

An Empirical Study on English Learning Beliefs for Art Students in Higher Vocational College

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Abstract

English teaching methodology is the external factor of learning rather than internal factor that can play a decisive role in learning to a large extent. Many researchers have gradually switched their attention to probing into various factors that affect English achievements from the perspective of students, which is called individual differences research and have become one of the research priorities. What beliefs learners hold will have direct influence on the choice of English learning strategies as well as the ultimate effect of learning. For this reason, vocational English teachers should strive to help students establish positive and beneficial English learning beliefs and get rid of the negative and detrimental English learning beliefs, with a view to helping them to improve their English proficiency.

Keywords: Achievements, Correlation, English learning beliefs, Vocational art majors

Introduction

Of the available researches on English Language beliefs (LLB), most of the emphases were on the undergraduates in universities rather than art majors in vocational colleges, whose English proficiency maintained awful status quo due largely to their majoring in fine arts and neglecting other subjects learning since their secondary school. Compared to undergraduates, they were not adequately self-assured of being expert in English and held negative and even wrong views about language learning. Be that as it may, the distinct differences between undergraduates and vocational college art majors (VCAM) were paid no attention to by researchers in China and empirical researches on LLB were still rarely able to find, which implied that it was extremely necessary and valuable to make in-depth and comprehensive investigations on LLB held by art majors. Therefore based on quantitative analysis, the current research is administered to explore how LLB affects English achievements of art majors in the Chinese context.

The study on art majors' LLB has theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it analyze the current situation and roles of art majors' LLB and enrich relevant studies on this subject, which suggests that vocational English teachers should make efforts to facilitate them to establish positive and beneficial language learning beliefs, and get rid of the negative and detrimental language learning beliefs, with a view to better helping them to improve their English proficiency and achievements. Practically, it provide them with important learning beliefs such as self-management beliefs, self-efficacy beliefs, language learning strategies beliefs, etc. and make them conscious of these significant beliefs that have direct correlations on their English learning outcomes. Being that learners are expected to have adequate abilities to proceed with language learning on their own in the future and undertake life-long learning, which necessarily require learner to hold a set of correct learning beliefs that inspire them to achieve this goal. Based on the above facts, it is extremely sig-

nificant to facilitate students to apply LLB to language learning, which could cause them introspect their learning behaviors, rectify their wrong or negative attitudes toward language learning, and then make satisfactory progress. All in all, art majors should build up correct learning beliefs to develop the consciousness of autonomic learning; what's more, English teachers should have clear ideas about their students' LLB and thereby, make their learning teaching to meet the demands of various learners.

Literature Review

Horwitz (1987) claims that previous language learning experiences of learners play a vital role in shaping their LLB. She defines learners' beliefs about language learning as the preconceived notions or ideas when learners are confronted with task of learning foreign of second language. Falvell (1987) defines that LLB is subordinate to one's self-knowledge, which refers to how learners ponder themselves as well as their learning objectives and task. Wen (1995) claims that external and internal factors can influence and even transform learner's LLB, thus she defines LLB as an integrated system of learners' perceptions about their previous individual experience and other people's influences in the language learning environment. Wenden (1998) defines language learning beliefs as the component part of metaknowledge in learners brains about how to learn language knowledge, language skills, communicative competence etc. To sum up, LLB are mutual product of individuals' previous learning experiences and cognitive environment, which have direct impacts on subsequent language learning activities.

Methodology

Under the guidance of the metacognitive theory and based on the previous researches, this research will give detailed descriptions about the methodology, including research participants, investigation instruments, and data collection and analysis, with a view to investigating the four research questions below.

Participants

The participants involved in the current research were 183 two-year art majors, with an average age of 20, chosen from three parallel large-scale classes in Vocational College of Wuhan Textile University (VCWTU), whose major respectively were decoration art design, environmental art design and clothing design.

Investigation instruments

Investigation instruments were mainly comprised of two instruments, one was language learning beliefs questionnaire basically adopted from Horwitz's Beliefs about BALLI (Language Learning Inventory, 1987) and Liu's LLBQ (Language Learning Beliefs Questionnaire, 2003), with a few items modified and added on the basis of a pilot study, and the other was English achievements of the CET-Band 3 (National College English Test-Band3 in China) collected from the Dean's Office in VCWTU.

With regard to the questionnaire, it was composed of two sections: section one concerned personal profiles such as name, gender, age and major; section two involved 52 items on language learning beliefs with five Lickert Scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. In consideration to the fact that art majors had poor English proficiency, the questionnaire was written in Chinese for their having a better comprehension of the questions and avoiding misunderstanding.

Concerning CET-Band 3, it was different from the English final exam and has already been standardized in Public English Test System in China for many years, which can measure college

students' English proficiency. Previous studies and experimental data have consistently proved that the CET-Band 3 enjoys the high validity and reliability in the domestic education system.

Data collection and analysis

In terms of empirical study, it is of vital importance to test and verify validity and reliability of questionnaire. The statistic analysis result shows that the reliability coefficient of the current questionnaire is reliable. The Cronbach's Alpha of these sets of items is more than 0.8

The ELB questionnaires was administrated to 183 students in three parallel large classes of art majors in VCWTU respectively, During the whole process, the 183 participants expressed rather cooperative attitudes and filled out the questionnaires on schedule. Among the 183 collected questionnaires, 167 questionnaires were regarded as valid, and 16 questionnaires were considered invalid due to missing values. After that, the art majors' responses to the questionnaire and their English achievements of CET-Band 3 Test were fed into a computer program, which is termed as Statistical Package of Social Science (SPSS).

With reference to the present study, the four approaches to data analysis of SPSS were adopted to analyze the four questions: (1) Descriptive statistics (means and percentages) is employed to investigate fundamental state of art majors' English learning beliefs; (2) The factor analysis approach is used to categorize 52 items English learning beliefs into six groups, including self-management beliefs, self-efficacy beliefs, motivational beliefs, beliefs about language learning strategies, mother-tongue reliance beliefs, beliefs about language aptitude and the nature of language learning; (3) T-test and one-way analysis of variance are used to disclose the correlations among majors, genders and the higher scorers and lower scorers in the CET-Band 3 Test; and (4) Pearson correlation analysis is employed to research the correlation between language learning beliefs and English achievements. This method will provide convincing proofs for the coming discussion.

Results and Discussion

Under the guidance of metacognition theory and based on the data collected, this chapter will analyze and discuss the four key questions addressed in the first chapter, that is, (1) overall picture of students' response to ELB Questionnaire; (2) differences between genders and majors on ELB; (3) differences between higher scorers and lower scorers on ELB; (4) correlations between ELB and English achievements for VCAM.

Factor analysis of ELB

Prior to factor analysis of ELB, whether the original observation variables are appropriate for employing this analytical method has to be confirmed firstly. According to KMO and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, the suitable KMO value should be greater than 0.7 (but less than 0.8) for factor analysis, the statistic analysis result in Table 1 shows that the current ELB Questionnaire is appropriate to factor analysis.

Table 1 KMO and Bartlett's Test of ELB

| | | |
|---|--------------------|----------|
| Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy | | 0.765 |
| Bartlett's Test of Sphericity | Approx. Chi-Square | 4635.392 |
| | df | 1286 |
| | Sig. | 0.000 |

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Factor analysis of the questionnaire generates six groups of factors responsible for art majors' ELB. These factors named according to the value of factor loading coefficient are respectively self-management beliefs, self-efficacy beliefs, motivational beliefs, beliefs about language learning strategies, mother-tongue reliance beliefs, beliefs about language aptitude and the nature of language learning. As for those items with lower factor loading coefficient will not be made any further discussion in the current study. The six groups of factors will be analyzed and discussed according to the value of variance contribution and the percentage that art majors' responses to each item was calculated for the purpose of giving comprehensive descriptions of their basic situation of ELB.

Overall picture of students' response to ELB questionnaire

In order to describe the overall picture of ELB, descriptive statistics analysis containing mean of art majors' responses to each item on ELB Questionnaire will be made. Table 2 depicts the entire tendency of the participants' responses to their ELB. In accordance with the criterion by Oxford (1990): the mean of 4.20 or higher are usually considered mostly strong agreement and 1.96 or lower are commonly regarded as strong disagreement.

It is apparent in Table 2 that art majors most strongly agree on four items concerning ELB. They were respectively listed below: (1) seeing more original movie and listening to more English radio is beneficial to improving English proficiency (item8, mean=4.2814); (2) Both in and out of English classes, speaking English as much as possible can be helpful to improving English proficiency (item9, mean=4.2455); (3) English is practically a matter of studying a quantity of vocabulary and grammar rules learning (item19, mean=4.2096); and (4) Poor English proficiency is mainly because I did not work hard (item42, mean=4.2275). The items 8, 9 concern the beliefs about language learning strategies, the item 19 involves the nature of language learning and the item 42 relates to beliefs about self-efficacy. By contrast, art majors most strongly disagreed on two items in regard to ELB. They were respectively arranged below: (1) girl students are more suitable for English learning than boy students (item3, mean=1.8802); (2) English learning does not help in my majoring study (item36, mean=1.9281). The item 3 concern the nature of language learning and the item 36 involves beliefs about motivation.

Differences between genders and majors on ELB

The second question to be addressed is whether language learning beliefs held by art majors will vary with genders and majors. Independent sample T-test manifested that with regard to ELB, there exists discrepancies between boy students and girl counterparts in genders and majors. As is displayed in Table 2, four items concerning ELB are listed below, which respectively involves beliefs about language aptitude (item 1), beliefs about the nature of language learning (item 18), motivational beliefs (item 44), and self-efficacy beliefs (item 45).

Table 2 T-test: ELB significant differences in genders

| Factor | Items | Group | Cases | Mean | Std. Deviation | df | T-value | p |
|--------|-------|-------|-------|--------|----------------|-----|---------|-------|
| 6 | 1 | Boys | 31 | 2.9677 | .79515 | 165 | -2.881 | 0.004 |
| | | Girls | 136 | 3.4044 | .75404 | | | |
| | 18 | Boys | 31 | 3.7097 | .78288 | 165 | -2.580 | 0.014 |
| | | Girls | 136 | 4.0956 | .59478 | | | |
| | 44 | Boys | 31 | 3.7419 | .85509 | 165 | -3.029 | 0.003 |
| | | Girls | 136 | 4.1765 | .68726 | | | |
| | 45 | Boys | 31 | 3.4516 | .85005 | 165 | 2.489 | 0.016 |
| | | Girls | 136 | 3.0147 | 1.01094 | | | |

It can be clearly seen in Table 2, on item 1 that some people have a gift for learning English, the mean of boy students' response to it is 2.9677, while the mean of girl counterparts' response to it is 3.4044, which implies that girl students are more confident of language aptitude than boy counterparts. This result is a normal phenomenon because it is generally assumed that the girls are more skilled in acquiring languages than boys, especially in intermediate and advanced learning stages, which may also account for the fact that the quantity of girls dominate over those of boys in the department of foreign languages at the university (Liu 2003).

On item 18 that English learning is practically a matter of reading aloud and reciting textbooks, the mean of boy students' response to it is 3.7097, while the mean of girl counterparts' response to it is 4.0956, which suggests that compared with boys, girls attached greater importance to English learning by means of memorizing English. Wen (1996) mentioned in her article that when the vast majority of learners called to mind their successful experience in language acquisition, they agreed by mere coincidence that it was absolutely efficient shortcut to learn English depending on practicing and memorizing the English learning materials at the early stage. Another case could give better proof of the fact that reciting English articles with moderate difficulty had improved their English proficiency considerably. As a matter of fact, the author had ever made didactical experiment on art majors who were required to learn about sixty essays of New Concept English by heart to improve their English speaking abilities in a short time, the experimental results showed that for those who had poor English proficiency, it was a effective way to improve their oral English abilities, pronounce accurately, train the language sense replying on the means of imitating and memorizing the English text designed for them.

Differences between higher scorers and lower scorers on ELB

The third question to be addressed is whether language learning beliefs held by art majors will vary with English achievement, to put it another way, whether higher scorers and lower scorers show striking differences in the matter of ELB.

Han (2004) emphasized that the sample must be 30 or great than 30 (cases \geq 30), the mean of the sample will indicate normal distribution. Therefore, In accordance with the arrangement the way from high score to low score in the CET-Band 3 Test, art student's achievements were divided into two groups. One group named higher scorers (Greater than or equal to 64 points) selected the top 35 student, the other group named lower scorers (Less than or equal to 39 points) selected the bottom 36 student. As shown in Table 3, Independent sample t-test has proven that there exist significant discrepancies between the two groups of students in terms of their grades.

Table 3 T-test: comparisons between HS and LS in the CET-Band 3 Test

| Variable | Cases | Mean | Std. Deviation | T-value | df | p |
|----------|-------|---------|----------------|---------|----|--------|
| HS | 35 | 70.2143 | 5.12962 | 35.528 | 69 | 0.0000 |
| LS | 36 | 34.3472 | 3.10258 | | | 0.0000 |

HS= higher scorers LS=lower scorers

Thereupon, with respect to striking differences in ELB, another independent sample T-test manifests that there exist specific discrepancies between higher scorers and lower counterparts. As it is displayed in Table 5, six items regarding ELB are arranged in order, which just involve the two groups of language learning beliefs. They are respectively beliefs about language learning strategies (item 7), and self-efficacy beliefs (items 33, 35, 45, 49, 51, 52).

Table 4 T-test: striking differences in ELB held by HS and LS

| Item | MeanH | MeanL | T-value | df | p |
|------|--------|--------|---------|----|-------|
| 7 | 4.0000 | 3.6571 | 2.345 | 69 | 0.022 |
| 33 | 4.0286 | 2.9167 | 2.097 | 69 | 0.040 |
| 35 | 3.8000 | 2.8889 | 4.576 | 69 | 0.000 |
| 45 | 2.4571 | 3.3056 | -3.658 | 69 | 0.001 |
| 49 | 2.8286 | 3.5278 | -3.109 | 69 | 0.003 |
| 50 | 3.0286 | 3.9167 | -3.281 | 69 | 0.002 |

MeanH = mean of higher scorers ELB MeanL= mean of lower scorers ELB

As is indicated in Table 4, on item 7 that knowing English cultures can be good for improving English proficiency, the mean of higher scorers' response to it is 4.0000, while the mean of lower counterparts' response to it is 3.6571, that is to say, higher scorers took a more positive attitude towards the learning of cultural knowledge. Being that the mutual effect and inseparability between language and culture, the lack of cultural knowledge of the English-speaking countries would unavoidably hinder students' development of listening, speaking, reading and writing capabilities to a great extent. Therefore, lower scorers, who took a relatively negative attitude toward cultural knowledge, undoubtedly impede further improvement in their English proficiency.

On item 33 that I have confidence to acquire good scores in the CET-Band 3 Test, the mean of higher scorers' response to it is 4.0000, while the mean of lower counterparts' response to it is 3.6571. On item 35 that I believe that I have the capacity to learn English well, the mean of higher scorers' response to it is 3.8000, while the mean of lower scorers' response to it is 2.8889. These two items' responses manifests that higher scorers had more confidence to learn English well and got good marks in examinations, which embodies the importance of confidence in the learning process. According to Wen's (1996) researches, Lower scorers, who were generally obliged to learn, had not adequate confidence in learning English well and thus had established negative and pessimistic beliefs about learning, which was bound to affect their learning motivation and resulted in passive learning. By contrast, higher scorers, who were usually initiative to learn, had sufficient confidence in English learning, and had constructed positive and optimistic beliefs about learning, which contributed to intrinsic motivation of learning and active learning. From this, it could be explained why there are significant differences between them.

On item 45 that I feel that the English textbooks too difficult to correspond to my current English proficiency the mean of higher scorers' response to it is 2.4571, while the mean of lower counterparts' response to it is 3.3056, which suggests that by contrast, higher scorers thought that the current English learning material was just suitable to their English proficiency. Supposing language learners are exposed to comprehensible spoken and written learning input materials, they can increase their underlying linguistic competence (krashen, 1985). That is to say, difficult learning materials that are not suitable to lower scorers result in inefficient learning.

On item 49 that my poor English proficiency is mainly because I have no interest in English learning, the mean of higher scorers' response to it is 2.8286, while the mean of lower counterparts' response to it is 3.5278. On item 50 that I cannot learn English well is due largely to previously poor English foundation, the mean of higher scorers' response to it is 3.0286, while the mean of lower scorers' responses to it is 3.9167. From these two items' responses, it could be seen that lower scorers who show no interest in English inevitably result in poor English foundation (item 49), while

lower scorers who had poor English foundation gradually lose interest in English (item 50), these two factors interact as both cause and effect.

From above result analysis, higher scorers obviously took a more positive and optimistic attitude toward learning strategies and self-efficacy beliefs, which suggested that students who had more learning strategies and self-efficacy beliefs would be good performance in English learning.

Correlations between ELB and English achievements forVCAM

The last question to be addressed is whether there exist correlations between ELB and art majors' English achievements. According to Pearson correlation analysis, the correlation coefficient of the three groups of ELB and English achievements achieved statistically significant requirements. These three groups of ELB were respectively beliefs about self-efficacy ($R=0.350$, $**P<0.01$), beliefs about motivation ($R=0.219$, $**P<0.01$) and beliefs about mother-tongue reliance ($R=-0.213$).

Table 5 Correlation analysis on six groups of ELB and art student's achievements

| | BSM | BSE | BM | BLLS | BMTR | BLP |
|----------|------------|------------|-----------|-------------|-------------|------------|
| r | .024 | .350** | .219** | .134 | -.213** | .054 |
| Grades p | .842 | .000 | .005 | .084 | .006 | .491 |
| n | 167 | 167 | 167 | 167 | 167 | 167 |

Notes: BSM= beliefs about self-management; BSE=beliefs about self-efficacy; BM= beliefs about motivation; BLLS=beliefs about language learning strategies; BMTR=beliefs about mother-tongue reliance; BLP=beliefs about language aptitude and the nature of language learning

Among the six groups of ELB, as is displayed in Table 5, the second and third group of ELB had positive correlation with art student's achievement. To be specific, Beliefs about self-efficacy had high positive correlation with English achievements ($R=0.350$), which meant that the stronger the self-efficacy, the better the students' English achievements. This result bears much resemblance on Chang's (2008) survey that self-efficacy and learning motivation can predict on English scores positively with the help of multiple regression analysis.

In addition, Beliefs about motivation also had high positive correlation with English achievements ($R=0.219$), which implies that students with stronger learning motivation would make more progress in English learning. The motivation is a driving force that can promote, guide and maintain learners' learning activities and make them achieve fixed learning target, which can be divided into intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refer mainly to the interest showed in learning content or tasks, while extrinsic motivation refer principally to outside influences, such as rewards, promotion, further education or avoid criticism. Being that learning behavior is dominated by the consciousness, the English learners was firstly required to have intensive motivation for English learning, and then put it into practice.

In the meanwhile, Beliefs about mother-tongue reliance had relatively high negative correlation with English achievements ($R=-0.213$), which means that the more dependent on mother tongue, the worse students' achievements. This result was in line with Liu's (2003: 162) research that the better English proficiency, the less dependent on mother tongue, while the worse English proficiency, the more reliant on the mother tongue.

To sum up, through making comprehensive analyses on the questionnaire, the current research gives detailed descriptions of art majors' ELB, such as what efficient ELB and inefficient ones are, what ELB higher scorers and lower counterparts hold respectively, and what ELB can improve learners' English achievements. Therefore, the analyses and discussions of the research are of

great help for students to construct positive and beneficial ELB, eliminate the negative and detrimental ELB, and cultivate their conscious employment of ELB in the process of English learning.

Conclusion

Major findings

Some important conclusions can be drawn in the current research. Firstly, the research results manifested that the majority of students generally has stronger self-management beliefs, and took a positive attitude toward important language learning strategies, whereas they had weak self-efficacy beliefs and held a negative attitude towards beliefs about mother-tongue reliance. Secondly, there exist significant differences between boy students and girl counterparts. By contrast, girl students had stronger self-efficacy and motivational beliefs; however, they showed no remarkable difference in language learning beliefs. Thirdly, there exists striking differences between higher scorers and lower counterparts. Compared with lower scorers, higher scorers had stronger self-efficacy and adequate confidence to learning English well, and took a positive attitude toward more effective language learning strategy. Lastly, among six group of ELB, self-efficacy beliefs and motivational beliefs had high positive correlation with English achievements, while Beliefs about mother-tongue reliance had relatively high negative correlation with English achievements.

Pedagogical implications

The learner-centered teaching mode today is more and more widely accepted by the teachers, the teacher's role is not limited to a single transfer of knowledge and, more importantly, they should undertake the responsibility for better stimulating students' learning qualities.

Firstly, English teachers should promptly discover student false or negative learning beliefs, to equip students with the knowledge of metacognitive and cognitive aspects of language learning, to establish correct beliefs about language learning. Therefore, it is necessary to make a detailed and comprehensive investigation on their own students' ELB. Some successful language masters could be invited to share their learning experience or to make lectures after the students are back into school, introducing the systematic and comprehensive characteristics of college English learning, as well as the correct language learning beliefs and learning methods. For the false or unfavorable English learning beliefs, "persuasive conversation" (Wenden, 1991) can be used to help students aware of the perniciousness of these ideas, so as to create positive and conducive language learning beliefs. By doing this, we can improve language learning as well as the quality of language teaching.

Secondly, English teachers should transfer themselves as far as possible from single knowledge giver into the learning guide, organizers, and helpers, to guide students to learn on their own (Voller, 1997). Since learning is a lifelong matter, even the best teachers could be nothing but external factors of learning. The most key factor should lie within the learners themselves. Consequently, learners should have a clearer understanding of English learning, for instance, the usage of language learning beliefs, and enhance self-regulation and self-assessment, such as carrying out a practical learning program and working out a learning method appropriate to themselves. In the process of learning, teachers are supposed to help students to establish correct and positive concepts of attribution, especially low English proficiency students. The teacher should help them to find out the reason of unsuccessful learning from the extent of efforts or the learning methods, rather than deny them from the aspect of lacking capacity. Considering that they generally had low sense of self-accomplishment, a lot of affirmation and encouragement should be given to enhance their sense of self-efficacy, and to establish self-confidence.

Thirdly, English teachers should strive to create a relaxed learning environment in classroom. A wide variety of language learning activities can be carried out by means of various classroom activities, teaching methods, and teaching modes, For instance, discussing topics in class, grouping for storytelling, impromptu speech contest, the spoken language competition, English singing contest, entertainment performances and other activities. The teacher can also guide the students to participate in the activities of the second class concerning their professional major learning, and conducting some special projects in order to create good atmosphere for learning, which enables students to have the opportunity to experience the knowledge usage of the English language learning anytime and anywhere. When they come to realize that English learning is related to their professional learning, recognize that English learning is useful and practical, they will maintain strong interest in English learning.

Fourthly, English teachers should help students to find effective learning strategies. Although most art student in vocational college acknowledged that choosing effective learning strategies was very important to learning English, however, how to choose effective strategies was what they should give more thought to, because they felt confused about the effective strategy and did not know which strategy would be effective strategy, what kind of learning strategies would be suitable for them. Therefore, as English teachers, understanding the individual differences of students, knowing what confusion exists for the students in English learning, assisting them to find out their proper learning strategies, and establishing short-term learning objectives and long-term learning objectives seem to be more important than teachers' simply completing the lesson and lecturing the book (Holec, 1981).

Lastly, English teachers should be skilled at utilizing the motivation to stimulate students' learning. Currently, facing difficult job hunting and high employment pressure, the students are very keen on proficiency examination and certificates obtaining. Hence, teachers can take full advantage of instrumental motivation to guide their skill learning. According to Questionnaire about students' personal information in the current study, it manifested that 131 out of 183 students are eager to improve their spoken English most. In this situation, oral teaching would be quite useful to be fulfilled on the basis of integration of motivation to meet the aspirations of students who are eager to improve oral communication, and to enhance the students' desire to learn.

Suggestions for future research

The current research aims at undertaking an in-depth and comprehensive investigation of ELB of art majors. By this empirical study, there are still some suggestions for future study. Firstly, participants involved the investigation should be of gender balance as far as possible. Serious gender imbalance may lead to inexact research results. Secondly, research fields should be expanded to the different types of schools, different disciplines, such as liberal arts majors, science majors, and engineering majors. Supposing investigation was restricted to students chosen from the same college or university, the research results may well not be extensively representative. Lastly, research methods should be diversified as many as possible, in addition to the questionnaire, semi-structured individual interviews and do in-depth case studies, etc. by doing so, the research concerning student' ELB and its influencing factors will be more comprehensive and credible.

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