

Undergraduate Level EFL Student's Beliefs About Language Learning

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Abstract:By providing quantitative data from the modified EFL version of Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) completed by the ELT undergraduate level students in one of the Turkish Universities, the survey was aimed to obtain generalizable conclusions about beliefs or notions about language learning of undergraduate level EFL students. The relationships among gender and years of education in the ELT department, as the impacting factors, and the participants' scores in the BALLI were statistically analyzed. The results were discussed in terms of the EFL students' the most important beliefs and the effect size of the gender and years of education as the variables on their beliefs about language learning.

1. Introduction

Beliefs are "psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true" (Richardson, 1996, p.102). More specifically, the term 'beliefs' about language learning are formed based on language learners' past experiences, background, their own culture, learning context, and some other personal factors (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005). Furthermore, Puchta (1999; pp.68-69) advocates that people understand and comprehend new information meaningfully by depending on their experience and existing knowledge and claimed that beliefs "are generalizations about cause and effect, and they influence our inner representation of the world around us. They help us to make sense of that world, and they determine how we think and how we act". This claim is confirmed with a specific aspect from Horwitz (1987) who states that almost every language learner has different beliefs or notions about learning a second language, in this respect, two foci points emerge: firstly, some of these varying beliefs and notions are the result of students' previous experience as learners learn a new language, and secondly, others are the result of their own cultural backgrounds.

Recent research on Beliefs about language learning has focused on the interaction between second language learners' individual characteristics (affective and cognitive) and learners' success in learning a new language. In this respect, language learners differ in metacognitive knowledge and beliefs that have impacts on such domains as academic learning, thinking, problem solving and logic solving (Kardash & Scholes, 1996). Moreover, learners' affective characteristics are related to the language learning capability (Schumann, 1998). Language teachers are mostly concerned with affective factors which are the feelings toward target language culture, cognitive factors such as learners' language aptitude and how they process information, and finally metacognitive factors such as language learning strategies, study skills and beliefs about language learning (Horwitz, 2008; p.7). Flavell (1979, 1981 cited in Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005) give importance to personal knowledge which is related to a person's metacognitive knowledge while learning a second language; in this context, cognitive and affective factors which have impact on learning are the components of personal knowledge.

Delving into the learners' beliefs is a must as successful learners are able to develop insightful beliefs about language learning process and discover their learning abilities and learning strategies which act as facilitators in learning (Bernat & Lloyd, 2007; p.79). Therefore, research on beliefs about second language acquisition is helpful in order to investigate how languages are learned and how they should be taught (Horwitz, 2008; p14).

Research literature on beliefs about language mostly depends on how variables such as gender, background knowledge, age and some other factors affect learners' beliefs about language learning and what sort of support should be given to learners to solve their learning problems. In this respect, Vibulphol(2004) attempted to investigate beliefs about language learning of pre-service EFL teachers in Thailand and any relationships between the pre-service teachers' beliefs about language learning and their choices of teaching assumptions. The most important results of this study indicate that pre-service EFL teachers in Thailand possessed similar beliefs to those of EFL learners; beliefs about language learning were influenced by learning experience as learners, beliefs relating to the use of English were influenced by practice teaching experience and instructional practices were influenced by beliefs about language learning. Another study comes from Büyükyazı (2010; p.169) who investigated the beliefs about language learning of 156 English as a foreign language (EFL) students and 19 EFL teachers working at one of the Turkish universities. It was aimed to find out the beliefs of prep-class students and the difference between students and their teachers in terms of beliefs about language learning. The study concludes that EFL learners have a broad range of conceptions both similar to and different from those reported by their teachers. A study from Bernat and Lloyd (2007; p.79) investigated the relationship between beliefs about language learning and gender. It was found that males and females held similar beliefs about language learning. On the other hand, Siebert (2003) investigated the beliefs of males and females, and reported several significant differences with a respect to language learning and strategies that they employ. Tercanlıoğlu (2005; p.146) also investigated the relation between gender and beliefs of pre-service EFL students studying at one of Turkish universities and reported that there was no significant difference among males and females. Again, Bacon and Finnemann (1992) investigated gender relation with self reported beliefs about foreign language learning and authentic oral and written input and it was concluded that females hold a higher level of motivation and strategy use in language learning; moreover, females are greater users of global strategies in dealing with authentic input and they have a higher level of social interaction with the target language group (cited in Büyükyazı, 2010; p.171). To our best knowledge, although there is some research which has investigated beliefs about language learning and other factors such as strategy use, contextual factors, and so on, there is not a certain consensus about the issue.

This study is a replication of the former studies at a point however it diverse from others as EFL students' experiences in the ELLIT department is included in the study as a variance. The results will be discussed from a general language teacher education policy of Turkey.

The main research questions that guide this study are: What beliefs about language learning do Turkish pre-service EFL teachers report? Are there any significant difference with regard to beliefs about language learning between males and females? and are there any significant differences among participants with regard to years of experience in the ELT department?

2. Methodology

2.1. Instrument

Depending on the samples of EFL version of beliefs about language learning inventory (BALLI) used in former studies for EFL context, it was modified for Turkish EFL students. The BALLI includes 34 items that investigate language learners' beliefs and 5 domains such as language aptitude, language learning difficulties, nature of learning a language, strategies and motivation and expectations (Horwitz, 1987). The items in BALLI were not translated into Turkish and they were given to students in English as it was assumed that the inventory is clear enough for the participants and it is written in simple language. Moreover, Horwitz (2008) suggests that "if you are teaching a different language, you can change English to any language, or you could replace it with the phrase, 'the language I am trying to learn'..." (p.232). Therefore, Cronbach alpha was not calculated for this study.

The BALLI includes 34 items with 5-point likert-type scale. Participants indicated their opinions from strongly agree to strongly disagree with the statements.

2.2. Participants

Four groups of participants of this study were selected through convenience sampling method from one of the Turkish universities. Each group of participants is consisted of undergraduate level students studying in different years of the Department of English Language and Literature (ELLIT). The department is a four-year program in which students are trained to gain English teacher qualifications and also in the subjects such as British and American literatures. Both female and male participants' ages range from 18 to 22.

2.3. Data Analysis

The data obtained from the survey was statistically analyzed with the SPSS software. The results were illustrated with tables and figures at the result part. Descriptive analysis also includes demographic information about the participants, and correlation analysis includes the relations among the variables such as gender, the years of experience in the ELT department and responses to the items.

3. Results

Descriptive results related to the demographic information about the participants are presented on the table 3.1., 3.2., and 3.3.

Table 3.1. The distributions of the male and female pre-service teachers according to the years of education in the ELLIT department.

		Years of Education				Total
		1st year	2nd year	3rd year	4th year	
Gender	female	26	18	24	21	89
	male	9	6	5	6	26
Total		35	24	29	27	115

In this paper, one of the research questions is related to the effects of gender differences on the participants' beliefs in view of the fact that there is little consensus about the gender as a contributing variable to the beliefs about language learning. Only 26 out of 115 students are males. Although, in her study, Tercanloğlu (2005) supposed that gender would have some impact on Turkish pre-service teachers' beliefs about language learning, the researcher reported that females and males do not differ significantly in their beliefs about language learning. However, there are some other studies that concluded that male and females had different level of beliefs about language learning in different areas (Bacon & Finnemann, 1992; Siebert, 2003).

Table 3.2. Females' and Males' previous teaching experiences

		Teaching Experience					Total
		No, I have never taught before	Yes, I have been an individual tutor	Yes, I have taught in a tutor center	Yes, I have taught both as an individual tutor and in a tutor center	Others	
Gender	female	29	36	7	14	3	89
	male	6	15	3	2	0	26
Total		35	51	10	16	3	115

Table 3.2. indicates the pre-service teachers' teaching experiences in any field which are thought to be potentially effective in forming their beliefs about language learning before being in-service teachers. About 23% of the males have reported that they had not had any teaching experience

whereas nearly 33% of the females have no experience in teaching any subject. As these figures are similar, the teaching experience of the participants was not included in this study.

Table 3.3. Participants' responses to the "foreign language aptitude" items

FOREIGN LANGUAGE APTITUDE	disagree	neutral	agree
item1. It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.	2,6	1,7	95,7
item 2. Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages such as English.	6,9	5,2	87,8
item 3. Turkish people are good at learning foreign languages.	26,0	53,9	19,1
item 4. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.	6,0	9,6	84,4
item 5. People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages.	53,0	20,0	27,0
item 6.I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	5,2	18,3	76,5
item 7. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.	27,8	19,1	53,0
item 8. People who speak more than one language are intelligent.	25,2	28,7	46,0
item 9. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	20,9	20,9	58,3

The table 3.3. includes the first group of items questioning participants' aptitude toward foreign language learning. Turkish EFL pre-service students who have reported in this inventory believe that age has a determining factor for the ease of learning a foreign language [(item 1) (95,7%)]; moreover, they believe that some has special ability in learning a foreign language (87,8%) and knowing already a foreign language may contribute to learning another foreign language [(item4)(84,4%)].

Table 3.4. Participants' responses to the "difficulty of language learning" items

Difficulty of language learning	disagree	neutral	agree
item 10. Some languages are easier to learn than others.	,9	8,7	90,5
item 11. I believe that I will learn to speak English well.	1,8	6,1	92,2
item 12. In learning English, it is easier to speak than to understand what people say.	26,1	24,3	49,6
item 13. In learning English, reading and writing are easier than speaking and listening.	13,9	15,7	70,05

Table 3.4.1. Learners' rating the "Difficulty of language learning"

I think English is..	Frequency	Percent
A very difficult language	2	1,7
A difficult language	14	12,2
A language of medium difficulty	59	51,3
An easy language	33	28,7
A very easy language	7	6,1
Total	115	100,0
If someone spent one hour learning English everyday, how long would it take him or her to speak English well	Frequency	Percent
Less than a year	30	26,1
1-2 years	46	40,0
3-5 years	19	16,5

5-10 years	7	6,1
You can't learn a language in 1 hour a day	13	11,3
Total	115	100,0

Table 3.4 shows that nearly all Turkish EFL pre-service teachers believe that learning difficulties depend on the type of the languages as some are easily learned [(item10)(90,5 %)]. They also believe that they will speak target language fluently in the future [(item11)(92,2%)]. It is interesting to note that item 12 is outscored as disagree and neutral than the other items. This may be an outcome of the curriculum of the primary and secondary level educational institutions in Turkey; what is more, students are selected to study EFL in Turkey through a state exam which includes only reading comprehension, grammar and sentence completion questions but not includes performance assessment questions. Therefore, students neglect speaking and writing skills till they are accepted to study at ELT departments in Turkey.

Table 3.4.1. shows further information about the pre-service teachers beliefs about difficulty of learning a foreign language. Nearly half of the participants indicates that English is a moderate level difficult language to learn (51,3 %); that is, it is neither a very difficult language (1,7%) nor a very easy language (6,1 %). Moreover, the table puts forward the idea that EFL learners need at least one or two years (with a one hour study per day) to speak fluently (40%). They also reported that it is impossible to speak English fluently by studying one hour in a day (11,3 %).

Table 3.5. Participants' responses to the "nature of language learning" items

Nature of language learning	disagree	neutral	agree
item 14. 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.	7	10,4	82,6
item 15. It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country such as England, the United States, or Australia.	2,6	1,7	95,6
item 16. Learning vocabulary words is an important part of learning English.	1,7	5,2	93,0
item 17. Learning the grammar is an important part of learning English.	13,3	9,6	85,2
item 18. Learning how to translate from Turkish is an important part of learning English.	7,8	19,1	73,0
item 19. Learning English is different from learning other academic subjects.	7,0	27,0	66,0

Table 3.5. shows that participants moderately believe that learning English is different than learning other types of materials, and in this respect it contrast with attention theories that view second language learning as very similar to learning other types of subjects (Horwitz, 2008; p.29). Almost all participants support the idea that *learning a new language naturally*, that is learning targeted language in the second language context, will be more helpful [(item15)(95,6%)]. They also give importance to learning vocabulary [(item16)(93 %)] and grammar (85,2 %) respectively in learning English language(item17).

Table 3.6. Participants' responses to the "learning and communication strategies" items

Learning and communication strategies	disagree	neutral	agree
item 20. It is important to speak English with a correct pronunciation.	1,7	7,8	90,4
item 21. We shouldn't say anything in English until we can say it correctly.	59,1	16,5	24,3
item 22. I enjoy practicing English with the foreigners I meet.	5,2	7,8	87,0
item 23. It's O.K. to guess if we don't know a word in English.	9,6	27,8	62,6
item 24. In learning English, it is important to practice a lot.	4,3	0,9	94,8
item 25. I feel timid speaking English with other people.	33,9	21,7	44,3
item 26. If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on.	33,0	21,7	45,2
item 27. In learning English, it is important to practice with cassettes or tapes.	2,6	9,6	87,8

The above table indicates that grammatical accuracy in speech may be neglected [(item21)(59,1%)] as practicing is considered to be the important factor in learning English [(item24) (94,8 %)]. Furthermore, they mostly agree with the importance of correct pronunciation in speech [(item20) (90,4 %)]. Using audio visual materials such as tapes and cassettes as practicing materials are very helpful in learning English. Turkish learners of English report that they feel moderately shy and hesitant while speaking in target language [(item25)(44,3 %)].

Nearly half of the pre-service teachers of English is strict on error correction and they believe that errors may interfere with mastering new language materials and they should be corrected [(item26)(45,2 %)].

Table 3.7. ANOVA for the effect of Gender on preservice teachers' language learning beliefs

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Foreign language aptitude	Between Groups	,227	1	,227	1,188	,278
	Within Groups	21,563	113	,191		
	Total	21,790	114			
Learning and communication strategy	Between Groups	,428	1	,428	3,012	,085
	Within Groups	16,047	113	,142		
	Total	16,475	114			
The nature of language learning	Between Groups	,201	1	,201	,861	,355
	Within Groups	26,387	113	,234		
	Total	26,588	114			
The difficulty of language learning	Between Groups	,038	1	,038	,133	,716
	Within Groups	32,253	113	,285		
	Total	32,291	114			
Motivasyon and expectation	Between Groups	,220	1	,220	1,010	,317
	Within Groups	24,675	113	,218		
	Total	24,895	114			

p> ,05

Table 3.7. shows that the pre-service teachers' beliefs about language learning in any area of beliefs do not differ in terms of gender; put it different words, male and females have reported similar opinions; there is no significant difference between males and females in terms of foreign language aptitude, learning and communication strategy, the nature of language learning, the difficulty of language learning and motivation and expectation levels. Although some of the former studies have reported that males and females had different beliefs (Bacon and Finnemann, 1992; Siebert, 2003, Öz, 2007); this present study concludes that there is no significant difference between males and females in terms of beliefs (Tercanlioğlu, 2005; Bernat & Lloyd, 2007).

Table 3.8. ANOVA for the effect of years of education on preservice teachers' language learning beliefs

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Foreign language aptitude	Between Groups	,135	3	,045	,230	,875
	Within Groups	21,655	111	,195		
	Total	21,790	114			
Learning and communication strategy	Between Groups	,695	3	,232	1,629	,187
	Within Groups	15,780	111	,142		
	Total	16,475	114			
The nature of language learning	Between Groups	1,238	3	,413	1,806	,150
	Within Groups	25,351	111	,228		
	Total	26,588	114			
The difficulty of language learning	Between Groups	1,014	3	,338	1,199	,313
	Within Groups	31,277	111	,282		
	Total	32,291	114			
Motivasyon and expectation	Between Groups	,767	3	,256	1,176	,322
	Within Groups	24,128	111	,217		
	Total	24,895	114			

p> ,05

Table 3.8. shows that first, second, third and fourth year students do not vary in their beliefs about language learning. There is no significant difference among students from each class. Therefore, experience in the ELLIT department may have no effect on their beliefs about language learning. In this context, curriculum of the department may have no or little effect on forming beliefs.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study which give insight into the learners' beliefs about language learning have produced some interesting findings that confirm the result of some of the former studies that reported beliefs were not gender related (Tercanlioğlu, 2005; Bernat & Lloyd, 2007) and while they rejected of some others that reported beliefs change based on gender (Bacon and Finnemann, 1992; Siebert, 2003, Öz, 2007).

This paper has addressed the aims of identifying several studies on learner beliefs in the EFL and ESL contexts and discussing them based on the recent literature. Analyses of learner beliefs are worthy of note for the light they shed on learners' thinking, expectations, and actions in the foreign language learning context. Furthermore, the beliefs held by participants in the studies in EFL/ESL contexts have been assessed in terms of gender as a variable, and while they were found to be similar in all categories they were found to be different in some others. Hence, the null hypothesis that 'the beliefs held by male and female students in the ELT departments in Turkish universities are different' was rejected. There were a small number of items with a discrepancy rate on agreement; two items in the area of "learning and communication strategy" (Items 25 and 26), only one item in the area of "difficulty of language learning" (item12), two items in the area of "foreign language aptitude" (items

7 and 8) and none of the participants showed nearly no incongruity in the area of “nature of language learning”.

Consequently, this study showed that there is no significant difference between males’ beliefs and females beliefs about language learning in the context of EFL pre-service teachers. Moreover, it was concluded that students in different years of education in ELLIT department have nearly similar beliefs. It can be said that the curriculum implemented in the English language teacher programs in Turkey might have no effect on the pre-service teachers’ of English as it was found that there was no gap in terms of beliefs among students from each year. Of course, there may be varying degrees of the impact of the curriculum of the teaching programs and syllabus of the courses and students and their teachers’ needs on forming the beliefs about language learning or cultural norms may be effective on the beliefs-gender relations, so these are the limitations of the results of this study. Replication of this study with a wider population may help to generalize the results of this study. Moreover; for analyzing the pre-service teachers’ beliefs about language learning in details is a very complex phenomenon, further studies may also focus on the internal and external factors by applying triangulated research designs.

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