# Exploring EFL Teachers' Decision-Making Skills: Departure from Lesson Plans

Serhat Başar [a] [1]

*[a] İzmir Institute of Technology, İzmir, Turkey*

## Abstract

This qualitative study primarily investigates the major reasons behind the teachers' decision-making skills when departing from their pre-planned lesson plans. This study also aims to explore to what extent teachers' beliefs and practices of departure from lesson plans are in line with each other. Data were collected through multiple sources including pre-interviews, observations, and post-interviews. Four tertiary level EFL teachers whose teaching experience was ranging from one to three were interviewed initially for the underlying beliefs related to departure from lesson plans. Then they were observed to examine how they depart from their lesson plans. Finally, they were interviewed again in terms of reflective thinking upon observation findings. The findings of the study indicated that four major categorical reasons influenced the teachers' deviation from their pre-determined lesson plans. These reasons were mainly related to academic concerns, affective factors, classroom management, and timing. The study also revealed that the teachers' underlying belief systems had a significant role in shaping what they did in their classes, which was examined individually for each participant. Based on these findings, some possible implications corresponding to curriculum and lesson plan design were discussed within the social constructivist theory and humanistic approach.

**Keywords**: Decision-making skills; departure from lesson plans; lesson plan; teacher beliefs; teacher practices

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[1] Corresponding author.
*E-mail address*: serhatbasar@iyte.edu.tr

## Introduction

There has been an increase in recent studies examining teacher beliefs in the field of language teaching. The reason for its significance in language teaching is that teacher beliefs can have a long-term influence on teachers' instructional practices in their classes (Crawley & Salyer, 1995). Also, beliefs can be a more effective component than knowledge in terms of shaping teachers' behavior and their decision-making processes regarding task organization and definition (Nespor, 1987). The reason why beliefs have profound influence on teacher practices could be attributed to its complex nature that is based on previous experiences, personalized and context-sensitive perspectives, and attitudes (Farrell & Lim, 2005). Another substantial aspect of teacher belief studies is the discrepancies occurring between teacher beliefs and practices, which constitutes a term that may also be defined as 'divergence, inconsistency, mismatch and incongruence' (Borg & Phipps, 2009, p.380).

Studies on teacher beliefs can be encapsulated within several categories comprising the pre-service language teacher cognition, in-service language teacher cognition, teacher cognition in grammar teaching, and teacher cognition in literacy instruction (Borg, 2006). Based on this categorization of literature, it is possible to suggest that study of teachers' beliefs has a limited scope that is in need of broader research areas. One of these research areas is teachers' beliefs on the curriculum that they have to implement at their institutions. The evidence from the studies conducted on teacher approaches to curriculum indicates that various approaches to curriculum implementation yield some results that are different from one another. Differences in the implementations of the curriculum may influence teachers, students, and the curriculum itself, and the curriculum is likely to turn into a different learned or taught curriculum compared to its original formal version as a result of these changes in the implementation (Randolph, Duffy, & Mattingly, 2007; Shawer, Gilmore, & Banks-Joseph, 2008). Considering this aspect of curriculum implementation, Shawer (2010) concludes that curriculum approaches of teachers affect their professional development, students' learning, and motivation. This distinction made upon the diversity of teaching outcomes regarding teachers' beliefs indicates that language teachers go through a process of decision-making on various components of teaching incorporating material selection, activities, and approaches (Brumfit & Rossner, 1992). With respect to the relationship between beliefs and language teachers' decision-making skills, it seems that beliefs can shape the decisions made by teachers.

Considering teacher beliefs and practices in language teaching, lesson plans also embrace a profoundly significant role in offering a framework to facilitate the teaching process by aiming to achieve the learning objectives (Vdovina & Gaibisso, 2013). Lesson plans help teachers make a connection between what is required in the curriculum and what is taught in the classroom (Lee, Chen, & Khum, 2009). Teachers are mostly responsible for developing lesson plans in accordance with the pedagogical objectives of the lesson and student needs and interests, which makes lesson planning a challenging process. In this sense, teachers are expected to have adequate critical thinking skills for the design and implementation of the lesson plans (Setyono, 2016).

As this study examined the main reasons and beliefs behind the departures from lesson plans, one of the main focuses was on the reasons or principles urging language teachers to depart from their pre-determined lesson plans. The other focus was on the teachers' beliefs about these departures and how these departures influenced their teaching. Based on this rationale, the current study was conducted to find answers to the following research questions:

1.) What are the major reasons behind the teachers' decisions to depart from their pre-planned lesson plans?

2.) To what extent are teacher beliefs and practices of departure from lesson plans in line with each other through these decision-making processes?

**Theoretical Framework**

**Social constructivist approach**

Language teachers contemplate a considerable number of factors to decide on departures. These factors can be examined within the framework of relationships between teachers and students as a vehicle for critical empowerment (Vygotsky, 1962; Van Der Veer & Valsiner, 1991; Freire & Macedo, 1995; Valsiner, 1995; Freire, 1998). The social constructivist approach underlines the significance of the fact that individual and social processes of knowledge construction are not independent of each other (Palincsar, 1998). This view is also supported by Carlson (1999) since the nature of the structure surrounding the dialogue and the level of thinking found in the dialogue trigger construction of decisions made by teachers and students. Another factor is the process of reflective thinking that language teachers go through. Reflective thinking does not constitute the ideas that come to one's mind by chance without any successive thoughts since it is based upon some existing thoughts (Dewey, 1933). In the

same vein, Richardson (1997) argues that social constructivism is a phenomenon that leads to the creation of understandings with the interaction of what individuals believe and what they come across in the context they learn and teach. These ideas specified within the social constructivist framework can establish a basis for the decision-making processes of teachers and how they decide to deviate from their lesson plans by considering the contextual factors.

**Humanistic approach**

Teaching with the perspective of the humanistic approach embodies a person-oriented framework that can help teachers to unlock students' natural curiosity and establish self-confidence among students (Rogers, 1995). Moreover, a great deal of attention has been given to affective factors with the rise of the humanistic approach in language learning since 'the emotional side of human behaviour' is a necessary component of language teaching and learning process. (Brown, 1994, p.135). These affective factors encompass feelings, moods, emotions, self-confidence, attitudes, and most importantly motivation (Krashen, 1982). Affective states of students have a key role in determining their both long-term and short-term learning experience (Ellis, 1994). As language teaching implications that are in line with the humanistic approach value students' feelings and emotions, these implications aim to enhance cognitive processes such as memory and perception by considering the influence of emotions and feelings on these cognitive processes (Parkinson, Totterdell, Briner & Reynolds, 1996). Regarding this framework, teachers' beliefs and practices might be shaped with the consideration of affective factors, which may lead to decisions to initiate departures from pre-planned lesson plans. As these human-related feelings do not fall apart from the context where learning and teaching occur, teachers can tend to adapt their practices in accordance with these affective states.

**Literature Review**

Designing lesson plans and implementing these plans in a real classroom makes it necessary to consider many factors that might have an effect on the process. In this sense, developing appropriate lesson plans is a complicated process since teachers should have information about the target group, teaching context, students' needs, interests, characteristics as well as their proficiency level (Sahin-Taskin, 2017). While teaching in the class and following the lesson plan, teachers try to maintain the flow of the lesson to comply with the plan and encourage student participation to achieve learning objectives (Paoletti & Fele, 2004). Some deviations initiated by students or teachers may appear while conducting the lesson plan.

Reactions to these deviations can be performed in a variety of ways. Teachers may leave the ongoing task and deal with the deviation stemming from a student (Li, 2013). Teachers can also resort to irony to imply that what is initiated by the student is a departure, or they use this departure as a chance to remind the learning goal (Waring, Reddington, & Tadic, 2016).

Departure from the lesson plan is one of the situations in which language teachers can make a decision. A departure from a pre-determined lesson plan can occur when a teacher who has a particular plan and steps in his or her mind has to change the flow of the lesson in case of unexpected adversities experienced in the class environment (Ulichny, 1996). Unlike the case stated by Ulichny (1996), the reasons for departure may also be driven from teachers' beliefs irrespective of the difficulty or easiness of the tasks, which means divergence from pre-planned lesson plans can occur in various conditions. Likewise, Richards (1998) stated that on-the-spot modification of the pre-planned activities provides teachers to make the activities more interesting and engaging to involve students in the activities. In a similar case, decisions that are made to depart from planned lessons can be due to students' affective states or teacher-oriented factors such as lack of material, which results in making unanticipated decisions (Smith, 1996). According to Smith (1996), the reason why teachers depart from their pre-planned lessons can be attributed to the interactions between their pedagogical choices and contextual factors including instructional setting and students.

Limited research studies conducted on decision-making skills of language teachers regarding departure from lesson plans have mostly focused on teachers' beliefs concerning departures, their practices of departures in the class, and the reasons triggering diverges from pre-determined lesson plans. Another issue that is considered to be significant is the institutional influence in the decisions made by language teachers. The study generated by Osam and Balbay (2004) investigated the decision-making skills of cooperating teachers and student teachers of English in a Turkish context by exploring seven student teachers and four cooperating teachers at a public school during their practicum. Results indicated that the main reasons leading teachers to diverge from their lesson plans were timing, classroom management, discipline problems, motivation, physical conditions, and language skills, which changed between student teachers and cooperating teachers. In addition, Osam and Balbay (2004) stated that both cooperating and student teachers violated their lesson plans which were based on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The reason why they departed from their plans and paid more attention to accuracy, rote-learning, and teacher-centeredness was related to their language learning experience imposed by their national and local institutions.

Another study conducted by Sougari (2011) explored the student teachers' decision-making skills about lesson planning and the impact of the practicum on these decisions. 99 EFL student teachers in a state university in Greece were examined with questionnaires. The data collected via questionnaires demonstrated that there were some discrepancies between what student teachers believed and what they did during decision-making processes. Besides, the reasons for departures stated in the pre-lesson questionnaire and post-lesson questionnaire were distinct in that learner involvement was highlighted in the former one. However, time constraints, discipline, and learner motivation were among the most prioritized reasons for why they departed from their lesson plans in the latter one. The reasons for teaching out of a pre-determined lesson plan were also indicated by Bailey (1996). These were common interests in a specific topic, teaching to the moment by some amendments, furthering the lesson by a procedural change, accommodating students' learning styles, promoting the students' involvement, and preventing more verbal students from dominating the class.

Differing from the studies mentioned above, Waring, Reddington, and Tadic (2016) conducted a conversation analysis based on the videotaped data of two ESL teachers. In this analysis, Waring et al. (2016) revealed how these teachers managed to maintain control when the learners started a departure in the classroom. Focusing on the strategies such as ironic teasing and reminding the learning goal employed by the teachers to redirect the departure to the learning point, Waring et al. (2016) remark that effective use of these control mechanisms enhances the classroom management and preserves the rights of learners who are relatively quiet. However, the reasons behind these departures or perceptions of the teachers towards these departures are not considered in this study, which hinders having a more comprehensive look at incidents of departure and the probability to use these departures for pedagogical purposes.

Considering the limited number of the studies and lack of variety in the scope of these studies, there is a need for more studies that might reveal the underlying factors behind the reality of departures. There are few studies revealing that departures take place because of several factors (Bailey, 1996; Osam & Balbay, 2004; Sougari, 2011), and some studies lack the underlying reasons behind departures by focusing on how departures occur (Waring et al., 2016). As departures are the incidents that frequently happen in language classrooms, there is a need for more comprehensive studies focusing on why departures take place, how teachers perceive these departures, and how these departures are utilised by teachers to be integrated

into the pedagogical and curricular objectives, which might lead to a betterment in learner engagement and affectively more plausible classroom atmosphere.

**Methodology**

**Setting and participants**

The participants for this study were four female EFL teachers from the preparatory school of an English-medium university in Turkey. Their teaching experience was ranging from two to three. All of the participants were required to teach for 24 lesson hours in a week. As all of them were advisor teachers, which means they have an extra responsibility to be the academic advisor of their classes. Most of the scheduled teaching hours were allocated for their classes. At this institution, as each year is separated into four academic tracks, the number of lessons that these teachers use to perform changes from 16 to 24 depending on the track. The lessons instructed by the participants were namely main course, reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The proficiency level of the students ranged from elementary to intermediate. Each class had approximately 20 students including international learners. These students were expected to reach an adequate English proficiency level to be qualified for their English-medium departments. Participants had a pre-planned curriculum to follow; however, they were free to adopt any approaches to teach the target subjects, which allowed them to make changes in their daily or weekly lesson plans. All participants were informed about the procedures of the study, and they were given an informed consent form informing about their rights throughout the study.

Table 1: Participants' background information (Pseudonyms were used for the participants)

| Name | Taught level | Year of experience | Education |
|------|-------------|--------------------|-----------|
| Aysu | Intermediate | 3 | • B.A. Translation and Interpretation<br>• M.A. American Literature |
| Beril | Intermediate | 2 | • B.A. Translation and Interpretation<br>• M.A. Sociology |
| Candan | Intermediate | 3 | • B.A. ELT<br>• M.A. ELT |
| Dilek | Intermediate | 2 | • B.A. ELT<br>• M.A. ELT |

**Research Design and Instrumentation**

As two main concepts (beliefs and practices) were taken into consideration to establish a comprehensive overview of what language teachers thought and did, qualitative research

techniques were conducted to obtain data for what language teachers perceived about their teaching practices including decision-making, designing lesson plans and deviations from lesson plans, and to what extent they could implement these beliefs in real classroom environments. For this reason, a qualitative case study was adopted considering the inseparable aspect of the case and context boundaries (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2018). Two qualitative research instruments were employed: semi-structured interviews and unstructured observations.

Pre-observation semi-structured interview was the primary phase of the instrumentation. It was conducted before observation sessions started. The participants were interviewed individually at the institution where they worked. It took approximately 15 minutes. This instrument also enabled me to establish a relationship with interviewees by developing a good rapport for the quality of data (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). This interview was conducted to shed light on language teachers' initial beliefs, theoretical background affecting their teaching methodologies and expectations. The focus of this data collection tool was to explore what they did in class to implement their teaching goals, how they evaluated the outcomes, specifically how they decide to depart from pre-determined lesson plans.

One lesson of each participant was observed without any pre-prepared scale to reflect what happened in class more comprehensively and analytically. Before the session started, the participants were asked to share their weekly and daily lesson plans. What they planned to teach was noted down to be able to notice any departures during the observation. The data was collected in two categories which were descriptive and analytical. The overall flow of the lesson was described, and incidents related to departure from the lesson plan were noted down and analyzed briefly within an analytical category. Furthermore, the lessons were audio-recorded for further analysis. The main purpose of these unstructured observation sessions was to note down the situations in which participants performed inconsistently associated with their previous explanations in the interview. These inconsistencies were used to detect other potential reasons for departure form lesson plans, and the differences between beliefs and practices were examined in detail.

Post-observation semi-structured interview (30 minutes) was the final step of the instrumentation. It was targeted to the participants the day after the observation sessions ended. It was semi-structured to provide participants with the freedom to evaluate themselves within their own perspectives. They were also ensured some transcribed instructions that occurred in the class intending to help the participants recall what had happened and why they preferred it,

which also provided a chance to conduct member-checking. Furthermore, it enabled participants to have an active role in the research rather than being passive objects by making meaning out of their experiences (Seidman, 2006). The participants were expected to reflect upon their behaviours in the class, departures, and the reasons behind these departures. Furthermore, as this interview allowed me to compare the previous interview and observation, it was beneficial to reach a more holistic position to deal with the data yielded through the triangulation of these instrumentation sources.

**Data analysis**

With reference to the analysis of data, all interviews and observation recordings were transcribed using *Transcribe*. Firstly, an inductive approach was implemented for all qualitative data sources (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Silverman, 1993). Each data source was analysed by means of within-case analysis (Patton, 1990), and a descriptive coding strategy was employed to name the words, phrases, and sentences emerging as codes (Saldana, 2014). All recurring patterns and notions utilized by the participants were noted down. For the pre-interview transcripts, the main focus was on the utterances concerning the participants' beliefs about their teaching practices and departure from lesson plans. For each participant, related segments were noted down on the chart prepared for 4 participants. Field notes taken during the observation sessions supported the transcriptions of the observation sessions. All departures were analysed and possible categorical reasons for departure were marked considering the context they occurred. Besides, all consistencies and discrepancies were noted on the table prepared for beliefs and practices. Transcripts of the last interview conducted after observation sessions were analysed, and each reason stated by the participants for the departures was marked to be matched with the categories that emerged from observation notes. As all data sources and stages of analysis were triangulated to provide reliability and validity for the data, an iterative analysis manner was used, which means categories were viable to change based on new patterns emerging from data. (Dörnyei, 2007). At the end of the analysis of each stage, all data sources were analysed together to reach a more common theorizing of the themes, and relationships between the participants' beliefs and practices were noted.

**Findings**

The analysis of teachers' beliefs, practices, and their observed departures from lesson plans indicated that what the participants believed and what they did in their lessons were in line with each other. Four over-arching themes emerged from the data to explain the reasons

behind the teachers' decision to depart from the lesson plan: affective factors, academic needs, classroom management, and timing. Also, the data illustrated that each participant's beliefs and practices were aligned with each other, which is displayed individually in the second section of the findings.

**Reasons for departure from lesson plans**

The analysis of teachers' beliefs and practices highlighted four themes which can be regarded as major reasons urging the participants to do some changes in their lesson plans during the lessons.

### Affective factors

Affective factors determine the proportion of language learners' input and intake. The affective factors incorporate certain emotions, such as motivation, self-confidence, anxiety, and so on in the process of acquiring a second language (Ni, 2012). Beliefs regarding affective concerns influenced the decisions made for departure.

Analysis of some incidents in the class yielded a series of reasons which can be related to affective factors encouraging the participants to depart from their pre-determined lesson plans. One of the participants (Dilek) extended the time allocated for the movie trailer, which was not embodied in her plan. During the post-observation interview session, she stated that she made students continue to watch the trailer because she realized that it had drawn her students' attention. In the second case, Beril started a discussion based on YouTube channels. When she was asked for the reason, she expressed that she had selected that topic to catch the students' attention and to make them feel more relaxed before starting the next task. Also, at the beginning of this lesson, Beril decided to depart from her lesson plan by stating that:

> *After the previous writing lesson, I had two options for them. Scenario writing and video-watching/acting. They did in-class writing, so I didn't want to tire them and I chose the second one.* (Beril, Interview 2)

This decision made by Beril designates that she considered her students' affective state as a reason for departure. Candan also departed from her expected lesson plan in order to motivate her students during the lesson. She started to give some information about an upcoming extra-curricular event, which excited students. After a brief discussion, Candan proceeded to follow her plan. Finally, Dilek was expected to work on worksheets that she had prepared for past modals, but she decided not to hand them out. During the post-interview, she stated that:

> *It was the last lesson. We were all tired and that final activity would be challenging for us. So, I decided to work on it the following day*. (Dilek, Interview 2)

**Academic needs**

What students needed and how much more they could learn influenced the way teachers made decisions about the flow of the lesson. Teaching beliefs of teachers had an substantial role in changing the scheduled activities. What teachers believe in terms of academic goals can lead to departures stemming from these beliefs.

> *I prefer to focus on the content not structure even if our material is about grammar. Vocabulary and discussion opportunities are more important to make them speak* (Candan, Interview 1)

In the first interview, Candan focused on her belief about the efficacy of content rather than structure. Towards the end of the lesson, she decided to turn a grammar activity which was based on a fill-in-the-blank text about mysterious jobs into a speaking activity, which is consistent with her aforementioned belief:

> *I wondered what they thought about it and I wanted to activate their background knowledge, so I turned it into speaking activity*. (Candan, Interview 2)

As her teaching beliefs support a more content-based teaching/learning process, she decided accordingly to meet her students' academic needs.

Second crucial factor determining the teachers' strategies to meet their students' academic needs was their proficiency level. The proficiency level of the students affected the way the participants diverged from their lesson plans. For instance, as Beril and Candan's level of classes were relatively more advanced than Aysu and Dilek's classes, Beril and Candan stated that they could change their lesson plans in action in order to teach extra grammar or vocabulary, which reflects their beliefs about what to teach and how to teach. In contrast to Beril and Candan, Dilek and Aysu pointed out that they preferred to facilitate learning via revisions, extra examples, and exercises. These beliefs were also supported by the participants' practices in that Aysu made a revision session instead of presenting the new topic she had prepared beforehand. Dilek also tried to facilitate past modals via extra exercises and examples during her lesson. In this case, they departed from their lesson plans to facilitate the learning process of their relatively low-level classes, however Beril and Candan changed their lesson plans to meet the needs of their students in grammar and vocabulary, which illustrates a consistent association between the participants' beliefs and practices.

**Classroom management**

Teachers sometimes deviated from their pre-determined plans to manage the classroom by coming up with new tasks, transforming the activities, and involving the students behaving disruptively into their lessons. In one of the cases, having shown the movie trailer, Dilek was talking about how past modals were used to make a deduction, however she realized that some of the students were not listening to her. She decided to come up with some examples about her students' lives, which drew the students' attention and they all stopped talking. As she noticed that they were interested in those examples, she gave more to keep them awake, which reveals the necessity to change the flow of the lesson to prevent disruptive behaviour. Another departure that occurred in Dilek's class corresponded to her students' disruptive behaviour as well. While she was leading a discussion about the deductions made in the movie trailer, she was interrupted by two overwhelmingly disruptive students, which forced her to make a change in her lesson at that time. She had those students stand up and go to the board. She expected them to write what their peers uttered as an example. They were taking notes on the board while their peers were discussing the movie trailer, which prevented them from performing disruptive behaviours.

> *One of the students was talking and I wanted him to stay away from there, so I gave him a task. I made him write an example on the board about past modals and he continued to write the other examples.* (Dilek, Interview 2)

She departed from the lesson by deciding on the procedure. She intended to have a more plausible environment by giving extra engaging tasks to the students bothering her teaching. The other example is from Candan's class. When she detected that some of the students were talking about the vocabulary item that they were discussing, she let those students give some examples about it, which relieved the class. After listening to their examples, she continued to teach. She gave some time for these extra examples to maintain a non-disruptive classroom environment for the other steps of the lesson.

### Timing

Timing of the lessons is a substantial factor affecting the lesson plan and teachers' decisions during the class. Based on the observation notes and retrospective comments on these notes, the participants mostly decided to adapt their materials and questions, dropped some activities, or add some activities considering the remaining time of the lessons. To illustrate, Beril stated that she would conduct a post-activity which would make students shoot a short video before she started the lesson. Towards the end of the lesson, she decided not to initiate the shooting process in the class. She separated the whole class into several groups, and she

wanted them to do brainstorming about the content of their videos, yet she asked them to shoot the videos after the lesson. When she was reflecting on her decision during the interview, she remarked that she had to get them to shoot the videos as homework due to time constraints. Additionally, Candan had to turn her last grammar activity into a speaking one. She stated two main reasons for that decision. The first one was about her belief favouring more content-based productive activities, but the second reason was about time limitation. She specified that that grammar activity was more time-consuming than the speaking activity. Hence, she made a change in her lesson plan to use the remaining time more efficiently, which indicates a decision made by the teacher to adapt the material to make use of time appropriately. Also, Candan had to drop her last activity, which was a grammar worksheet to practise past modals.

> *As they already gave many examples by using the target form, I couldn't give the worksheets. The video part lasted longer than I expected.* (Dilek, Interview 2)

The timing problem caused Dilek to drop an activity that was embraced in her lesson plan beforehand, which can be observed as a reason for the departure decision.

**Beliefs and practices**

In this section, participants were analysed individually based on their beliefs that they stated both in the first and second interviews and their teaching practices, which can provide a better understanding of the consistency between beliefs and practices highlighted in the second research question.

### Aysu

In the first interview, Aysu mentioned the situations in which she can feel the urge to diverge from her lesson plans. As she spends a lot of time to prepare a well-structured lesson plan, she pays attention to conducting her plans without any divergence if possible. She put forward that her class had the potential to disrupt easily, and she always had to grab their attention to make them follow the lesson, which implies that maintaining the original plan of the lesson is the main priority of a teacher. With regard to the situations in which she feels she has to depart, she emphasized the importance of affective factors and classroom management concerns as the reasons for departure. She underlined that she tended to depart from her lesson plans in case of disruptive behaviours and students' indifference to the lesson. She also denoted that she preferred not to depart in the absence of these aforementioned problems.

The data collected through the observation session indicates that Aysu's beliefs are profoundly in line with her actual teaching practice in the class in that she provided a well-

structured lesson plan with me before the lesson started, and she followed her plan to the letter. There was not a significant departure from her plan. When she was asked about it in the second interview, she expounded that she did not have to deviate from her plans since she faced neither behaviour problem nor lack of interest in the class, which can reveal the degree of consistency between her beliefs and practices.

### Beril

Based on the first interview, Beril stated that learner autonomy was one of the most remarkable concern that he held. She defined learner autonomy as a notion which requires involving students into decision making processes.

> *I sometimes feel that I am too hard on them. I give them too much information. They say "Teacher too much information. Can we do something else? Then, I modify. So, every day I ask them whether they want to do something different or not. I think these departures are a democratic way of governing the class.* (Beril, Interview 1)

Beril additionally highlighted the significance of students' interest. She believed that her students' interest or indifference could lead to a change in her lesson. Another indicated factor influencing her lesson plan was the proficiency level of her students. As she expressed that her class had a relatively higher proficiency level compared to other classes, she needed to teach more beyond the curriculum. To teach extra grammar or vocabulary, she departed from her pre-planned lesson plans. Based on these findings, it can be emphasized that she emphasized the role of affective factors and academic needs in her departures.

Observation notes provided supportive evidence that was aligned with Beril's beliefs because before starting the lesson, she incorporated students in the initial decision-making process. Considering her students' lesson load due to an in-class writing session completed in the previous lesson, she wanted her students to state their opinions for the scenario writing activity. As they were all tired, they did not want to write a scenario to post in YouTube. Instead, Beril turned it into a speaking activity, which indicates that she considered her students' ideas as her belief about the learner autonomy and students' interests required to do so. In addition, while she reflected upon her lesson, she expressed that she did not have to teach anything extra for that lesson, but she had to do that most of the time. She reflected that when her students were bored with the curriculum materials because of their higher proficiency level, she had to continue with more challenging materials or activities, which indicates that her belief about departure from lesson plan in accordance with students' academic needs is parallel to her teaching practice.

**Candan**

Candan's beliefs regarding the reasons for departure from lesson plans were mostly based on affective factors and academic needs. She also underlined that she her beliefs support the use of more communicative activities in the classroom rather than structural and grammar-based activities. With respect to affective factors, she enumerated that establishing a good rapport with students was key to maintain an efficient lesson. To establish this rapport, she found departures reasonable. Also, she mentioned that she could adapt the material or activity when necessary, depending on her teaching beliefs and students' academic needs, which is an example of a decision made by the teacher to elaborate materials with the aim of making them more efficient both for her and the students.

Her actual teaching practice did not show any discrepancies with the aforementioned beliefs since Candan was quite interested in building a good rapport with her students, and she prioritized their academic needs throughout the lesson.

> *They were taking notes, but while taking notes they were talking to each other, and they were asking questions to me. To have a rapport with students, I used that period. I asked personal questions, which shows you are interested in them, you support them.* (Candan, Interview 2)

She also adapted an activity that was supposed to be completed at the end of the lesson. It was a grammar activity comprising modals, however Candan turned it into a speaking activity. When she was asked why, she signified that she preferred to focus on the content not structure at that time due to the students' needs. She also foregrounded that she considered time limitation while adapting the activity.

**Dilek**

In the first interview, Dilek proposed that she could depart from her lesson plans because of several reasons including disruptive behaviours, academic needs, students' feelings, and her state of mind. She acknowledged that adapting lessons in a line with students' interests and changing the plan considering their boredom was a part of her teaching practice. She noted that she used departures as a classroom management tool and an opportunity to extend the pre-lesson activities before the main ones.

> *I feel that students are bored, or they are confused about particular things, I depart from my plans. Whenever I think they need a departure or I need a departure, I do it. It can be about their motivation, or it can be about educational purposes or learning purposes.* (Dilek, Interview 1)

Observation notes of Dilek's lesson demonstrated that her beliefs were consistent with the decisions she made during her lesson. She paid attention to the students' interest by giving

more time to their examples. She changed the procedure of the lesson because of some students' disruptive behaviors. She assigned them some tasks that were not mentioned in her lesson plan. She also spent more time on discussion of the movie trailer before starting to teach the target grammar structure, which indicates that she considered her beliefs while making decisions.

**Discussion**

With respect to the first research question exploring the major reasons behind the teachers' decision to depart from their pre-planned lesson plans, four possible reasons were discovered to cause departure: affective factors, academic needs, classroom management, and timing. Findings indicate that these reasons are not completely discrete from the previous research results. To illustrate, Osam and Balbay (2004) suggested that timing, classroom management, discipline problems, motivation, physical conditions, and language skills are the main reasons urging teachers to diverge from their lesson plans. Similarly, Sougari (2011) proposed that learner involvement was highlighted as the main reason for departure prior to the lesson by the participants, however after the lesson, time constraints, discipline, and learner motivation were highlighted as major reasons for departure. In addition, Bailey (1996) emphasized some reasons for teaching out of lesson plan: a common interest in a specific topic, teaching to the moment by some amendments, furthering the lesson by a procedural change, accommodating students' learning styles, promoting the students' involvement and preventing more verbal students from dominating the class, which highlights more specific reasons compared to the findings of this study.

In connection with the second research question exploring the consistency of teacher beliefs and practices regarding their departure from the lesson plan, the findings revealed that the participant teachers' beliefs in deviation from lesson plans were consistent with the decisions they made during their teaching practice. This consistency is distinct from former study results in that they underlined some discrepancies between beliefs and actual teaching. For instance, Osam and Balbay (2004) pointed out that both experienced and pre-service teachers violated their lesson plans that were based on Communicative Language Teaching. The reason why they departed from their plans and paid more attention to accuracy, rote-learning, and teacher-centeredness was related to their language learning experience imposed by their national and local institutions. In contrast, findings of this study shows that the reasons why the teachers violated their lessons were based on their beliefs, which provides consistency between their beliefs and practices since the participants did not touch upon any negative sides

of these departures. The teachers hold the view that departure is a part of their teaching, and they shape it considering their own beliefs. Likewise, Sougari (2011) highlighted the same inconsistency observed between pre-service teachers' beliefs and their class performances with respect to the way they depart from lessons. However, this study demonstrates that teachers do not have inconsistent belief and practice patterns since they regard these departures as incidents stemming from their beliefs rather than contrasting practices. What is more, even though Waring et al. (2016) suggests that teachers should be able to redirect departures to previously set learning goals, this study designates that some teachers utilise from departures by making use of them to maintain classroom management. Realizing the learners' state of mind and customizing the flow of the lesson pedagogically in accordance with learner needs is considered to be a classroom management skill rather than deviation from learning goals.

When it comes to the correspondence between the findings and main frameworks shaped the nature of this study, it can be specified that in-depth analysis of teachers' beliefs and their practices in the classroom environment shows that the aforementioned beliefs are related to both humanistic and social constructivist approaches. Primarily, the social constructivist approach provides a perspective to have a better understanding of the interaction between teachers and students while making decisions to depart from lesson plan since teachers and students can be seen as the vehicle for critical empowerment (Vygotsky, 1962; Van Der Veer & Valsiner, 1991; Freire & Macedo, 1995; Valsiner, 1995; Freire, 1998). Departures that took place as a result of affective and academic needs indicate that in-class interactions reveal what learners need and urge teachers to take actions that can empower learners both academically and affectively. The social constructivist approach also underlines the significance of the fact that individual and social processes of knowledge construction are not independent of each other (Palincsar, 1998). These social constructivist ideas support the finding that teachers decide to change what they teach by considering the interaction they have with students. Detecting disruptive behaviours during the lesson and involving students in the process of knowledge construction can reflect this constructivism in two ways. The initial is the experience gained from previous interactions with students, and the second one is social learning that occurs at the end of integration of disruptive students into the lesson after departure, which is also in relation to another component of social constructivism: Reflective Thinking (Dewey, 1933). Both learners and teachers are bound to have a reflection on their actions in case of a departure, which helps them to tailor their prospective actions. Unlike the previous studies on departure from lesson plans (Bailey, 1996; Osam & Balbay 2004; Sougari,

2011; Waring et al., 2016), this study indicates that departures can be handled within a social constructivist approach, and they can be employed as a leverage to reconstruct knowledge in a collaborative and reflective way.

The other framework, the humanistic approach, is a person-oriented framework that can help teachers to unlock students' natural curiosity and establish self-confidence among students (Rogers, 1995). In the light of this framework, it can be possible to argue that the humanistic approach is mostly in connection with affective factors triggering departure from lessons. Based upon the qualitative data, all the participants had a consensus on the fact that students' interests, boredom, anxiety, confidence, and motivation influenced the way they implemented their lesson plans.  As the teachers were aware of this, they tended to provide a lesson that could draw the attention of students. They complied with their interests, and they tried to lower the anxiety level of the students, which can be seen as some implementations conducted within the perspective of the humanistic approach. Departures occurring as a result of affective factors and consistent beliefs concerning these departures held by the teachers show that affective factors in a learning environment can shape what is believed and practised. In this sense, having a needs-driven perspective towards departures could yield pedagogically more effective practices in the class on the contrary to the idea that is based on the need to control and eliminate departures (Waring et al., 1016). Even though there is not a direct relationship between findings and humanistic approach, previous studies also revealed that there some affective reasons resulting in departures. For example, Osam and Balbay (2004) regarded motivation as a reason for departure. Likewise, Bailey (1996) and Sougari (2011) emphasized the role of active learner involvement in departures, which is in line with what have been found in this study. Considering the reasons about affective factors in these studies, it is significant to have a humanistic approach and take students' affective state of mind into account while making a decision on departure, which is bound to pave the way for more engaging classroom practices.

Considering the vital role of lesson plans in determining the framework of what is taught in the class (Lee, Chen, & Khum, 2009; Vdovina & Gaibisso,2013), the teachers were able to utilize from their critical thinking skills while making decisions on departure (Setyono, 2016). In this sense, critical thinking functions as an essential concern for better decision-making skills regarding the role of critical thinking in the 21$^{st}$ century (Zhou, Jiang, & Yao, 2015) since it promotes the improvement of thinking process by enabling individuals to analyse and evaluate how they think (Paul & Elder, 2007). Improvement in decision-making skills can

also help teachers to come up with solutions when they have adversity in conducting their lesson plans as a result of lack of familiarity with the students (Sahin-Taskin, 2017).

## Conclusion

Data collected from interviews and observation made it clear that teachers hold some beliefs depicting what they think about teaching out of their planned lessons. Findings indicate that in-service language teachers do not depart from their lessons without a rationale. The rationale behind their departures is mostly related to students' and their affective states of minds, students' academic needs that can facilitate or elaborate their teaching/learning processes, maintaining a good temperature of the classroom, and using time efficiently. In terms of the attempts to examine whether teachers hold beliefs that are in line with their teaching practices, this study illuminates how congruent beliefs and practices are. For that reason, individual analysis of the participants is provided so that it can be possible to keep track of their beliefs and practices at the same time.

## Implications & Limitations

It seems that this study can yield some clear implications with regard to curriculum and lesson designs that can be beneficial for pre-service/in-service teachers, administrators, curriculum developers, and stakeholders. As the study indicates that departure from plans is a salient reality occurring naturally in classes, and it does not yield any negative reactions from the students, it should be viewed as an inevitable component of curricula in the field of English language teaching. Flexibility and openness of a curriculum are regarded as a must by Richards (2002). Affective factors and interaction opportunities between teachers and students for a social learning environment are significant concerns that should be considered within humanistic and social constructivist perspectives. These can be implemented efficiently through a more flexible curriculum which can enable teachers to teach in a way that is more consistent with their beliefs. Such a curriculum design can encourage teachers to make more instant and autonomous decisions about any contextual factor influencing their teaching. Besides, this kind of curriculum design can empower teachers to decide on what to do depending on their interests, needs, and beliefs.

This study also sheds light on the nature of lesson plans. As it is quite possible to deviate from lesson plans because of any unexpected incidents, teachers should have some insights into making efficient decisions in case of these unexpected situations. Instead of familiarizing pre-service teachers with ideal lesson plans, providing the reality happening in a real teaching

environment with them and training them to raise their awareness regarding this concern are significant steps to take into consideration.

Finally, this study designates that departures might take place because of a variety of reasons, and teachers might have various insights into how they perceive and handle these departures, which is in line with complex nature of teaching. In the ELT field, implementing a program or curriculum that does not neglect the possible reasons for departures can promote the efficiency of the strategies that teachers use to handle departures. Also, the way the teachers reasoned their practices reflects that teachers' conscious thought can be fostered through reflection practices, which bridges the gap between beliefs and practices as well. So, some professional development practices based on teacher reflection can lead to more consistent patterns of beliefs and practices, and a betterment in classroom practices for the benefit of students.

One of the most essential limitations of this study is the lack of observation sessions, which can be a good indicator of what teachers do in their class in the long run. Longitudinal studies also can yield more reliable findings as teacher cognition is a field requiring an in-depth analysis of teachers' thinking and their teaching. Additionally, findings could have been compared to more experienced teachers to analyse whether they have similar belief systems. It could have been better to check consistency between beliefs and practices. Further studies can be conducted based on the changes in teachers' beliefs in the long run, and teaching experience can also be taken into consideration.

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