Effects of Learning Beliefs of Pre-Service Teachers at an English as a Foreign Language Certificate Program on their Practice Teaching

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study is to explore the effects of pre-service teachers' language learning beliefs on their practice teaching. Two randomly chosen pre-service teachers were recruited in the study (one male, one female). This research mainly adopted a qualitative approach using a structured interview, philosophy statements, field-notes during observations and the reflective journals of the participants. To explore their language learning beliefs and to determine the categories participants' interview transcriptions were open coded. Five main categories of language learning beliefs were identified in the end of the analysis; (1) ideal English learner, (2) ideal English teacher, (3) ideal English classroom, (4) difficulties in language learning process, (5) strategies of learners to overcome difficulties. The findings of the observation checklist and reflection papers written by the participants revealed some significant effects of the language learning beliefs of pre-service teachers on their practice teaching. Briefly, the results of the study revealed that both participants' teachings were greatly affected by their foreign language learning beliefs. However, it was also seen that some external factors created some divergences between the beliefs and practice teaching.

Keywords: *Language learning beliefs; pre-service teacher education; English language teaching; practice teaching; EFL certificate program*

Introduction

A belief is described as a mental state that is believed to be true by the person holding it, although the individual may know that alternative beliefs may be held by others (Incecay & Kesli Dollar, 2011). Beliefs about language learning have been one of the research focuses of recent years, presumably based on the assumptions that beliefs govern people's behaviors. Beliefs are explained as "generalizations about cause and effect, and they influence our inner representation of the world around us. They help us make sense of that world, and they determine how we think and how we act" (Puchta, 1999). According to the assumption that beliefs can influence thoughts and actions of individuals, research has been done to investigate relationships between teachers' beliefs and their instructional practices.

Beliefs about language learning have become to be an interest in the field of Second Language Acquisition. The reason of this, mainly depends on the assumptions that "success depends less on materials, techniques, and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom" (Stevick, 1980, p.4). According to Stevick, what goes on inside learners, which includes learners' beliefs, seems to have a strong impact on learners' learning during the language learning process. In addition to Stewick's (1980) words, Puchta states that people interpret new information and show reaction to it with their preexisting ideas about the subject being taught (Puchta, 1999).

Research interests in beliefs on language learning have not been limited to the beliefs of language learners. The close relationship between pre-service and in-service teachers' beliefs about language learning and their practice have been investigated in the literature (Mattheoudakis, 2007; Tercanlıoğlu, 2005; Davis, 2003; Calderhead, 1996; Thompson, 1992). These studies were designed based on the hypothesis that teacher beliefs may influence student beliefs through instructional practices and that those beliefs may change throughout their pre-service education. Johnson (1994) concluded that: "Research on teachers' beliefs shares three basic assumptions. First, teachers' beliefs influence both perception and judgment which, in turn, affects what teachers say and do in classrooms. Second, teachers' beliefs play a critical role in how teachers learn to teach that is, how they interpret new information about learning and teaching and how that information is translated into classroom practices. Third, understanding teachers' beliefs is essential to improving teaching practices and professional teacher preparation programs" (p. 439).

The development process of pre-service teachers' beliefs about language learning starts from the period when they were language learners themselves and goes till the time when they were in teacher education programs (Vibulphol, 2004). Considering the amount and level of the thinking that pre-service teachers have to do in their practice teaching, the experience they gained from their practice teaching may be influential to the adjustment of their beliefs, compared to the learning experience in the regular classes in teacher education program at their faculties.

Despite the number of studies conducted on this specific topic, Peacock (2001) reports that there is still need for further investigation. In the light of this report, the main focus of the present study is on the beliefs of pre-service teachers about language learning and the effects of these beliefs on their practice teaching. The selection of pre-service teachers as participants for this study is on purpose because the insights gained from a study on pre-service teachers' beliefs can contribute to the improvement of teacher education programs that may enhance beliefs that are supportive to the teaching approaches. Another reason is; as claimed by Dole and Sinatra (1994) and Wenden (1998), beliefs are relatively stable. Beliefs of advanced learners were believed to be more stable than those of novice learners (Kern, 1995). Considering that in-service teachers are generally more advanced learners than pre-service teachers, pre-service teachers whose beliefs may still be developing while they are in teacher education programs are preferred to conduct this study with.

The purpose of the current study is to explore the effects of pre-service teachers' language learning beliefs on their practice teaching. Specifically, the following research questions are addressed in this study:
1. What beliefs do pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' have about foreign language learning?
2. What are the effects of these beliefs on the pre-service teachers' practice teaching?

Methodology

Setting

In 1997 the eight-year compulsory education system started and this resulted in some remarkable changes in foreign language education in Turkey. Under this law, it became obligatory for public primary school students to start studying a foreign language in the 4th grade. As a result of this law, the need for language teachers increased rapidly. In order to fulfill the need for English language teachers, English Language Teaching (ELT) certificate programs have been offered by some state and private universities (MEB, 2004).

English Language Teaching Certificate Programs in Turkey

The students who are graduates of higher education institutions with English medium of instruction were given the chance to attend English Language Teaching certificate programs. However, with the act 80 in 2009 (http://www.kamudan.com/Uploads/Egitim/80_kk.pdf) only the students who were graduates of English Language and Literature, American Culture and Literature, Interpretation, English Linguistics and Translation departments have been accepted to the program. The main focus of these programs is to provide necessary content and pedagogical knowledge to the students for one year. The students attending to these certificate programs are required to complete 31 credits in two academic terms. The courses and their credits are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Courses and the credits per semester.

Course				Course			
1st Semester				**2nd Semester**			
1. Introduction to Education	2	0	2	7. Teaching Grammar	2	0	2
2. Developmental Psychology	2	0	2	8. Educational Technology and Materials Development	2	2	3
3. Program Development	2	0	2	9. Language Learning and teaching approaches	2	0	2
4. Testing	2	0	2	10. Turkish Education system and school management	2	2	3
5. Linguistics	2	0	2	11. Counselling	2	0	2
6. Teaching Methodology	3	2	4	12. Practice teaching	2	6	5
Total Credits	**13**	**2**	**14**	**Total Credits**	**12**	**10**	**17**

The students who are graduates of higher education institutions with English medium of instruction (English Literature, Interpretation, American Culture and Literature, and Linguistics) were given the chance to attend these certificate programs. The main focus of these programs is to provide necessary content and pedagogical knowledge to the students for one year. This study was conducted in one of these certificate programs of a foundation university in Istanbul.

Participants

Two randomly chosen pre-service teachers were recruited in the study (one male, one female). Both of the participants received their undergraduate degrees from the Interpretation departments of two different state universities. The participation to the study was on voluntary basis. They had started ELT certificate program in the first semester of 2009-2010 academic year and completed the requirements of the compulsory lessons offered in the first semester of the program. For the purposes of the study, data were collected during the second term when pre-service teachers started doing their practice teaching.

Data Collection

This research mainly adopted a qualitative approach using a structured interview, philosophy statements, an observation checklist and the reflective journals of the participants. In order to answer the first research question which aims to explore the language learning beliefs of pre-service teachers, the participants were required to write their philosophy statements about language learning on the sub-headings of the interview which are ideal language learner, ideal language teaching, ideal language classroom. In addition, to provide in-depth data a structured interview was made with the participants. Each interview lasted for about thirty minutes. The interview questions were adapted from the one used in the study conducted by Vibulphol (2004). The questions in the interview were grouped under three titles; (a) beliefs about language learner, (b) beliefs about language teacher, (c) beliefs about language classroom. The interviews with the participants were videotaped and transcribed. In order to have reliable results the coding of the data was done by two different researchers and 90 % agreement was reached. The codes which were agreed on were later discussed in the results section.

After the exploration of the language learning beliefs of pre-service teachers, the participants were observed during their practice teaching to see the effects of their language learning beliefs on their classroom practice. They were observed only once because of the fact that they had only one official practice teaching throughout the program. The lessons observed lasted for forty minutes. During the observations, detailed field-notes were taken. The participants were assigned subjects before their teaching by the cooperating teachers at school. They taught without any interruption of the cooperating teachers and the supervisors. In addition, the participants were asked to write a reflective journal regarding their teaching experience to get more detailed data to see the effects of their language learning beliefs on their teaching.

Data Analysis and Findings

Content and document analysis of the student-generated data helped the researcher to interpret the research findings. During the data interpretation, "open coding" strategy was applied (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p.62). In order to answer the first research question, to explore their language learning beliefs and to determine the categories participants' interview transcriptions were open coded. Five main categories of language learning beliefs were identified in the end of the analysis; (1) ideal English learner, (2) ideal English teacher, (3) ideal English classroom, (4) difficulties in language learning process, (5) strategies of learners to overcome difficulties. Based on the categories the following initial assertions were made.

Assertion 1: Ideal language learner

When participants were asked to define an ideal language learner, they placed heavy emphasis on the social characteristics of language learner. The following quote from interview is representative of this belief.

> "Technology and improving media tools provide a lot of input to language learners. That's to say, in order to benefit from these opportunities in the language learning process, the learner should be as social as possible. Taking-risk and being outgoing are also very important to use the newly learned language without any frustration." (Participant 1)

To support the data gathered from interviews, the participants were asked to write their philosophy statements regarding language learning. These statements of the participants also support the idea mentioned in the above quote.

> "Being social, risk taking and outgoing are the most important characteristics that a language learner should have." (Participant 2)

In addition to these ideas, some other characteristics of the ideal language learner are defined by participants such as being disciplined, and investigator. Although these characteristics are proved to be necessary by the previous research, the importance of being self-motivated and having the necessary aptitude should not be ignored. It is clear that, self-motivated learners are always one step forward in the language learning process.

Assertion 2: Ideal language teacher

When asked to identify the characteristics of an ideal language teacher, participants tended to exemplify the necessary characteristics as supporter, facilitator and moderator. Following quote taken from the interview illustrates this belief.

> "We are being educated as learner centered teachers to be which means that we have to be as humanistic as possible in the classroom. I can say that, being a humanistic teacher requires being moderator and supporter in every aspect of the teaching-learning process." (Participant 1)

The findings of the philosophy statements revealed that in addition to these ideas, one of the participants stated that a language teacher should be a role-model and authoritative in the language classroom and explained the reason with the following excerpt:

> "In Turkey, language learners cannot have any input out of the classroom, that's why, as a language teacher, I have to provide the correct way of language use and I believe this requires being authoritative and disciplined. They should be aware of the significance of learning a language." (Participant 2)

As it can be seen, there is significant difference between the beliefs of participants. When the demographic data gathered from the participants were analyzed, the reason can be clearly identified. The first participant who focuses on the humanistic characteristics of an ideal language teacher is a graduate of a private high school where there are fewer students and teachers are able to follow the recent approaches by the help of facilities provided by the administration. However, the second participant is a graduate of a state school where there are a lot of students in the classrooms and the language teacher's first concern is having a disciplined classroom. That's to say, it is clear that the

participants' beliefs are affected by their studentship period. This finding is consistent with the study of Johnson (1994) which reveals results on the effect of language learning process on language learning beliefs of pre-service teachers.

Assertion 3: Ideal English classroom

The participants were required to describe the ideal language classroom which is believed to be an inseparable part of language learning. Both of the participants focused on the importance of real life materials in the classroom. The following quotation from the interview reveals this.

> "Classroom has a great role to motivate the students, that's why the materials should take the attention of the language learners, when they are in the class, they should have chance to read or notice some real life situations." (Participant 1)

In addition to the above mentioned description, in their pre-philosophy reports both of the participants mentioned the importance of technological equipments in the language classroom.

> "An ideal English classroom needs to be designed with technological language learning equipments such as; internet access, sound system and projector which I believe are beneficial to motivate students during the learning of all communicative skills" (Participant 1)

It is clear that the participants tended to describe the language classroom physically instead of the activities and methods that need to be applied. When they are asked to describe the ideal language classroom regarding the content, they both talked about the importance of communicative, group and pair work activities.

Assertion 4. Difficulties during the language learning process

Participants emphasized the difficulties that a language learner can have during the process of language learning, each participant came up with different problems such as; difficulty to acquire speaking, difficulty in comprehending a native speaker and being both fluent and accurate. Even though they seem to be different problems they are all related to the use of language. One of the participants describes the situation:

> "Since we do not have many native speakers around and we do not have many chances to hear and talk outside the classroom, when we come across with a native speaker we have difficulty in both comprehending him and talking to him accurately." (Participant 2)

The pre-philosophy of this participant on the same issue also supports this idea.

> "I could not have any chance to speak in English in the classroom because I was shy and afraid of being criticized, and I could not acquire speaking well." (Participant 2)

As it was stated by the participants, the most problematic point in the language learning process was the use of foreign language. This may be because they have experienced such difficulties during their own learning. In other words, this difficulty can be generalized to all learners of foreign language who are learning a language as a foreign language not as a second language.

Assertion 5: Strategies to overcome the difficulties

The participants were asked to define their strategies that helped them overcome the difficulties that they probably come across with during the language learning process. They mentioned the importance of using the technology for the real life use of the language and listening to songs and videos to learn correct pronunciation. The following excerpt was taken from the interview transcript of the participants.

> *"Technology and media instruments provide the only real life situations for the language learners. Otherwise, they cannot learn how to produce correct language." (Participant 2)*

This quotation was supported by the pre-philosophy statement of the other participant. She stated that;

> *"Unfortunately, we as the language learners need to talk in the natural environment to acquire the communicative abilities. Since we cannot have this chance, making online foreign friends can be a solution." (Participant 1)*

As it was stated by the participants, technology and use of media tools are believed to be the best strategies to overcome the difficulty regarding language use in the process of language learning. This may be explained by the effectiveness of technology in learners' lives. Since they are already interested in the internet and other technological tools, the language classes should integrate technology and productive skills courses such as speaking and writing in order to improve language learners' communicative abilities.

After having explored the pre-service teachers' language learning beliefs, the effects of those beliefs on their practice teaching were also investigated. In order to investigate, two main instruments namely practice teaching observation field-notes and pre-service teachers' reflection papers on their practice teaching were used to gather the necessary data to answer the second research question. The field-notes were taken by taking the interview questions into consideration. To supply adequate data the participants were also asked to write their own reflections regarding their observed practice teaching.

To clearly define the effects of beliefs on practice teaching, the language learning beliefs of participants were categorized in Table 2.

Table 2. Language Learning Beliefs of Participants

Beliefs on	Participant 1	Participant 2
Ideal English learner Ideal English teacher Ideal English classroom	social, outgoing, risk taker supporter, facilitator, moderator technological equipments, authentic materials, communicative	disciplined, investigator role-model and authoritative technological equipments, group and pair work
Difficulties in language learning process Strategies of learners to overcome difficulties	being able to use fluent and accurate language making on-line friends	comprehending and speaking use of technology, listening to songs and videos

The findings of the observation checklist and reflection papers written by the participants revealed some significant effects of the language learning beliefs of pre-service teachers on their practice teaching.

Participant 1. The field notes taken in the observed practice teaching demonstrated that first participant's beliefs on ideal language learner strongly affected his teaching. The students in his lesson were generally very active and risk-taker without causing any classroom management problems. He facilitated the students who were working in pairs and supported the individual students who were not high achievers in the classroom. In addition, by providing students with authentic materials and making them listen to a song, helped them to hear and use foreign language accurately within the classroom. Despite the limited time of observation, he was observed that there was great convergence between his foreign language learning beliefs and his teaching. In other words, as a result of the observation, he was proved to be affected by his language learning beliefs.

Participant 2. During her practice teaching, she was very nervous and had difficult times in managing the classroom, although she tried to be disciplined, she could not manage the classroom well. This may be because of the fact that she was teaching 4th graders which means that managing the class necessitates specific skills regarding teaching young learners. Unfortunately, the participant did not have any 'teaching young learners' course during the certificate program. On the other hand, she used some technological equipment (i.e. power point presentation and sound system) in order to take the learners' attention and created some real-life situations to integrate them into lesson. Even though she tried to arrange some groups for an activity, due to the management problem, she quitted the activity and turned it a whole-class activity which is quite a good reflection-in-action. Consequently, it is clear that this participant was also affected from her own foreign language learning beliefs; however, due to some external factors and the atmosphere of the class she tended to apply some different teaching strategies.

Conclusion and Implications

In the end of the data analysis, above mentioned assertions namely; ideal English learner, ideal English teacher, ideal English classroom, difficulties during the language learning process and strategies to overcome these difficulties were identified. The findings reveal that beliefs about language learning showed their effects on the pre-service teachers' instructional practices in the aspects of creating language learning environment, roles of teacher and learner within the language classroom and providing learners with necessary strategies when they have difficulty. These effects are all related to the pre-service teachers' stated beliefs which are about ideal language learner, ideal language teacher, ideal language classroom, difficulties they come across during the language learning process and how to overcome these difficulties. This finding support the arguments of Horwitz (1987), Holec (1987), and Puchta (1999) in that learners develop their beliefs about language learning from their experience as language learners. The participants' beliefs about the ideal teacher, for instance, illustrated that they believed the teacher shuld be supporter, facilitator, role model and authoritative. Accordingly, the participants were observed that they were quite affected by their beliefs, however, it was seen that their beliefs were not the only factor affecting their teaching. The level they are teaching, the theories they received, the number of students and the competencies they need to have had also some effects on their practice as well.

In the case of teaching and learning, it is accepted that beliefs powerfully influence what prospective teachers learn during teacher preparation programs and what they do as teachers. In other words, there is no such thing as a tabula rasa regarding teaching and learning (Featherstone & Feiman-

Nemser, 1992). As an implication to the field of language teacher education, analyzing the learning beliefs of pre-service teachers and making them aware of their own beliefs might be helpful to direct them current teaching techniques and methodologies. They may have some uncertainties in their teaching during their first years which result from the tension between their beliefs of their own foreign language learning – their apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975) and the goals of current foreign language teaching.

For further research, it is suggested that the beliefs of pre-service teachers after their practice teaching should be analyzed again to see the effects of practice teaching on their language learning beliefs. In addition, due to some limitations, the number of participants and the data were restricted. A research can also be conducted with greater number of participants with the concern of generalization of the results.

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