 6    | 367                | 85.1 |
| 2    | Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages such as English.        | 431   | 35                    | 8.1  | 56           | 13   | 340                | 78.9 |
| 10   | It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.      | 431   | 61                    | 14.1 | 107          | 24.8 | 263                | 70   |
| 15   | I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.                                  | 430   | 64                    | 14.8 | 176          | 40.8 | 190                | 44.2 |
| 22   | Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.                                  | 427   | 193                   | 44.8 | 166          | 38.5 | 68                 | 15.8 |
| 29   | People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages. | 430   | 244                   | 56.6 | 131          | 30.4 | 55                 | 12.7 |
| 32   | People who speak more than one language are intelligent.                                  | 428   | 85                    | 19.7 | 111          | 25.8 | 232                | 54.3 |
| 33   | Bosnian people are good at learning foreign languages.                                    | 431   | 56                    | 12.9 | 178          | 41.3 | 197                | 45.7 |
| 34   | Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.   | 429   | 60                    | 13.9 | 67           | 15.5 | 302                | 70.1 |

Table 1 shows the students' beliefs about foreign language aptitude and focuses on natural skills to learn a foreign language. Amazingly the majority of respondents (85%) in this part either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that 'It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language' indicates that they have a natural exposure to them in daily life from a young age. In parallel with this statement participants (80%) also showed a high level of notion about inborn special ability to learn a foreign language such as English. Nearly half of the students (46%) either strongly believed or believed that Bosnian people are good at learning foreign language, while

(41%) remained undecided. Although the students are not English major learners 70% of them believe that it is easier to learn a foreign language for those who already speak another one. However, the majority of respondents showed a negative attitude to the question which argues that ‘People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages’. Only 12.7% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed whereas about 57% of respondents did not agree with this and another 30% remained uncertain.

With regard to ability, the respondents had a different approach about learning the language. 44% of the students held moderate opinions about their ability to learn foreign languages while 79% of them indicated relatively high opinion about other people believing that they have a special ability for learning foreign languages such as English. Another interesting belief was obtained in question related with men and women. Only 15% of the participants agreed on the notion that women are better than men at learning languages while 45% of learners did not agree and 38% of them remained undecided. Additionally, 54% of respondents stated a positive opinion about the intelligence on language learning, and about 25% were unsure. Finally, 70% of participants believed that everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.

**Table 2: Difficulty of Language Learning**

| Item | Statement  | Total | Total Disagree<br>1+2 |      | Neutral<br>3 |      | Total Agree<br>4+5 |      |
|------|--|-------|-----------------------|------|--------------|------|--------------------|------|
|      |  |       | N                     | %    | N            | %    | N                  | %    |
| 3    | Some languages are easier to learn than others.                                | 430   | 25                    | 5.8  | 20           | 4.6  | 385                | 89.3 |
| 6    | I believe that I will learn to speak English well.                             | 430   | 29                    | 6.7  | 33           | 7.7  | 368                | 85.4 |
| 24   | In learning English, it is easier to speak than to understand what people say. | 431   | 226                   | 52.5 | 133          | 30.9 | 72                 | 16.7 |
| 28   | In learning English, reading is easier than speaking and                       | 427   | 109                   | 25.5 | 173          | 40.1 | 145                | 33.7 |

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|    |   |     |     |      |     |      |     |      |
|----|---|-----|-----|------|-----|------|-----|------|
|    | listening.  |     |     |      |     |      |     |      |
| 35 | In learning English, writing is easier than speaking and listening  | 429 | 193 | 44.8 | 152 | 35.3 | 84  | 19.5 |
| 4  | I think English is:<br>a) a very difficult language<br>b) a difficult language<br>c) a language of medium difficulty<br>d) an easy language<br>e) a very easy language  | 428 | 45  | 10.5 | 196 | 45.5 | 187 | 43.6 |
| 14 | If someone spent one hour a day learning English, how long would it take him or her to speak English well.<br>a) less than a year<br>b) 1-2 years<br>c) 3-5 years<br>d) 5-10 years<br>e) you can't learn a language in 1 hour a day | 427 | 290 | 67.2 | 79  | 18.3 | 58  | 13.4 |

There have been a lot of causes referred to language learning difficulties, predominantly; anxiety, motivation, effort, learning strategies and aptitude. However, one of the most important factors is a belief that the students hold in the classroom. As it is demonstrated in the table above, the majority of participants accounted their opinions on Difficulty of Language Learning. Almost all students (90%) think that some languages are easier to learn than other languages. Another 85% of the participants demonstrated a fairly positive attitude to learning English Well. Regarding four skills, Respondents claimed that to understand what people say is the easiest one, then respectively reading, and finally writing.

Many factors influence the rate of progress through these three proficiency levels and the level learners acquire by the end of high school.

However, a considerable number of students (11%) believe that English is a very difficult or a difficult language. Such assumed beliefs may be detrimental to learning. Therefore, it is very

important to identify learners' beliefs and that may lead to enable teachers and authors of textbooks to devise learning strategies that support or correct negative beliefs and improve student proficiency (Kuntz, 1999).

**Table 3: The Nature of Language Learning**

| Item | Statement  | Total | Total Disagree 1+2 |      | Neutral 3 |      | Total Agree 4+5 |      |
|------|--|-------|--------------------|------|-----------|------|-----------------|------|
|      |  |       | N                  | %    | N         | %    | N               | %    |
| 8    | It is necessary to know the customs, the cultures, and the ways of life of English-speaking people (such as the British, Americans, or Australians) in order to speak English correctly and appropriately in a particular context. | 428   | 202                | 46.9 | 114       | 26.5 | 111             | 25.8 |
| 11   | It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country such as England, the United States, or Australia.   | 431   | 47                 | 10.9 | 63        | 14.6 | 321             | 74.5 |
| 16   | Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words.  | 430   | 64                 | 14.8 | 98        | 22.7 | 268             | 62.3 |
| 20   | Learning the grammar is an important part of learning English.   | 431   | 33                 | 7.7  | 43        | 10   | 355             | 82.4 |
| 25   | Learning English is different from learning other school subjects.   | 429   | 51                 | 11.8 | 148       | 34.8 | 230             | 53.4 |
| 26   | Learning how to translate from Bosnian is an important part of learning English.   | 430   | 40                 | 9.3  | 78        | 18.1 | 312             | 72.4 |

Humans are born with a natural skill or an ability to learn another language. What it proves is everybody has a capacity to learn a foreign language until they find the right conditions to come about. In the above table students evaluated their approaches to the nature of language learning. Almost half of the participants (47%) did not agree with the statement that 'it is necessary to know the foreign culture in order to speak a

foreign language’. On the contrary, 75% of respondents think that studying the English in an English-speaking country is the best but another 25% think that it is not the only way to learn language. The majority of the participants (82%) believe that learning the grammar is the most important part of language learning. However, 62% of respondents think that learning vocabulary is an important part of learning English.

Surprisingly, 72% of respondents reported that they find translation beneficial, and this has been confirmed by empirical research. O’Malley and Chamot have stated that translation accounted for over 30 percent of strategy uses. Beginner students mostly rely on repetition, translation and transfer, whereas more advanced students resort to inferencing, though without abandoning familiar strategies such as repetition and translation (1990:127). These results can be referred to students’ previous experience of learning English in primary school. As students have some other subjects at school, they do not hold different beliefs about learning English. Finally, about 62% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that learning English is related with a lot of memorization.

**Table 4: Learning and Communication Strategies.**

| Item | Statement   | Total | Total Disagree<br>1+2 |      | Neutral<br>3 |      | Total Agree<br>4+5 |      |
|------|---|-------|-----------------------|------|--------------|------|--------------------|------|
|      |   |       | N                     | %    | N            | %    | N                  | %    |
| 7    | It is important to speak English with a correct pronunciation.      | 430   | 64                    | 14.9 | 79           | 18.3 | 287                | 66.5 |
| 9    | We shouldn’t say anything in English until we can say it correctly. | 431   | 273                   | 63.3 | 80           | 18.6 | 78                 | 18.1 |
| 12   | I enjoy practicing English with the foreigners I meet.              | 431   | 59                    | 13.6 | 73           | 16.9 | 299                | 69.4 |
| 13   | It’s O.K. to guess if we don’t know a word in English.              | 429   | 70                    | 16.3 | 118          | 27.4 | 241                | 55.9 |
| 17   | In learning English, it is important to practice a lot.             | 430   | 37                    | 8.5  | 54           | 12.5 | 339                | 78.7 |
| 18   | I feel timid speaking English with other people.                    | 429   | 186                   | 43.4 | 108          | 25.1 | 135                | 31.3 |

|    |   |     |    |      |     |      |     |      |
|----|---|-----|----|------|-----|------|-----|------|
| 19 | If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on. | 430 | 98 | 22.8 | 111 | 25.8 | 221 | 51.3 |
| 21 | In learning English, it is important to practice with multi-media.  | 429 | 29 | 6.7  | 55  | 12.8 | 346 | 80.2 |

“Communication strategies refer to techniques learners use when there is a gap between their knowledge of the language and their communicative intent” (Wenden, 1986:10). e. The main aim of learning a foreign language is to be able to communicate. It is through communication that people send and receive messages effectively and negotiate meaning (Rubin & Thompson, 1994: 30).

The above table shows the beliefs about learning and communication strategies that the students hold in English. In order to speak English fluently, most of the participants (80%) acknowledged the importance of multi-media to practice their English. Another 79% of respondents approved the benefit of practising English a lot. A further great number of participants (70%) asserted that they would like to practice English with the foreigners they meet

Embarrassment is considered one of the drawbacks in a foreign language. Those who have self-conscious emotion they are likely to fail, mostly in fluency. 31% of students feel timid when they speak English with other people, which is relatively big number and another 25% remained undecided in the same statement. Deducing the meaning from the context is highly appreciated and recommended skill in learning English. Taking this into account, respondents (60%) realized the importance of this notion and demonstrated positive attitude. However, the same students (18%) either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “We shouldn’t say anything in English until we can say it correctly”. Finally, 51% of respondents indicated that

they view accuracy more important than fluency which is unrealistic beliefs regarding accuracy and error correction.

**Table 5: Motivations and Expectations**

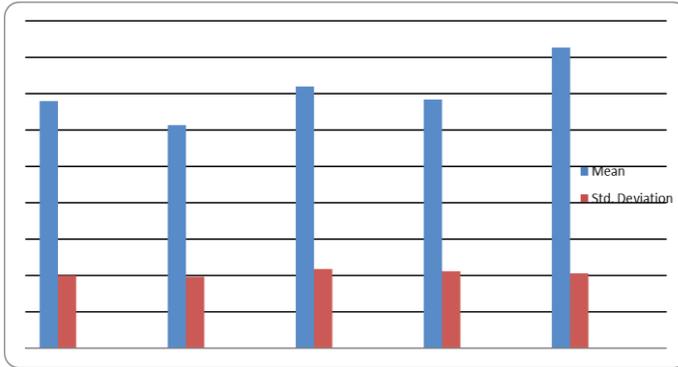
| Item | Statement   | Total | Total Disagree<br>1+2 |      | Neutral<br>3 |      | Total Agree<br>4+5 |      |
|------|---|-------|-----------------------|------|--------------|------|--------------------|------|
|      |   |       | N                     | %    | N            | %    | N                  | %    |
| 23   | If I get to speak this language very well, I will have many opportunities to use it.  | 428   | 32                    | 7.4  | 23           | 5.3  | 373                | 86.6 |
| 27   | If I can use English very well, I will have 5better opportunities for a good job.   | 430   | 39                    | 9    | 19           | 4.4  | 372                | 86.3 |
| 30   | Bosnian people feel that it is very important to learn English  | 431   | 48                    | 11.1 | 101          | 23.4 | 282                | 65.4 |
| 31   | I would like to learn English so that I can get to know English speakers.   | 429   | 59                    | 13.7 | 93           | 21.6 | 277                | 64.3 |
| 36   | I would like to have friends from other countries.  | 429   | 33                    | 7.6  | 49           | 11.4 | 347                | 80.9 |
| 37   | I want to learn English well because it can help me reach all kind of information from internet.                                    | 430   | 77                    | 6.3  | 34           | 7.9  | 369                | 85.6 |
| 38   | English is important for undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.  | 430   | 27                    | 6.3  | 35           | 8.1  | 368                | 85.4 |
| 39   | Learning English will help me communicate with people from all around the world because English is the most widely spoken language. | 430   | 29                    | 6.7  | 22           | 5.1  | 379                | 88.1 |

The above table shows that 65% of Bosnian people have relatively high motivation and feel that it is very important to learn English and another 86.6% of participants believe that they want to be able to speak English well. They also stated that people in Bosnia and Herzegovina have instrumental motivation and 86% of respondents believe that if they learn English very well, they will have better opportunities for a good job. However, 64% of participants expressed a moderate amount of integrative motivation. They want to learn English

so that they can get to know people who speak English (such as the British, Americans, or Australians) better and another 80.9% of respondents proved the integrative motivation by expressing their wishes to have friends from other countries. They are also interested in the culture associated with that language. In addition, 88% of respondents remarked that they are interactively motivated and they think learning English will help them communicate with people from other countries because English is an international language and it is widely used all around the world. Another 85.4% of the participants showed that they learn English for their higher education and academic career because nowadays, not only prestigious and well-paid job, but also academic research requires proficiency in this language. Those who speak English well, have a big advantage almost in everything. Moreover, 85.6% of respondents stated that they want to learn English well because it can provide them with extra opportunities and access information from around the world.

## Conclusion

| Area                                  | Total | Mean     | Median   | Mode     | Std. Deviation |
|---------------------------------------|-------|----------|----------|----------|----------------|
| Foreign Language Aptitude             | 430   | 3.397778 | 3.444444 | 3.444444 | 0.999          |
| The Difficulty of Language Learning   | 430   | 3.0675   | 2.875    | 3        | 0.9815         |
| The Nature of Language Learning       | 430   | 3.598571 | 3.857143 | 3.714286 | 1.089429       |
| Learning and Communication Strategies | 430   | 3.42     | 3.555556 | 3.444444 | 1.058667       |
| Motivation & Expectations             | 430   | 4.13375  | 4.5625   | 4.75     | 1.03           |



The present study aimed to investigate what beliefs students in high school held about foreign language learning in Bosnia & Herzegovina. 430 students participated in this study that came from different regions to study at private Sarajevo College. The respondents' data was analyzed by Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The empirical findings identified the notion that the students held and brought into classroom environment were relatively positive. Kuntz (1997, p.5) points out that beliefs as notions about language learning that students have acquired before coming into the classroom may play decisive role in foreign language learning.

In order to examine the views of respondents on motivation and expectations, the above table was created to show the mean and the standard deviation of each area. The data revealed that the mean score for about 430 students are relatively close to each other as indicated in their standard deviation. In terms of motivation and expectation, the participants showed considerably high scores in foreign language learning. With a possible score range of 1 to 5, the actual mean of items 32 and 35 were roughly 3.75, as well as a median 4.00 and as a mode of 4.00 which are close to "agree" range, and the rest of items' means, medians and modes revealed very high scores which are close to "strongly agree". However, we cannot say exactly the same on the difficulty of

language learning. The respondents showed less than moderate opinions on these items.

In order to investigate the views of participants on the areas of foreign language aptitude and learning and communication, the values above table described that the respondents held moderate opinions about the intelligence on language learning. Mostly the students did not support the idea of gender ability on language learning. The data indicated that the mean, the median and the mode scores for about 427 students were about 3.5.

Finally, as demonstrated in Figure 6 above, the results showed that the participants held rather strong beliefs about the nature of language learning as well, the respondents' views on items 11, 16, 20, 25, 26 were rather homogenous and the mean was 3.5 which were above the average.

This study has also attempted to enlighten and draw attention to the importance of identifying the learners' beliefs and approaches towards foreign language learning. Wenden (1991) and Yang (1991) stated that the time and effort to investigate and develop positive beliefs in the classroom will lead to effective learning strategy use and minimize negative beliefs that inhibit learning.

Taking this into account, some pedagogical implications can be ascertained from this study. First of all, identification of students' beliefs and self- assurance about language learning will strengthen the learners' beliefs and remove misconceptions and possible negative notions. Secondly, Beliefs are changeable; learners drive their beliefs from different sources such as social environment, cultural background, personality traits etc and they bring these misconceptions into the classroom which may lead to a less effective language learning. In this situation, Cortazzi (1990 cited in Peacock 1999) advises teachers to develop knowledge of comprehension to learners' cultural awareness because of the role it plays in their beliefs.

Identification and the relationship between learners' beliefs and their performances on their possible effect on language learning may increase awareness and even adjustment of their expectations. If the learners become aware of their beliefs with the guidance of their teachers, they will take the advantage of learning another language, which is supposed to provide better opportunities in their jobs in the future. Investigating learners' beliefs enables the learners to develop 'a critical and informed awareness of learning options' (Wenden 1986 cited in Erlenawati 2002). Such knowledge may also help teachers modify the syllabus content, teaching methods and the curriculum itself.

The results revealed that Bosnian students have positive and realistic beliefs about foreign language in terms of motivation and expectations about learning English as a foreign language, the nature of language learning and communication strategies. The findings also indicated that Bosnian students hold less positive and realistic beliefs about language learning as regard the difficulty of language learning and foreign language aptitude.

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