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EXPLORING THE EFFECTS OF GENDER AND PROFICIENCY LEVELS ON TURKISH EFL LEARNERS' BELIEFS ABOUT LANGUAGE LEARNING: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

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Abstract

Language learners' beliefs about second language learning interact with their awareness, consciousness, attitude towards learning, strategy choices and motivations (Buyukyazi, 2010). Delving into learners' beliefs provides an insightful view of learners' perceptions and actions about their education, which also helps teachers to shape the language learning process with changing or adapting the methods and materials thereby reshaping the negative preconceptions of the learners about English language. To see the effect of the learners' gender and language proficiency levels, 43 university level students contributed to the study. The data were collected with a 34-item Likert Scale called as The Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) developed by Horwitz. The data analysis revealed that while learners' gender has no significant effect on the learners' belief, their proficiency levels affect their beliefs about the nature of the language, foreign language aptitude, motivations and expectations from their second language learning procedures.

Keywords: language learner's beliefs, attitude, aptitude, preconception

1. Introduction

In the domain of second language learning, the researchers have focused on the studies dealing with the cognitive problem of language learning during the last two decades. The results of the researches demonstrated that each student possesses a unique approach to the language learning tasks (Altan, 2003; O'Malley Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1992, 1993; Oxford & Cohen, 1992; Wenden & Rubin, 1987). As the scholars have acknowledged that learners bring some set of experiences, attitudes, expectations, characteristics, cultural elements and so on, the reason behind the difference may be grounded on the learners' beliefs about the nature of the language, language learning, language learning outcomes, strengths and limitations for language learning (e.g. Nyikos & Oxford, 1993; for examples relating to English education in Japan, see Benson, 1991; Stone, 1989; Sakui & Gaies, 1999).

Individuals' beliefs constitute an indispensable part of every discipline including human behavior and learning as one of the main constructs (Sakui & Gaies, 1999). According to the cognitive psychology, beliefs are categorized as an element of cognitive knowledge, since it perceives beliefs as self-knowledge (for a review, see Wenden, 1998b; Flavell, 1987; Sakui and Gaies, 1999) while social psychology sees beliefs as the perceptions consisting of individuals' earlier experiences, backgrounds, educational lives and more. (Dole and Sinatra, 1994; Alexander et al., 1991). Hence, the beliefs are both the basis of the new experiences and the informants for the interpretation of subsequent experiences. Supportively, beliefs are described as 'the basis for value judgments' in the study of Dole and Sinatra (Dole & Sinatra, 1994; Ryan, 1984; Weinert & Kluwe, 1987; Schommer, 1990).

Second language learners' beliefs about L2 learning are derived from the learners' past learning experiences, their educational backgrounds, their culture and characteristics (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005; Han et. al, 2011). According to Punchta (1999, pp. 68-69), people understand and comprehend new information with the help of their past experiences and current knowledge. Besides, Horwitz (1987) interpreted the difference in learners' beliefs about L2 learning thereby depending on varying previous learning and language learning experiences, varying cultural backgrounds of the learners and their personalities.

Focusing on the second language learners' beliefs towards their L2 learning processes facilitates understanding of how second languages are learnt and how they need to be taught (Horwitz, 2008, p14). Although all children learn second language thereby following the same steps at the same learning rate, the beliefs that learners bring to the L2 learning situations vary. Moreover, these beliefs can be learners' misconceptions debilitating their success in second language learning procedures. As the beliefs reflect the learners' perceptions, expectations, commitment, success and satisfaction related with their following language learning experiences, foreign language teachers should dedicate more effort to eliminate negative beliefs of learners, and especially the ones who will be teachers (Altan, 2006). Hollec (1981, p. 27) suggests that L2 learners must get through a psychological preparation process of 'deconditioning' to get rid of their negative preconceptions which negatively interfere with their language learning procedure (cited in Altan, 2006).

When a student believes that language learning primarily requires learning of vocabulary items, the learner will dedicate most his/her effort to learn and memorize L2 words. On the other hand, if the student believes that L2 learning process heavily depends on grammar, then he/she will put all his/her effort to memorize the grammatical structure of the second language. Horwitz's study (1988) showed that unless the learners possess facilitative beliefs and realistic ideas parallel with their language teachers' ideas, their confidence to their teachers, their success in L2 classes and their satisfaction with the learning procedure may be negatively affected (Buyukyazi, 2010).

1.1. Background to the Study

During the last two decades, second language learning beliefs have been investigated with the pioneering effect of Horwitz study in 1985. Since his leading effect, the researches on second or foreign language learning beliefs have conducted in numerous settings: in the USA with foreign language learners (Horwitz, 1988; Kern, 1995; Kuntz, 1996; Oh, 1996; Hurt, 1997; Mori, 1997), in an ESL context with adult learners in the USA (Wenden, 1986, 1987; Horwitz, 1987) and New Zealand (Cotterall, 1995), with university-level or adult language learners (Huang, 1997; Hurt, 1997; Gaies et al., 1999), with an EFL context in Brazil (Barcelos, 1995), China (Wen and Johnson, 1997), Korea (Park, 1995; Truitt, 1995), Japan (Luppescu and Day, 1990; Keim et al., 1996), North Cyprus (Kunt, 1997), Russia (Tumposky, 1991; Gaies et al., 1999), Hong Kong (Benson and Lor, 1999), Turkey (Altan, 2006; Oz, 2007; Ayhan, 2008; Tercanlıoglu, 2004) and Taiwan (Yang, 1992; Huang, 1997).

Starting with the leading figure, Horwitz studied beliefs of American university students who were having a requisite foreign language course thereby developing a self-reported scale called 'The Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory' (BALLI) (Horwitz, 1985; 1987; 1988). One of the most salient findings in this study is that learners' preconceptions can influence their second language learning perceptions in a negative way (Horwitz, 1985). On the other hand, Bernat (2006) studied with sixty-two university learners who took academic English class at Australia to see that whether the results of BALLI would be context-based or would present parallel findings with Horwitz study. She concluded that there were many similarities between the two different contexts (Bernat, 2006). In a different context, Mantle-

Bromley (1995) studied with 208 learners from middle school taking Spanish and French. She emphasized the teachers' role in shaping learners' beliefs towards their second language as the learners with realistic beliefs would be more productive and successful in classes. When there is a mismatch between the learners' beliefs and their performance, they become disappointed (Mantle-Bromley, 1995).

Some of the studies in this domain paid attention to the differences between male and female learners' beliefs about their second language learning procedures. Sibert (2003) found significant differences in L2 learners' beliefs related with language learning and strategy choices while Bacon and Finnemann (1992) found out that female learners possess higher level of strategy use, motivation and social interaction in their L2, Spanish. However, Tercanlioglu (2005) found no statistically significant difference among 73 female and 45 male undergraduate EFL teacher trainees' beliefs.

On the other hand, teachers' beliefs also play a crucial role in shaping L2 learners' beliefs about second language learning, deciding on the teaching methods and materials and creating the classroom environment. Peacock's longitudinal study (2001) was grounded on belief changes of ESL pre-service teachers in three-year-education program. However, he found no statistically significant change in pre-service teachers' beliefs about second language learning. He explained the finding by depending on the idea that learners' beliefs are derived from their old L2 learning experience, especially in secondary school (Peacock, 2001, p. 187). Besides, Horwitz (1988) found out that the significant difference between learners' and teachers' beliefs in his study may result in negative language learning outcomes in terms of learners' confidence to the teacher and their success, satisfaction in classes, willingness to participate in communicative learning activities (Horwitz, 1988; Peacock, 1999).

In addition to the international studies, Altan's (2006) local study for Turkish context conducted with four hundred students from English, German, French, Japanese and Arabic pre-service language teachers. He found out that there is a statistically significant similarity among the pre-service teachers' beliefs from different language backgrounds for future careers. However, in this study the aim is to explore the effects of gender difference and proficiency levels of learners on their second language learning beliefs. Although gender difference has been investigated in the literature, there is no consistency in the findings of the earlier studies. Furthermore, L2 learning proficiency variables have failed to gain a place in this domain to reveal the possible similarities and differences in learners' beliefs, motivations, perceptions and their strategy use. To fill this gap in the literature, the research questions of this study;

1. Are there any significant differences with regards to beliefs about language learning between male and female learners?
2. Are there any significant differences among the participants who belong to different proficiency groups with regards to beliefs about language learning?

2. Methods

2.1. Setting

The study was conducted at school of foreign languages in a private university. Following the university entrance exam, the university places the learners' with an English language proficiency exam at the beginning of the each academic year. The learners who fail to get the minimum passing score are placed at preparatory classes based on the placement test scores for their language proficiency levels. The programs for ELT and ELF preparatory classes include 1+4 years education consisting of one year preparatory class and four years of departmental education.

2.2. Participants

The study was carried out with four intact groups of learners from ELT and EFL preparatory classes. The first three groups consist of 8 learners for each proficiency levels ranging from A2, B1 and B2 from EFL preparatory classes. There are 15 female and 9 male learners in these three groups. On the other hand, the last group consists of 19 learners including 10 males and 9 female learners of ELT preparatory class with the B2 language learning levels for English language. Totally, there are 43 preparatory class learners ranging from 8 A2 learners, 8 B1 learners and 27 B1 learners.

Table 1. *Distribution of the participants*

Departments	Proficiency Levels	Female	Male	f	%
ELT Preparatory Class	B1	9	10	19	44,18
ELF Preparatory Classes	A2	7	1	8	18,60
	B1	4	4	8	18,60
	B2	4	4	8	18,60
Total		24	19	43	100

2.3. Instrumentation

The Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) developed by Horwitz in 1983 is utilized in this study to asses L2 learners' various opinions about second language learning. BALLI is a five-point Likert Scale including thirty four items assessing learners' beliefs on five major domains; (1) difficulty of language learning, (2) foreign language aptitude, (3) the nature of language learning, (4) learning and communication strategies, and finally, (5) motivations and expectations. The structure of the instrument is retained with no major changes in its original design. Only the items which do not represent the Turkish context are exposed to necessary modifications in order to reflect current study's context thereby changing the expression "American" into "Turkish" (30th and 33rd items).

2.4. Data Analysis

After the data collection process, the responses gathered from the subjects are analyzed by using descriptive statistics with the help of IBM Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) 21 software. First, the data is subjected to normality test which indicates that trimmed mean, mean and median scores are almost alike. Additionally, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov value is recorded as 0.089 while Q – Q Plot Test and Histogram results are also supporting the parametric value of the data. After the results ensuring the normality of the samples, the descriptive statistics are analyzed with independent sample t-test to interpret the effects of gender and ANOVA to see the impact of second language proficiency levels. The significance level is set up at $p < .05$.

Table 2. *Test of normality*

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
TOTAL	.089	43	.200*	.976	43	.508

3. Results

The results of this study are interpreted according to the 2 different research questions.

1. Are there any significant differences with regards to beliefs about language learning between male and female learners?

An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the second language learners' beliefs for male and female EFL and ELT preparatory class students. According to the data, there is no statistically significant difference in the scores for female ($M=3.3750$, $SD=.36116$) and male learners ($M=3.5921$, $SD=.36525$; $t=-1.94$). As the significance values for Levene's test are higher than .05 ($p=.795$, $p=.733$, $p=.404$, $p=.135$, $p=.074$ for each cluster), there is no statistical difference between the beliefs' of female and male learners.

Table 3. Independent samples test for gender

		Independent Samples Test									
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
										Lower	Upper
Difficulty of Language Learning	Equal variances assumed	.068	.795	-1.94	41	.058	-.21711	.11146		-.44220	.00799
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.94	38.566	.059	-.21711	.11161		-.44293	.00872
Foreign Language Learning Aptitude	Equal variances assumed	.118	.733	1.201	41	.237	.15838	.13186		-.10792	.42468
	Equal variances not assumed			1.197	38.306	.238	.15838	.13226		-.10930	.42606
Nature of Language Learning	Equal variances assumed	.711	.404	.219	41	.828	.03125	.14268		-.25690	.31940
	Equal variances not assumed			.212	32.352	.834	.03125	.14767		-.26941	.33191
Learning and Communication Strategies	Equal variances assumed	2.321	.135	.088	41	.930	.01284	.14636		-.28274	.30843
	Equal variances not assumed			.085	32.052	.933	.01284	.15170		-.29613	.32182
Motivations and Expectations	Equal variances assumed	3.366	.074	-.099	41	.922	-.01930	.19587		-.41486	.37627
	Equal variances not assumed			-.096	33.325	.924	-.01930	.20176		-.42962	.39103

2. Are there any significant differences among the participants who belong to different proficiency groups with regards to beliefs about language learning?

One-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to find out the effect of learners' proficiency levels to their second language learning beliefs. The preparatory school subjects consisted of 3 groups involving A2 level learners, B1 level learners and B2 level learners. As $p < .014$ in their beliefs, it is obvious from the table that there is a significant difference between B1 ($M = -.57685$) and B2 ($M = .57685$) level L2 learners beliefs' on motivations and expectation.

Table 4. Multiple comparisons for proficiency levels

Multiple Comparisons							
Tukey HSD	(I)	(J)	Mean	Std.	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
Dependent Variable	PROFICIENCY	PROFICIENCY	Difference (I-J)	Error		Lower Bound	Upper Bound
MOTIVATIONS AND EXPECTATION	A2	B1	.02500	.29028	.996	-.6815	.7315
		B2	-.55185	.23370	.059	-1.1207	.0170
	B1	A2	-.02500	.29028	.996	-.7315	.6815
		B2	-.57685*	.23370	.046	-1.1457	-.0080
	B2	A2	.55185	.23370	.059	-.0170	1.1207
		B1	.57685*	.23370	.046	.0080	1.1457

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

4. Discussion

In the domain of second language learning beliefs' studies, the issue of gender difference fails to reach a consistency in the results of earlier studies. In spite of the findings of Siebert (2003) and Bacon and Finnemann's (1992) studies, the results of this study reveal that there is no significant difference between the male and female preparatory class learners' beliefs about second language learning. The results of the current study support the findings of Tercanlioglu (2005) and Bernat and Lloyd (2007) who found similarities among the gender in terms of foreign language aptitude, the language difficulty, nature of the language learning, language learning strategies, motivations and expectation.

On the other hand, the effects of language learning proficiency level to the second language learners' beliefs are an intact area in the literature. The current study's findings elicit that there is a statistically significant difference between B1 ($M = -.57685$) and B2 ($M = .57685$) level L2 learners learners' motivations and expectation towards their L2 learning process. Most of the subject learners possess the positive or correct beliefs and perceptions about the nature of the language learning, foreign language aptitude, difficulty of language learning and learning and communication strategies from the beginning. However, while B1 level learners have relatively negative beliefs about motivation and expectation, B2 level learners believe that learning English very well helps them have many opportunities to practice it, find a better job and get to know native speakers better. The change between the proficiency group in only motivation and expectation cluster can result from age, year of education, second language learning context or cultural background.

5. Conclusion

Starting with the Horwitz first study (1985), the beliefs of second language learners about their L2 learning procedures and experiences have been studied for over two decades. This study reveals the effects of gender and proficiency levels on learners' perception of second language learning, its nature, L2 strategies, learning difficulty, motivations and expectation.

While the data prove that there is no correlation between learners' gender and their L2 belief, their proficiency levels affect their motivations and expectation.

However, this study was conducted only with 43 participants varying from A2, B1 and B2 level learners. The number of the participants and the number of the second language proficiency levels can be increased while age of the subjects and their year of English language education can be considered as additional variables to find out more about what causes or changes second language learners' beliefs about their EFL learning procedures and experiences.

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