

Pre-Service EFL Teachers' Attitudes towards 'Language Acquisition Courses'

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Abstract

This study discusses the attitudes of pre-service English language teachers towards 'Language Acquisition Courses' in English Language Teacher Education Programs. The data have been collected through a developed questionnaire of 20 questions given to 324 students in the department of Pre-service English Language Teacher Education at Ondokuz Mayıs University. SPSS has been used for the evaluation of the data. The results indicate that the pre-service teachers of English believe in the importance of language acquisition courses for their career. However, they think that they need some preliminary courses on linguistics before they take "Language Acquisition Courses". Otherwise, since they may not have any background knowledge in linguistics, they may have some problems in the comprehension competence.

Key Words: Language acquisition courses, Pre-service English language teacher education, Foreign language teacher education, Language teacher preparation

Özet

Bu çalışma, hizmet öncesi İngilizce Öğretmenliği programındaki öğrencilerin, İngilizce öğretmeni yetiştirme programlarında yer alan "Dil Edinimi Derslerine" olan tutumlarını tartışmaktadır. Veriler, Ondokuz Mayıs Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi, hizmet öncesi İngilizce öğretmeni eğitimi Anabilim Dalındaki 324 öğrenciye verilen 20 soruluk bir sormacadan elde edilmiştir. Veriler, SPSS istatistik paket programı ile değerlendirilmiştir. Elde edilen veriler, hizmet öncesi İngilizce öğretmenlerinin "Dil Edinimi Derslerinin" kariyerleri için önemli olduğuna inandıklarını; ancak, bu dersi kendileri için alt yapı oluşturacak bazı dilbilim derslerinden sonra almaları gerektiğini göstermiştir. Aksi takdirde, öğrencilerin yeterli aralan bilgileri olmadığı için algılama yetileri açısından bu derste sorun yaşayabilecekleri bulgulara ortaya çıkmıştır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Dil edinim dersleri, hizmet öncesi İngilizce öğretmeni eğitimi, yabancı dil öğretmen eğitimi, dil öğretmeni yetiştirme

1. Introduction

Teacher Education in Turkey has been under construction for years. Between the years of 1994 and 1998, with the partnership of YOK/World Bank, National Education Development Project has started (Kızıltan 1997). After this reconstruction, faculties of education in Turkey have gone into several changes in terms of their curriculum. Within this change, pre-service English language teachers were offered ‘Language Acquisition Courses’ in the third semester. Later, since 2008, this course is offered in the fourth semester.

Within the preparation of English language teachers, ‘Language Acquisition Course’ plays an important role in raising students’ linguistic awareness in acquisition and learning languages. It is because pre-service teachers are prepared how to teach languages through its course content, as well. Although the name of the course seems a general term for acquisition, the course content is based on second language acquisition theories, and first language acquisition theories which can be influential in the field of second/foreign language learning. Within the course syllabus the following topics are also discussed:

The dichotomy between acquisition and learning; intellectual developmental stages of children; first and second language acquisition theories and explain them in second/foreign language learning/teaching settings. Besides, within this course, individual learners’ differences, such as learning styles, multiple intelligences and types of motivation, learning strategies are discussed to prepare language teachers to teach a foreign language effectively.

As is seen within the course syllabus of ‘Language Acquisition Course’, pre-service EFL teachers can also mainly develop their language awareness.

Within the Foreign Language Teacher preparation, the above given topics discussed in the course syllabus are essential for new teacher competencies. Jeffries (1996) summarizes the following competencies according to National Foreign Language Standards in Foreign Language Education project in 1996, in USA, on which foreign language teacher education in Turkey is based. According to the standards teachers must be:

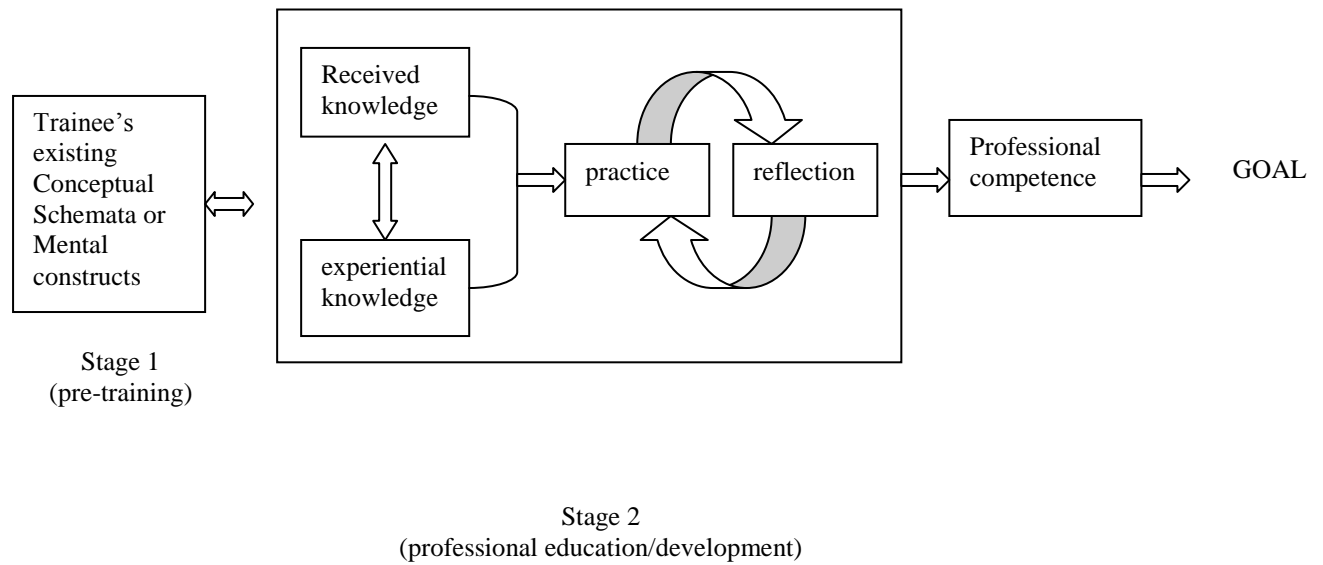
- competent in one or more of a variety of languages at a level of advanced or higher;
- researchers and consumers of research on language learning and teaching;

- continually involved in professional development, reflection on teaching and self-improvement;
- effective designers of curriculum, instruction and assessment for language acquisition and cultural knowledge and skills;
- able to cope with diversity and change in their students, in the world and in the profession;
- partners in their communities;
- model citizens of a global, multicultural society (Jeffries 1996:8).

Language acquisition courses prepare pre-service EFL teachers for the above given competencies. Through error analysis they are aware of varieties of languages at higher and advanced levels; through the projects they conduct, they become researchers on language learning and teaching; through first and second language acquisition theories, they are involved in professional development and through acculturation and pidginization theories, they develop cultural knowledge and skills; through models of second language learning, types of motivation, multiple intelligences, they are able to cope with diversity and change in their students, in the world and in the profession; through learning strategies, they become partners in their communities and lastly, having access to Universal Grammar (UG), they are model citizens of a global, multicultural society.

By 'Language Acquisition Courses' not only new teacher competencies are developed but also professional competence of the students can be developed.

Figure: 1 Professional Education/ Development



At Stage 1, the pre-service language teacher has decided to undertake professional training or development with his existing linguistic knowledge before he receives the new knowledge and experiential knowledge at the second stage. As a result of these two stages the students develop professional competence.

In the light of these facts, language acquisition courses help the pre-service EFL teachers to develop professional competence. Besides, their attitudes towards the courses are said to be an important element for this development. As Clemente (2001) states, the concept of attitude is regarded as one of the most important elements of the belief system of the teacher, and is an essential element to be considered within a language teacher education scheme.

1.1 Problem of the Study

Language Acquisition Course' is said to be one of the essentials courses in the teacher education program. Although 'Language Acquisition Course' is supposed to be important for the pre-service EFL teachers (henceforth the students), those taking this course in the fourth semester in the second year may not be aware of importance of this course within pre-service EFL teacher education program compared with the third and fourth year students.

Before pre-service English language teachers take this course, they are given only one linguistic course in the third semester. Since the students are exposed to only basic English language in the first year education program, they are not prepared for ‘Language Acquisition Courses’ during the first year. Thus, they may develop negative anxiety which may block their comprehension competence when they take the ‘Language Acquisition Courses’ first. They may find the content of the course difficult when compared with other courses they take in the department. As a result, their attitude towards this course may be negative. Besides, the appropriate place of this course within the pre-service English teacher education programs is under discussion.

1.2 Research Questions

This study discusses the following research questions:

1. What is the attitude of the pre-service EFL teachers towards ‘Language Acquisition Courses?’
2. Do the pre-service EFL teachers show a significant attitudinal difference according to the classes?
3. What is the appropriate place of ‘Language Acquisition Course’ within the EFL teacher education program?
4. Are the pre-service EFL teachers satisfied with the outline of ‘Language Acquisition Course’?
5. What kind of problems do the pre-service EFL teachers have in ‘Language Acquisition Course’?
6. Do the pre-service EFL teachers have problems in the comprehension of the subjects in ‘Language Acquisition Course’?
7. To what extent does ‘Language Acquisition Course’ prepare pre-service EFL teachers for teaching?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This study aims at finding out pre-service EFL teachers’ attitude towards ‘language acquisition courses’ and their awareness about the importance of this course for their career. Besides, this study discusses the appropriate place of ‘Language Acquisition Courses’ in pre-service EFL teacher education program through dichotomy between the classes in order to help foreign language curriculum planners.

2. Method of the Study

Total 324 (second year:126, third year: 116, and fourth year:82) students in the Department of pre-service EFL teacher education have been given a questionnaire which checks their attitude towards ‘Language Acquisition Courses’. The questionnaire mainly consists of two sections. In the first section there are 20 questions and Likert Scale has been used as Strongly Agree:5, Agree: 4, Undecided:3, Disagree:2 and Strongly Disagree:1. These questions check the students’ general attitude of ‘Language Acquisition Courses’, and ascertain the appropriate place of this course within EFL teacher preparation.

In the second section, the students have been asked to give their ideas about ‘Language Acquisition Courses’ through the following open ended questions:

1. What kind of problems have you had in language acquisition courses?
2. What is your attitude towards the ‘Language Acquisition Course’?
3. Do you think that a specialist should offer this course rather than an instructor of any other majors?
4. How would you like to be assessed in ‘Language Acquisition Courses’?

Additionally, the instructors offering ‘Language Acquisition Courses’ have been also asked if they have observed any problems during the courses.

3. Evaluation of the Data

The SPSS 9.1 has been used for percentages and Independent-samples t-Test.

3.1 Limitations of the Study

The data from the participants have been gathered from only one public university in Turkey. More specifically, the study has been carried out on participants who have taken or have been taking ‘Language Acquisition Courses’ in the Department of pre-service EFL teacher education at Ondokuz Mayıs University.

4. The Evaluation and the Discussion of the Data

When the above given figure is taken into account in terms of semester of the ‘Language Acquisition Courses’ within the Foreign Language Teacher preparation programme, its place may be a matter for students. In order to question its appropriate semester and function within the pre-service English Language Teacher Education, a ‘Language Acquisition Course Evaluation Form’ of 20 questions has been given to

second, third and fourth year students who have already taken the course in their education. The following Table 1 gives the results of the ‘Course Evaluation Form’.

Table 1. Crosstable of the Questions According to the Classes

Question 1: I like ‘Language Acquisition Courses’.			1,00	2,00	3,00	4,00	5,00	Significance
CLASS	2	Count	5	10	17	74	20	
		% within	4,0%	7,9%	13,5%	58,7%	15,9%	$X^2= 29.59$
CLASS	3	Count		7	12	65	32	$P < .001$
		% within		6,0%	10,3%	56,0%	27,6%	
CLASS	4	Count	10	13	8	41	10	
		% within	12,2%	15,9%	9,8%	50,0%	12,2%	
Question 2: When compared with other courses in the department, ‘Language Acquisition Course’ is more difficult than the others.								
CLASS	2	Count	1	19	13	48	44	Significance
		% within	,8%	15,2%	10,4%	38,4%	35,2%	$X^2= 8.40$
CLASS	3	Count	1	10	5	68	32	$P < .05$
		% within	,9%	8,6%	4,3%	58,6%	27,6%	
CLASS	4	Count	3	15	4	32	28	
		% within	3,7%	18,3%	4,9%	39,0%	34,1%	
Question 3: I do not think ‘Language Acquisition Course’ will help me to teach English better.								
CLASS	2	Count	60	48	10	5	3	Significance
		% within	47,6%	38,1%	7,9%	4,0%	2,4%	$X^2= 24.52$
CLASS	3	Count	67	41	2	2	4	$P < .01$
		% within	57,8%	35,3%	1,7%	1,7%	3,4%	
CLASS	4	Count	29	34	7	11	1	
		% within	35,4%	41,5%	8,5%	13,4%	1,2%	
Question 4: I’d better take ‘Language Acquisition Course’ in the fifth semester.								
CLASS	2	Count	5	34	24	36	27	Significance
		% within	4,0%	27,0%	19,0%	28,6%	21,4%	$X^2= 6.5$
CLASS	3	Count	4	27	27	40	18	$P > .05$
		% within	3,4%	23,3%	23,3%	34,5%	15,5%	
CLASS	4	Count	5	26	19	22	10	
		% within	6,1%	31,7%	23,2%	26,8%	12,2%	

Question 5: I'd better take 'language Acquisition Course' in the fourth semester.

CLASS	2	Count	28	43	28	18	9	Significance
		% within	22,2%	34,1%	22,2%	14,3%	7,1%	
CLASS	3	Count	12	45	29	25	5	
		% within	10,3%	38,8%	25,0%	21,6%	4,3%	$X^2= 16.37$
CLASS	4	Count	6	34	27	12	3	$P < .05$
		% within	7,3%	41,5%	32,9%	14,6%	3,7%	

Question 6: I'd better take 'Language Acquisition Course' in the sixth semester.

CLASS	2	Count	19	50	32	21	4	Significance
		% within	15,1%	39,7%	25,4%	16,7%	3,2%	
CLASS	3	Count	14	61	23	10	8	
		% within	12,1%	52,6%	19,8%	8,6%	6,9%	$X^2= 10.14$
CLASS	4	Count	7	42	19	9	5	$P > .05$
		% within	8,5%	51,2%	23,2%	11,0%	6,1%	

Question 7: I'm happy with taking 'Language Acquisition Course' in the third semester.

CLASS	2	Count	21	46	16	35	7	Significance
		% within	16,8%	36,8%	12,8%	28,0%	5,6%	
CLASS	3	Count	19	48	17	25	7	
		% within	16,4%	41,4%	14,7%	21,6%	6,0%	$X^2= 9.86$
CLASS	4	Count	20	30	15	10	7	$P > .05$
		% within	24,4%	36,6%	18,3%	12,2%	8,5%	

Question 8: I'd better take 'Language Acquisition Course' in the seventh semester.

CLASS	2	Count	29	62	23	8	4	Significance
		% within	23,0%	49,2%	18,3%	6,3%	3,2%	
CLASS	3	Count	33	54	14	9	6	
		% within	28,4%	46,6%	12,1%	7,8%	5,2%	$X^2= 4.95$
CLASS	4	Count	25	32	15	6	4	$P > .05$
		% within	30,5%	39,0%	18,3%	7,3%	4,9%	

Question 9: I'd better take 'Language Acquisition Course' in the eighth semester.

CLASS	2	Count	42	57	22	5		Significance
		% within	33,3%	45,2%	17,5%	4,0%		
CLASS	3	Count	49	43	15	3	6	
		% within	42,2%	37,1%	12,9%	2,6%	5,2%	$X^2= 11.53$
CLASS	4	Count	32	34	13	2	1	$P> .05$
		% within	39,0%	41,5%	15,9%	2,4%	1,2%	

Question 10: I'd better take 'Language Acquisition Course' in the first semester of the first year.

CLASS	2	Count	84	30	2	6	3	Significance
		% within	67,2%	24,0%	1,6%	4,8%	2,4%	
CLASS	3	Count	70	32	4	3	7	
		% within	60,3%	27,6%	3,4%	2,6%	6,0%	$X^2= 20.23$
CLASS	4	Count	38	32	8	3	1	$P< .01$
		% within	46,3%	39,0%	9,8%	3,7%	1,2%	

Question 11: I'd better take 'Language Acquisition Course' in the second semester of the first year.

CLASS	2	Count	66	39	6	10	5	Significance
		% within	52,4%	31,0%	4,8%	7,9%	4,0%	
CLASS	3	Count	60	39	9	5	3	
		% within	51,7%	33,6%	7,8%	4,3%	2,6%	$X^2= 11.10$
CLASS	4	Count	33	33	10	6		$P> .05$
		% within	40,2%	40,2%	12,2%	7,3%		

Question 12: I do not think I should take 'language Acquisition Course' in my Pre-service English Language Teacher Education.

CLASS	2	Count	63	41	8	11	3	Significance
		% within	50,0%	32,5%	6,3%	8,7%	2,4%	
CLASS	3	Count	83	26	1	3	3	
		% within	71,6%	22,4%	,9%	2,6%	2,6%	$X^2= 48.15$
CLASS	4	Count	29	20	16	12	5	$P< .001$
		% within	35,4%	24,4%	19,5%	14,6%	6,1%	

Question 13: I think 'Language Acquisition Course' will help me to teach English better.

CLASS	2	Count	6	3	12	54	51	Significance
		% within	4,8%	2,4%	9,5%	42,9%	40,5%	
CLASS	3	Count			5	36	75	
		% within			4,3%	31,0%	64,7%	$X^2= 38.97$
CLASS	4	Count	6	6	9	38	23	P< .001
		% within	7,3%	7,3%	11,0%	46,3%	28,0%	

Question 14: 'Language Acquisition Course' is too difficult for me to take in the third semester.

CLASS	2	Count	3	41	22	34	26	Significance
		% within	2,4%	32,5%	17,5%	27,0%	20,6%	
CLASS	3	Count	5	27	10	45	28	
		% within	4,3%	23,5%	8,7%	39,1%	24,3%	$X^2= 12.56$
CLASS	4	Count	2	21	15	32	12	P> .05
		% within	2,4%	25,6%	18,3%	39,0%	14,6%	

Question 15: To be more successful, I have to study 'Language Acquisition Course' harder.

CLASS	2	Count	1	12	16	68	29	
		% within	,8%	9,5%	12,7%	54,0%	23,0%	
CLASS	3	Count		7	6	71	32	
		% within		6,0%	5,2%	61,2%	27,6%	$X^2= 26.97$
CLASS	4	Count	4	12	17	35	14	P< .001
		% within	4,9%	14,6%	20,7%	42,7%	17,1%	

Question 16: I think I need a prerequisite course for 'Language Acquisition Course'.

CLASS	2	Count		9	27	57	33	Significance
		% within		7,1%	21,4%	45,2%	26,2%	
CLASS	3	Count		12	18	55	31	
		% within		10,3%	15,5%	47,4%	26,7%	$X^2= 18.73$
CLASS	4	Count	3	14	11	41	13	P< .05
		% within	3,7%	17,1%	13,4%	50,0%	15,9%	

Question 17: I do not understand anything in ‘Language Acquisition Course’ due to lack of my linguistic competence.

CLASS	2	Count	23	62	24	15	2	Significance
		% within	18,3%	49,2%	19,0%	11,9%	1,6%	
CLASS	3	Count	12	56	19	26	3	$X^2 = 16.28$
		% within	10,3%	48,3%	16,4%	22,4%	2,6%	
CLASS	4	Count	7	34	13	23	5	$P < .05$
		% within	8,5%	41,5%	15,9%	28,0%	6,1%	

Question 18: If I had been given a chance to drop the ‘Language Acquisition Course’, I would have dropped it.

CLASS	2	Count	7	59	51	5	4	Significance
		% within	5,6%	46,8%	40,5%	4,0%	3,2%	
CLASS	3	Count	18	51	33	11	3	$X^2 = 14.01$
		% within	15,5%	44,0%	28,4%	9,5%	2,6%	
CLASS	4	Count	9	32	28	8	5	$P > .05$
		% within	11,0%	39,0%	34,1%	9,8%	6,1%	

Question 19: I believe in the significance of ‘Language Acquisition Course’ for my education.

CLASS	2	Count	4	9	3	51	59	Significance
		% within	3,2%	7,1%	2,4%	40,5%	46,8%	
CLASS	3	Count		1	4	39	72	$X^2 = 51.38$
		% within		,9%	3,4%	33,6%	62,1%	
CLASS	4	Count	5	11	8	44	14	$P < .001$
		% within	6,1%	13,4%	9,8%	53,7%	17,1%	

Question 20: The content of the course has raised my linguistic awareness.

CLASS	2	Count	4	7	12	45	58	Significance
		% within	3,2%	5,6%	9,5%	35,7%	46,0%	
CLASS	3	Count			3	45	68	$X^2 = 36.12$
		% within			2,6%	38,8%	58,6%	
CLASS	4	Count	4	8	8	42	20	$P < .001$
		% within	4,9%	9,8%	9,8%	51,2%	24,4%	

According to the classes, the questions 1,2,3,5,10,12,13,15,16,17,19 and 20 indicate significantly different results. In the questions 4,6,7,8,9,11,14, and 18 a significant difference has not been detected.

Whereas the questions 1,2,3,12,13,15,16,17,18,19, and 20 are checking the students' attitude toward Language Acquisition Courses, the questions 4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11, and 14 are checking the students' evaluation of the semester of Language Acquisition Courses within teacher preparation program.

It is seen that the students are not pleased with the semester of 'Language Acquisition Course' which is given in the second semester of the second year. It is because they find it difficult in the given semester. The students have indicated that they had better take this course in the first semester of the third year (Question (Q) 4).

All the students like 'Language Acquisition Courses' (Q:1). They agree on the idea that when compared with other courses in the department, Language Acquisition Course is more difficult than the others (Q:2). Most of them disagree on the idea that 'Language Acquisition Course' will not help them to teach English better (Q:3). They strongly disagree on the idea that they should not take 'Language Acquisition Course' in their education (Q:19). It is because they think that this course will help them to teach English better (Q:3). They believe in the fact that they would be more successful in the course if they study harder (Q:15). Most of the students think that they need a prerequisite course for Language Acquisition Course (Q:16). Besides, they think that their linguistic competence is enough to understand the subjects of 'Language Acquisition Course' (Q:17). They have also indicated that they have developed a positive attitude towards the lesson from very beginning (Q:18). Whereas second and third year students strongly agree on the significance of 'Language Acquisition Course' for their education, fourth year students only agree on the significance (Q:19). The second and the third year students have indicated strongly that the content of the course has raised their linguistic awareness, whereas the fourth year students agree on the given idea (Q:20).

Besides the above results in the 'Students' Attitude Form', the following ideas have been also given by the students. Most of the students think that linguists should give the course. 12 students out of 324 (3.7%) think that this course can be given by teachers of other majors. The problems of the students have had in 'Language Acquisition Courses' can be listed as follows:

- The linguistic terminology
- First and second language acquisition theories
- Learning strategies

80.8% of the students (262 out of 324) agree that they have been motivated in the 'Acquisition Classes' through assessment. 279 students out of 324 (86.1%) have indicated that they developed a positive attitude towards language acquisition courses.

5. Some Suggestions for Language Acquisition Courses in Foreign Language Teacher Education

- 'Language Acquisition Courses' should be taught by linguists.
- After some prerequisite courses, such as courses on 'Linguistic terms' and 'An Introduction to Linguistics I and II' are given to the students, 'Language Acquisition Course' should be offered.
- The appropriate time for 'Language Acquisition Course' is the fifth semester.
- In 'Language Acquisition Courses', some problematic terms for the students may be translated into students' mother tongue.
- In 'Language Acquisition Courses', students may be given some projects on language acquisition/learning and teaching to develop students' awareness in literacy development in childhood and adolescence.
- For the framework of the course, instructors should take the following into account as Gravers (1996:13) summarizes:

needs assessment; determining goals and objectives; conceptualizing content; selecting and developing materials and activities; organization of content and activities; evaluation and consideration of resources and constraints.

6. Conclusion

In the foreign language teacher preparation, 'Language Acquisition Course' plays an important role, since it helps pre-service language teachers to raise their language awareness. However, students' existing conceptual schemata may not be enough when they first meet the course. As it has been indicated in this study, pre-service English language teachers are aware of the significance of this course, but they think that they must be given some preliminary courses on linguistics in order to comprehend the

professional competencies. Otherwise, the course content may not be comprehensible for the students.

In order to develop new, higher standards for the teacher education in the 21st century, a ‘Students’ Attitude Form’ for each course in the teacher education program must be given to the pre-service teachers to see students’ attitude towards the courses, as it has been discussed in this study.

Pre-service teachers are our future. What is given them in the preparation program will be reflected in the schools and communities. ‘Language Acquisition Courses’ help students for professional competence, since it specifically focuses on how children acquire their first language. It discusses how languages are learned, similarities between first and second language acquisition. Through ‘Language Acquisition Courses, pre-service English language teachers learn how the theories of first language acquisition can be applied to second language learning, what is the critical age for language acquisition, how individual learners’ characteristics and different contexts for second language learning affect their achievement.

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