

Pre-service EFL Teachers' Beliefs about Foreign Language Learning and How They Relate to Gender

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Abstract

Introduction: Foreign language learners also often hold different beliefs or notions about language learning (Horwitz 1987), and existing research suggests that learner beliefs have the potential to influence both their experiences and actions as language learners.

Method: This paper reports on a study which investigated the language learning beliefs of a group of pre-service EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers with regard to gender. Participants were 118 pre-service EFL teachers (45 male and 73 female), who completed Horwitz's Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI).

Results: In the BALLI inventory, participants scored highest for the “motivations and expectations to learn a language” factor. The results show a strong relationship between variables. Results of the ANOVA procedure to determine gender-related differences indicated no significant differences among males and females.

Discussion: The findings of this study provide insight into their beliefs about what is most important in learning English as a foreign language. They said it was “motivations and expectations to learn”. Secondly, it provided insight into the interrelations between belief factors: they were all interrelated. Thirdly, it provided insight into the relationships between belief factors and gender: no significant difference was found.

Keywords: beliefs about language learning, learner beliefs, English teacher education.

Introduction

Victori and Lockhart (1995) discuss differences between "insightful beliefs" which successful learners hold, and the "negative or limited beliefs" which poor learners hold, and state that:

... if students develop or maintain misconceptions about their own learning, if they attribute undue importance to factors that are external to their own action ... they are not likely to adopt a responsible and active attitude in their approach to learning and may never become autonomous. (p. 225)

Furthermore, McDonough (1995, p. 9) indicates that beliefs can be important incentives for behaviours:

... what we believe we are doing, what we pay attention to, what we think is important, how we choose to behave, how we prefer to solve problems, form the basis for our personal decisions as to how to proceed. An important fact about this argument is that it is not necessary for these kinds of evidence to be true for them to have important consequences for our further development.

Foreign language learners also often hold different beliefs or notions about language learning (Horwitz 1987), and existing research suggests that learner beliefs have the potential to influence both their experiences and actions as language learners. According to Puchta (1999), "beliefs are guiding principles for our students' behaviour and strong perceptual filters ... they act as if they were true". Stevick (1980) asserts that "success depends less on materials and techniques [and] more on what goes on inside [the learner]." Richardson (1996) defines beliefs as "psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true". Current definitions of beliefs found in the foreign language education literature focus primarily on how teachers think about the nature of foreign languages, teaching and learning.

Recent researchers have examined learners' beliefs about language learning for different purposes. For example, Cortazzi (1990) studied culture-related differences in beliefs. Mantle-Bromley (1995) and Wen and Johnson (1997) investigated the link between beliefs and proficiency. Domain-specific beliefs (Mori 1997), dimensions underlying learners' be-

liefs (Cotterall 1995, Sakui & Gaies 1998), the impact of beliefs on language learning (McDonough 1995, Victori & Lockhart 1995), methods of investigating learner beliefs (Kalaja 1995, Sakui & Gaies 1998) and gender-related differences in beliefs (Bacon and Finnemann 1992) have also been investigated.

During the past 15 years teacher education research has made significant advances in studying teacher beliefs, and the connection between teacher beliefs and educational practice has already been well established (see e.g., Calderhead 1996, Thompson 1992). Brown and McGannon (1998) and Breen (1991) studied teacher beliefs and concluded that teachers had many incorrect beliefs about how foreign languages are learned and that this influenced their teaching. Kennedy (1996) hypothesises that "Real and effective change in teachers' practices can only occur through a change in their beliefs" and Kennedy adds that beliefs shape the way teachers behave. As Brown and McGannon (1998) suggest, it is important to help trainees reflect on their beliefs because "Students bring beliefs to a teacher education program that influence what and how they learn" (Richardson 1996).

However, Peacock (2001) reports that there is still a shortage of research that investigates the beliefs of pre-service EFL teachers, and many issues need further investigation. For example, beliefs can be related to a number of factors such as language learning experience, age, and academic performance. In addition to such factors, Bacon and Finnemann (1992) showed that foreign language learning beliefs can be predicted by gender. They found that women reported a higher level of motivation and strategy use in language learning than male students, greater use of global strategies in dealing with authentic input and a higher level of social interaction with the target language (Spanish).

In Turkish culture, gender is still a key variable that may directly influence or even determine attitudes or motivations or behaviors. Therefore it is reasonable to suppose that they may have different beliefs about what learning is and how it occurs. This paper will explore the nature of pre-service EFL teachers' beliefs, and if male and female pre-service EFL teachers hold different beliefs about learning a foreign language which may influence what and how they teach within the Turkish context.

Purpose of the study

It is widely accepted that student teachers begin their professional education with deeply grounded beliefs about teaching and learning (Kagan 1992, Pajares 1992). The purpose of the current study, then, is to explore pre-service EFL teachers' beliefs and relationships between beliefs and gender. Specifically, the following three research questions are addressed in this study: a) what beliefs do pre-service EFL teachers' have about foreign language learning? b) Are belief factors related to each other? c) Are the beliefs moderated by the gender of the learner?

Method

Instrumentation

In this study the *Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory* (BALLI) was administered to collect information on language learners' beliefs in the EFL context. A couple of BALLI items were modified slightly for use in Turkey. Horwitz (1999) offered a review of representative studies of English as a Foreign Language English students using the BALLI. Shouyuan (1996) used the instrument for Chinese students and found it suitable.

The BALLI is a quantitative self-report questionnaire that investigates 34 different learner beliefs. Horwitz (1987) developed BALLI to assess students' beliefs about language learning in five major areas: (A) foreign language aptitude, (B) the difficulty of language learning, (C) the nature of language learning, (D) learning and communication strategies, (E) motivations and expectations. The questionnaire was administered in English. The BALLI had a Cronbach alpha of .79. According to Hair, Anderson, Tatham, and Black (1998), the acceptable value of Cronbach alpha is at least .70. Subjects were asked to read a statement and decide if they: (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) agree, or (5) strongly agree with each statement.

Subjects

One hundred and eighteen university students in Turkey participated in the study. Of the 118 students, 45 were male and 73 were female. They were all full-time undergraduates in different years of the Teaching English as a Foreign Language Programme at Ataturk University. The programme is a 4-year full-time pre-service EFL teacher education programme for students who wish to teach English in secondary schools. The degree acts as a teaching qualification. Pre-service EFL teachers complete a large number of courses. Core courses on TEFL

methodology and language learning include “School experience in TEFL”, “Second Language Learning”, “Materials evaluation and preparation in TEFL”, “Second language teaching methods”, “Foreign language testing and Research methods in TEFL”. Elective courses include “Communicative language teaching”, “Teaching language through content areas”, and “Utilising drama techniques for language teaching”. Most students have jobs in tourism during the summer and therefore they have time to practice English with native speakers outside class.

Statistical Analysis

The survey was conducted by the author in the first 2 months of a new semester, in 2003. The SPSS software package (version 9.0) was used to compute calculations and conduct analyses. Quantitative analysis involved several statistical procedures: (1) descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations were computed to summarize the students' responses to the belief items (2) Pearson correlations analysis were conducted to examine the relationships between the belief factors, and (3) ANOVA was conducted for gender differences.

Results

Discussion will be organized according to the three research questions.

Research question 1: What beliefs do pre-service EFL teachers' have about foreign language learning?

This study aimed to investigate beliefs pre-service EFL teachers' have about foreign language learning; this research question was analyzed by frequencies, means and standard deviations. Table 1 shows the group means and standard deviations, in descending order.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for belief factors

Variable	M	SD
E Motivations	4.03	0.84
C The nature of language learning	3.64	0.69
D Learning and communication strategies	3.58	0.55
A Foreign language aptitude	3.57	0.44
B The difficulty of language learning	3.40	0.46

As can be seen in Table 1, the subjects scored “motivations and expectations to learn a language” highest. Theories and models of motivation began to appear in language learning literature as early as the 1950s (Gardner & Lambert 1959). Gardner and various colleagues proposed the Socio-Educational Model of Language Learning which distinguishes between two kinds of motivation: integrative (positive attitude toward the foreign culture and a desire to participate as a member of it) and instrumental (goal of acquiring language in order to use it for a specific purpose). However, it should be acknowledged that the “motivation literature” has moved on quite a bit since Gardner and Lambert (1959). According to this finding, participants have positive emotional reactions to foreign language learning. They have goals for foreign language learning as well as beliefs about the importance, utility, and interest in their learning. They have expectations from the learning of a foreign language.

Table 2 presents responses to the BALLI items which concern beliefs about “Motivations and Expectations”.

Table 2. Response frequency (in percentage) for the motivations and expectations

	1+2	3	4+5
20 People in my country feel that it is important to speak English.	13	13	74
24 I would like to learn English so that I can get to know native speakers of English better.	30	16	54
29 If I learn English very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job.	8	6	87
31 I want to learn to speak English well.	10	-	90
32 I would like to have native-English speaking friends.	9	16	75

Note 1. 5 strongly agree, 4 agree, 3 neither agree nor disagree, 2 disagree, and 1 strongly disagree.

Ninety percent of the students reported that they wanted to learn to speak English well (Item 31). Seventy-four percent of the students agreed with the item “People in my country feel that it is important to speak English” (Item 20). Obviously, the participants think it is important to speak English.

Eighty-seven percent of the students agreed with the item “If I learn English very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job.” This finding indicated that these participants are more "instrumentally oriented".

Seventy-five percent of the students endorsed the item “I would like to have native English-speaking friends”. Fifty-four percent of the participants also agreed that “I would like to learn English so that I can get to know native speakers of English better”. The majority of the students have a strong desire to know representatives of the foreign culture and language.

The second group of items addresses the issues related to the nature of foreign language learning process. Table 3 reports these results.

Table 3. Response frequency (in percentage) for the nature of language learning

	1+2	3	4+5
8. It is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures in order to speak English.	14	11	75
12. It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country.	8	2	90
17. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary.	20	16	64
23. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar.	27	19	54
27. Learning a foreign language is different from learning other academic subjects.	15	24	61
28. The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from my native language.	39	17	44

Many language learners in Turkey believe that it is best to learn English in an English-speaking country. Ninety percent of the respondents agreed with this opinion (Item 12). Seventy-five percent also believed that it is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures in order to speak English (Item 8).

It is also widely known that Turkish EFL learners invest the majority of their time in studying grammar rules, memorising words and making translations. Furthermore, in relation to learners' opinions about their own preferences, a study by Alcorso and Kalantzis (1985) indicated that learners tended to view traditional activities as more useful parts of a lesson than communicative activities. Yorio (1986) also reports that learners in his study valued four traditional teaching techniques (grammatical explanations, using the language laboratory, memorizing vocabulary lists, translation exercises). In the current study, sixty-four percent of the students endorsed “The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary”. Fifty-four percent of the students endorsed “The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar”. Fifty-six percent of the students endorsed “The

most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from my native language.” In addition, sixty-six percent of the students believed that learning a foreign language is different from learning other academic subjects.

Table 4 lists responses to the BALLI items concerning “learning and communication strategies”.

Table 4. Response frequency (in percentage) for learning and communication strategies

	1+2	3	4+5
7. It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.	11	8	81
9. You shouldn't speak anything in English until you can say it correctly.	58	19	23
13. I enjoy practising English with the native speakers of English I meet.	15	4	81
14. It's OK to guess if you don't know a word in English.	9	26	65
18. It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	10	4	86
21. I feel timid speaking English with other people.	45	32	23
22. If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on.	39	18	43
26. It is important to practise with cassettes or tapes.	10	22	68

This section reports student preferences concerning language and communication skills. Firstly, with reference to traditional learning strategies, eighty-six percent of the Turkish students endorsed repetition and practising (Item 18). The majority prefer to practice English with native speakers (Item 13). Since English is a foreign language in Turkey, there is little opportunity to use the language outside the classroom.

The state of the art in teaching pronunciation is the topic of some items in this section. Item 7 discusses the issue of excellence in pronunciation. Eighty-one percent of the students agreed with the statement. However, the majority did not agree that they should wait to say anything in English until they say it correctly (Item 9). The participants also believed that it is best to correct errors at the very beginning, otherwise it would be difficult for them to speak correctly later on (Item 22).

Item 21 is about psychological factors affecting development of language skills. Previous literature has extensively examined the psychological dynamics involved in speaking a foreign language. For example, Lin (1995) reported that the students' shy personalities contribute to their difficulties in mastering the listening and speaking aspects of English. In the current study, students did not feel that they felt timid speaking English with other people.

Item 26 discusses the contribution of tape-recorders to learning outcomes in EFL. Previously, Al-Ansari and Wigzell (1996) reported a study undertaken in Bahrain secondary schools on the contribution of tape-recorders to learning outcomes in EFL. The results demonstrate a significant connection between the variables pertaining to the use of the tape-recorder and attained levels of proficiency. Sixty-eight percent of the participants reported that they found it important to practise with cassettes or tapes.

Griffiths (2003) states that instead of literally translating and painstakingly looking up every new word, good language learners guess and keep going. Sixty-five percent of the participants agreed that it is OK to guess if they do not know a word in English (Item 14).

The next group of items addresses the issue of "foreign language aptitude". Participant responses to these items are found on Table 5.

Table 5. Response frequency (in percentage) for foreign language aptitude

	1+2	3	4+5
1. It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.	6	2	92
2. Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	7	8	85
6. People from my country are good at learning foreign languages.	34	31	35
10. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.	9		84
11. People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages.	56	32	11
16. I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	10	32	58
19. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.	24	31	46
30. People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.	23	25	51
33. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	17	20	53

The very common belief that it is easier for children to learn a foreign language than adults was supported by the overwhelming majority of all students, 92 % (Item 1). Most participants also supported the general concept of foreign language aptitude (Item 2). Although the majority of the students were not sure if Turkish people are good at learning foreign languages (Item 6), these learners of English, at least, perceived themselves as having particularly high levels of foreign language aptitude (Item 16). Item 11 investigated whether participants consider that “people who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages”; only 11 % agreed with this statement.

The final group of BALLI items concerns the general difficulty of learning a foreign language. Participant responses to these items are found in Table 6.

Table 6. Response frequency (in percentage) for the difficulty of language learning

	1+2	3	4+5
3. Some languages are easier to learn than others.	13	19	68
4. English is:	-	-	-
a. a very difficult language	-	-	-
b. a difficult language	19	-	-
c. a language of medium difficulty	56	-	-
d. an easy language	22	-	-
e. a very easy language	3	-	-
5. I believe that I will learn to speak English very well.	13	20	66
15. If someone spent one hour a day learning a language how long would it take them to speak the language very well?	-	-	-
a. less than a year	3	-	-
b. 1-2 years	34	-	-
c. 3-5 years	25	-	-
d. 5-10 years	10	-	-
e. You can't learn a language in 1 hour a day	27	-	-
25. It is easier to speak than to understand a foreign language.	41	18	41
34. It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.	28	19	43

There is a common belief in Turkish society that some languages are easier to learn than others (Item 3). Sixty-eight percent of the students agreed with this statement. Students felt that “the difficulty of language learning” is dependent on the particular language selected (Item 4). Fifty-six percent of the students found English to be a language of medium difficulty. The majority of students believed that a foreign language could be learned over a period of one to five years (Item 15). Sixty-six percent of respondents believed that they would have learned to speak English very well when they finished their studies. Evidently, the students were quite positive about their ultimate achievement. Although students were not sure if it is easier to speak than to understand a foreign language (Item 2), the majority found it is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it (Item 34).

Research question 2: Are belief factors related to each other?

Table 7 shows the results obtained for the second question: *Are belief factors related to each other?*

Table 7. The correlation between belief factors

Variable	Statistics	A	B	C	D
A foreign language aptitude					
B the difficulty of language learning	r	0.70			
	P	0.00			
C the nature of language learning	r	0.37	0.28		
	P	0.00	0.00		
D learning and communication strategies	r	0.67	0.66	0.40	
	P	0.00	0.00	0.00	
E motivations and expectations	r	0.74	0.78	0.40	0.72
	P	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

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

The Pearson product–moment correlations between the four belief factors provided some insight into their relationship; as can be seen, results show a strong relationship between variables. Five belief factors were closely related to each other. This result may support an argument that certain students' beliefs would likely correlate with each other.

Research question 3: Are the beliefs moderated by the gender of the learner?

The third research question was intended to investigate if gender difference has any significant influence on beliefs about language learning. Table 8 shows the findings.

Table 8. ANOVA table for gender differences

Scale	Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
A foreign language aptitude	Between Groups	1.00	1	1.00	2.15	0.15
	Within Groups	53.94	116	0.47		
	Total	54.94	117			
B the difficulty of language learning	Between Groups	1.27	1	1.27	1.83	0.18
	Within Groups	80.36	116	0.69		
	Total	81.62	117			
C the nature of language learning	Between Groups	0.00	1	0.00	0.00	1.00
	Within Groups	24.89	116	0.21		
	Total	24.89	117			
D learning and communication strategies	Between Groups	0.06	1	0.06	0.29	0.59
	Within Groups	23.06	116	0.20		
	Total	23.12	117			
E motivations and expectations	Between Groups	0.66	1	0.66	2.18	0.14
	Within Groups	35.00	116	0.30		
	Total	35.66	117			

Results of the ANOVA procedure to determine gender-related differences indicated no significant differences among males and females. For that reason it seems possible to conclude that beliefs about language learning do not vary by gender. The finding should be examined more closely in the future. It is possible that age, stage of life or language learning context may also be important sources of group variation in learner beliefs. The learners discussed here all studied English as a foreign language and they are all adults who would teach English in the future. It is possible that such contextual differences in the language learning situation as well as specific classroom practices would have an impact on learner beliefs.

Conclusions

In this quantitative study, pre-service teacher beliefs about learning a foreign language have been explored. This study has provided several important learner insights on pre-service teacher beliefs concerning foreign language learning.

Firstly, it provided an insight into their beliefs concerning what is more important in learning English as a foreign language. They said it was “motivations and expectations to learn”. They

said it was “motivations and expectations to learn”. Secondly, it provided insight into the interrelations between belief factors: they were all interrelated. Thirdly, it provided insight into the relationships between belief factors and gender: no significant difference was found.

The similarity between male and female Turkish pre-service EFL Teachers in their beliefs about foreign language learning may reflect recent educational practices that tend to give emphasis to education of females. These insights into beliefs about foreign language learning could be used to understand beliefs about foreign language learning in Turkey among pre-service EFL teachers. Since these beliefs may influence what and how they will teach in the future, teacher education programs should try to eliminate any detrimental beliefs in their trainees before they start to teach EFL (Peacock 2001).

There are other questions which need further research: “when and how do EFL teachers acquire their beliefs?”, “what is the relationship between EFL teacher beliefs and classroom practices?”, and “to what extent are learner beliefs about foreign language learning culture-oriented?”. I recommend future study on different beliefs and success in learning or educational practice, and other factors such experience, age or academic performance.

This study has a few limitations. First, BALLI is a quantitative self-report questionnaire which can be subjected to a number of criticisms, including the impact of response bias. Second, the participant sample used in this study was selected from one Turkish University. It could be argued that there may be different demands placed on students in different universities both within Turkey and in other countries. Caution should therefore be exercised in generalising the current findings beyond this student population, or indeed to other wider populations.

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