

**BELIEFS ABOUT LANGUAGE LEARNING:
GENDER RELATED OR NOT?**

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ÖZET

Bu çalışma, üniversite hazırlık sınıfındaki erkek ve kız öğrencilerinin yabancı dil öğrenme hakkındaki inançları arasında istatistiksel olarak anlamlı bir fark olup olmadığını tespit etmeyi amaçlamıştır. Araştırmaya Çukurova Üniversitesi Yabancı Diller Bölümünden (YADYO) 180 (90 erkek ve 90 kız) üniversite hazırlık öğrencisi katılmıştır. Veriler, Türkçe'ye çevrilerek ve İngilizce'yi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen üniversite hazırlık sınıfı öğrencilerine uyarlanarak, 34 maddeli Likert tipi bir ölçek olan ve Horwitz (1988) tarafından geliştirilen "Dil Öğrenimi Hakkında İnanç Envanteri-BALLI" ile toplandı. Veriler tanımlayıcı istatistikle analiz edildi. Öğrencilerin görüşleri Horwitz (1988) tarafından önerilen beş alt başlık altında sınıflandı. Çalışmanın sonuçları erkekler ve kızlar arasında envanterdeki 30. ifade hariç anlamlı bir fark olmadığını gösterdi. Bu çalışmada bulunan tek anlamlı farklılık birden fazla dil konuşabilmek ve çok zeki olmak arasındaki bağlantı ile ilgilidir. Kız öğrenciler "Birden fazla dil konuşan insanlar çok zekidir" ifadesine erkeklere göre istatistiksel olarak anlamlı bir fark yaratacak ölçüde daha fazla onay vermiştir.

ABSTRACT

This study aimed at determining if there was a statistically significant difference between the male and female university prep class students' beliefs about language learning. The subjects participated in the study were 180 (90 male and 90 female) university prep class students from Foreign Language Education Center (YADYO) at Cukurova University. Data were collected using a 34-item Likert-Type scale (Horwitz's BALLI- Beliefs about Language learning Inventory), modified for the Turkish EFL learners. Data were analyzed descriptively. Beliefs of learners were classified under five subheadings as suggested by Horwitz (1988). The findings of the study indicated no significant differences among males and females except Item 30. The only statistically significant difference detected in this study concerned the relationship between speaking more than one language and being very intelligent. The female students gave a much greater support to the statement 'people who speak more than one language are very intelligent'.

Key Words: Foreign Language learning, beliefs about language learning, gender

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Introduction

Review Of Literature

In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), extensive research has been done on learner beliefs and beliefs have been defined in different ways as “definite preconceived notions” (Horwitz, 1988), “implicit theories” (Clark and Trafford, 1995), “self-constructed representational systems” (Rust, 1994), and “general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing learning, and about the nature of learning and teaching” (Victori & Lockheart, 1995). Learner’s beliefs in the language acquisition context are important because language learners enter the classroom with these beliefs and certain erroneous beliefs can negatively affect the way the learners viewed the language learning experience.

The interdisciplinary research suggests that beliefs can be related to a number of factors such as language learning experience, age, and academic performance differences. Among the studies on affective language learning, a considerable number looked at individual differences such as gender, age, nationality, learning style, and personality type. Researchers explored such topics as gender differences in motivation to learn a new language (Mori & Gobol, 2006), adults’ foreign language learning strategies (Tercanlıoğlu, 2004), attitudes of female and male students towards learning a particular foreign language (Dewaele, 2005; Shaaban & Ghaith, 2003). Yet, in the field of second and foreign language acquisition, there is still a comparatively small number of studies on language learning beliefs with a special focus on gender differences in the learners’ beliefs.

A study by Siebert (2003) was conducted among 64 female and 91 males language learners studying English at a higher education institution in the U.S. After applying Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), Siebert found more gender-related differences in relation to language learning compared to Diab’s (2006) research. For example, male students were twice as likely to agree that people from their country were good at learning foreign languages. Likewise, male and female students also significantly differed in their assessments of how long it takes to learn a foreign language. The greatest differences in beliefs between male and female participants were detected in relation to language learning approaches and the strategy choices.

Among academic inquiries on language learning beliefs based on Horwitz’s BALLI that addressed the issue of gender differences are research studies by Diab (2006) and Siebert (2003). Diab conducted his study with 284 students (57 percent males and 43 percent females) learning English as a foreign language at three universities in Lebanon. The study examined the students’ beliefs about learning English and French and compared these beliefs among different groups of learners. The

findings of the study revealed statistically significant differences in the beliefs that were related to the students' gender. Compared to the male students, the female students' motivation to learn French was higher, and so was their confidence in using the French language.

Tercanlioğlu (2004), on the other hand, found no significant differences in beliefs about language learning of 45 male and 73 female pre-service EFL teachers at a Turkish university. She carried out a study which investigated the language learning beliefs of a group of pre-service EFL teachers with regard to gender. Results of the ANOVA procedure to determine the gender-related differences indicated no significant differences among males and females.

Another study on this issue was carried out by Bernat and Lloyd (2007). In this study, the BALLI consisting of 34 items was administered to 155 female and 107 male English as a foreign language students enrolled in an Academic English Program. The Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test was employed to investigate gender difference. The findings indicated that overall males and females held similar beliefs about language learning in all categories of the survey instrument BALLI. However, there were two items on which responses of males and females differed. Bernat and Lloyd (2007) explains these items as follows :

One concerned the relationship between speaking more than one language and intelligence with females being more likely to view that intelligence plays a greater role in language learning than males. Another difference, although only marginally different, was found in an item that concerned the degree of enjoyment both males and females reported in practicing English with native speakers, with males being more likely to enjoy the experience than females...

When compared to the study by Siebert (2003), it is seen that the gender differences found in Bernat and Lloyd (2007)'s study differ from those reported by Siebert (2003). Namely, Siebert found eight items with gender differences while this study found only two.

Another related research was conducted by Nikitina (2007). 107 (65 females and 42 males) Russian language students at Universiti Malaysia Sabah participated in this research. BALLI was employed in Nikitina's research with the aim to explore whether beliefs of female and male learners were significantly different. Results of this study revealed that "the only statistically significant difference in male and female students' beliefs detected in this inquiry concerned the value and importance of the use of audio materials and CD recordings in the language classroom. The female students

assigned a much greater importance to employing and utilizing these language learning tools.” (Nikitina 2007, p. 16).

Research regarding gender differences in students’ beliefs about language learning is sparse and shows contradictory findings as noted above. Therefore, further studies are necessary to get a better understanding. The aim of this study is to explore whether language learning beliefs of female and male students differ in the Turkish context. And, if it is so, it aims to find out in which areas those beliefs are most similar and most diverse.

METHOD

Participants

This study covers 180 freshmen students who are registered at Foreign Language Education Center (YADYO) at Çukurova University and they were all learning English. Of the 180 students, 90 were male and 90 were female. Since some departments use English as the language of instruction, students were required to study English intensively for one academic year with a workload of twenty four hours a week before starting their degree programs.

Material

The instrument used as a research tool in this study is a modified Turkish version of the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) developed by Horwitz (1988). The questionnaire was given in Turkish in order not to cause lack of understanding or misinterpretation. The instrument was checked and translated by different people to increase its validity. The questionnaire (written in Turkish) was distributed to the true beginner English learners. The participants completed the questionnaire in their own classrooms by the guidance of their own teachers during their regular English classes.

The inventory consists of 34 items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly agree (1)” to “strongly disagree (5)” and was designed to assess the language learners’ beliefs on a variety of issues connected to second or foreign language learning. The BALLI measures beliefs about five language learning areas: (1) Foreign language aptitude, (2) the difficulty of language learning, (3) the nature of language learning, (4) learning and communication strategies and (5) motivations and expectations.

Scoring

All data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 14.0). Frequencies and means were used to analyze single items. Since we wanted to assess whether there are significant gender differences in participants’

perceptions and the data for the BALLI consisted of ordinal variables, the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test was used.

Data Analysis

The results of the data analysis of the students' beliefs about foreign language are presented in groups according to the five language areas of the BALLI. Table 1 reports the results of the data analysis regarding beliefs about the difficulty of language learning.

Table.1 Difficulty of Language Learning

Items	Female Median±SD	Male Median±SD	p
3. Some languages are easier to learn than others.	2±0.89	2±0.93	0.071
5. I believe that I will learn to speak English very well.	3±0.74	3±0.75	0.115
25. It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language.	5±0.76	5±1.05	0.520
34. It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.	1±0.47	1±0.78	0.290

*indicates significance at 0.05 level

Responses to the items about the difficulty of language learning show that participants agreed with the statements of most items. Male and Female participants shared almost the same opinion about the existence of the hierarchy in foreign languages difficulty (Item 3). While most participants disagreed that it is easier to speak than understand a foreign language (Item 25), they strongly agreed that it is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it (Item 34). Items 4 and 15 are also about the difficulty of language learning but their results are not displayed in the table above since they are the multiple choice items of the inventory. Related to Item 4, both male and female participants found English to be a language of medium difficulty. Another statement that both male and female participants shared the same opinion about is Item 15 (If someone spent an hour a day learning English language, how long would it take him/her to become fluent?). The participants agreed that it would take 3 to 5 years to learn a foreign language. Mann-Whitney tests show that there were no significant differences in responses between males and females for the items in this category.

The results of the data analysis of the participants' beliefs about foreign language aptitude are reported in Table 2.

Table.2 Foreign Language Aptitude

Items	Female Median±SD	Male Median±SD	p
1. It is easier for children than adults to learn English.	1±0.81	1±0.98	0.440
2. Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	2±1.29	2±1.30	0.683
6. People from my country are good at learning foreign languages.	2±0.87	2±1.07	0.822
10. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.	2±1.07	2±1.27	0.444
11. People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages.	2±0.80	1±1.18	0.905
16. I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	2±1.05	2±1.14	0.552
19. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.	1±0.74	1±1.05	0.480
30. People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.	5±0.94	4±1.09	0.023*
33. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	1±0.64	1±1.08	0.128

*indicates significance at 0.05 level

Participants of both genders had an almost uniform agreement with the opinion in Items 1 and Item 2. Other highly shared belief between genders is that it is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one (Item 10). Interestingly, not only women but also men had an almost similar opinion regarding the statement that women are better than men at learning foreign languages. Related to Item 11, though it is not statistically significant the male participants gave stronger endorsement to the opinion that people who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages. Mann-Whitney tests show that there were no significant differences in responses between males and females except for Item 30

($p=0.023$) which means that women are more likely than men to believe that people who speak more than one language are very intelligent.

Table.3 Participants' beliefs about the nature of language learning

Items	Female Median±SD	Male Median±SD	p
8. It is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures in order to speak English.	2±0.80	1±1.18	0.905
12. It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country.	1±0.47	1±0.78	0.290
17. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary.	1±0.92	1±1.12	0.240
23. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar.	2±0.74	2±0.99	0.434
27. Learning a foreign language is different than learning other academic subjects.	3±1.38	3±1.35	0.440
28. The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from my native language.	3±1.15	3±1.13	0.462

Regarding the participants' beliefs about the nature of language learning (see Table 3), both female and male participants supported the opinions that it is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures in order to speak English (Item 8) and that it is best to learn English in an English-speaking country (Item 12). As Tercanlioğlu (2004) suggests that Turkish EFL learners invest the majority of their time in studying grammar rules, memorizing words and making translations. Similarly, in the current study the majority of male and female participants endorsed "the most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary (Item 17), grammar (Item 23) and learning how to translate from the native language (Item 28)". There were no significant gender differences in terms of responses to items in this category.

Table.4 Learning and communication strategies

Items	Female Median±SD	Male Median±SD	p
7. It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.	2±0.80	1±1.18	0.905
9. You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly.	5±0.89	5±0.99	0.962
13. I enjoy practicing English with other people.	2±0.91	2±1.04	0.590
14. It's OK to guess if you don't know a word in English.	2±1.02	2±1.12	0.063
18. It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	1±0.49	1±0.85	0.059
21. I feel timid speaking English with others.	2±1.05	2±1.14	0.552
22. If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English without correction, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on.	3±1.43	3±1.39	0.894
26. It is important to practice with cassettes or tapes.	2±0.81	2±0.97	0.645

Table 4 reports the findings on the participants' learning and communication strategies. Both female and male participants placed a very high value on repeating and practicing a lot (Item 18) and practicing with cassettes or tapes (Item 26). Item 7 discusses the issue of excellence in pronunciation and both male and female participants agreed with the idea. However, they did not agree that they should wait to say anything in English until they say it correctly" (Item 9). Another statement that generated an almost unison agreement among- and was highly supported by- the respondents of both genders was that "I feel timid speaking English with others" (Item 21).

Table.5 Language Learning Motivation and Expectations

Items	Female Median±SD	Male Median±SD	p
20. People in my country feel that it is important to speak English.	2±0.96	2±1.18	0.817
24. I would like to learn English so that I can get to know Americans better.	4±0.57	4±0.75	0.322
29. If I learn English well, I will have better opportunities for a good job.	1±0.64	1±1.08	0.128
31. I want to learn to speak English well.	1±0.49	1±0.85	0.059
32. I would like to have American friends.	2±0.98	2±1.15	0.086

Finally, we examine the differences in female and male participants' language learning motivation and their expectations regarding the outcome of the language program. Responses on items for motivations and expectations indicate that an overwhelming majority of respondents of both genders agreed with the statements and only very few were neutral or disagreed. The finding of Item 29 indicates that both male and female participants are more instrumentally oriented. The lowest positive response was obtained for learning English in order to get to know Americans better. There are no significant gender differences in respondents' perceptions for the motivation and expectation items.

Conclusion

In this study, 180 Turkish freshmen students' beliefs about learning a foreign language have been explored. The study has provided an insight into the relationship between belief factors and gender and supported the notion that beliefs about language learning do not vary by gender. That is, the female participants did not exhibit a definitely more positive attitude towards learning foreign languages than did their male peers. Both genders placed a great importance on learning a foreign language and recognized its practical value. The findings of the current study agree with the previous studies that disputed the existence of gender-related differences in students' attitudes towards language learning (Nikitina 2007, Tercanlioğlu, 2005).

The only statistically significant difference in male and female students' beliefs detected in this study concerned the relationship between speaking more than one language and being very intelligent. The female students gave a much greater support to the statement that people who speak more than one language are very intelligent.

Implication of the current study is that language instructors should avoid having preconceived notions about their students. Since these notions may influence what and how they will teach, language instructors should try to eliminate any detrimental beliefs.

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