Impact of methodology courses on pre-service EFL teachers’ beliefs

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to identify possible variations regarding the beliefs of students who took methodology courses at the beginning and at the end of their teacher education program. The study applied Horwitz’s (1988) BALLI as an instrument to pre-service English language teachers studying at Eastern Mediterranean University in North Cyprus. The results indicated that there were constant and conflicting beliefs among all the pre-service teachers. Additionally, the results showed that prospective teachers’ engagement in methodology courses seems to have a little impact on the improvement of their beliefs.

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Keywords: Pre-service teacher education; teacher beliefs; beliefs about language learning; BALLI.

1. Introduction

Beliefs, by which we refer to human behavior and learning, are basic and crucial principles, and they are absolutely effective for people who are learning a second language (Fishbean & Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen, 1988). The beliefs of learners are crucial because they affect learners’ way of learning and the variety and flexibility of the language learning strategies the learners use (Abraham and Vann, 1987). Research into student teachers’ beliefs about learning and teaching have indicated that students taking methodology courses during a four-year education program bring some entrenched and preconceived beliefs and ideas about learning and teaching with them. Horwitz (1985), Kern (1995), and Roberts (1992) have suggested that students’ beliefs about language learning originate from their second language learning experiences, particularly in secondary schools. Similarly, both Kagan (1992) and Pajares (1992) concluded that pre-service teachers use their past experiences and beliefs as a filter through which they interpret the content of teacher education courses and rely heavily on their past experiences as students to form personal epistemologies of teaching and learning. Furthermore, research on motivation and willingness to adapt unfamiliar methods of has found out that pre-service teachers who had strongly held beliefs shaped by youth experiences were unwilling to alter their teaching methods to encompass a larger subset of learner-centered teaching methods and were less unmotivated to learn to reflect critically on their own teaching and learning experiences (Hileman and Knobloch, 2005).
1.1. Teachers’ and Student Teachers’ Beliefs

Beliefs can influence both learners’ and teachers’ expectations about language learning. Altan (2006) stated that teachers’ beliefs influence their consciousness, their teaching attitudes, and their teaching methods and policies. Teachers’ beliefs also strongly influence teaching behavior and, subsequently, learners’ development. Mattheoudakis (2006) suggested that student teachers’ beliefs about learning and teaching indicate that students entering teacher education programs carry with them definite ideas about learning and teaching, and student teachers’ engagement in teaching practice seems to have a low impact on the development of their beliefs. According to Anderson and Holt Reynolds (1995), beliefs might be difficult to change, even though awareness and knowledge about beliefs regarding teaching and learning were a critical factor in becoming effective teachers. On the other hand, McDiarmid (1990) argued that most prospective teachers completed their teacher education programs without much awareness of their misconceptions about teaching and learning. Peacock (2001) longitudinal study showed that the hoped for changes in teachers’ mistaken ideas from the beginning to the end of a TESL training program did not in fact occur, and the results implied that teacher trainees’ beliefs are stable and often detrimental.

1.2. Approaches in the investigation of Beliefs

According to Bernat and Gvozdenko (2005), there are multiple approaches to the investigation of learner beliefs: the Normative Approach, the Metacognitive Approach, the Contextual Approach, and Metaphor Analysis. The Normative Approach is characterized by the use of Likert-scale questionnaires to reveal learner beliefs. Horwitz (1985, 1987) initiated important research into beliefs with the development of the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory, which has been used in small and large-scale research studies. The Metacognitive Approach to language learner beliefs argues that beliefs are stable, but that learners often have incorrect knowledge about language learning. Wenden (1986a, 1986b, 1998, 1999, 2001) conducted important studies in this framework using Metacognitive Approach. The Contextual Approach views learner beliefs as embedded in learners’ contexts. Finally, “metaphor analysis” (Ellis 2002 and Kramsch 2003) entails analyzing the metaphors used by learners to describe their learning and constitutes an indirect means of identifying beliefs. The present study applies the normative approach characterized by the use of Likert Scale questionnaire to reveal the learners’ beliefs.

2. The Study

2.1. Purpose of the study

This paper was part of a large-scale research project aimed at identifying possible variations regarding the beliefs of pre-service teachers who took methodology courses at the beginning and at the end of a four-year teacher education program.

2.2. Research objectives

This study has the following objectives:

1. To compare the teacher’s beliefs about language learning in the first and last year of a pre-service program.
2. To describe the difference between the beliefs of students taking the initial and those taking the final methodology courses.

2.3. Subjects

Pre-service teachers from the English Language Teaching Department of Eastern Mediterranean University participated in the study. Their age range was between 19 and 26. They were from Turkey, North Cyprus, Germany, and Kazakhstan. The department assigns the students into the groups. Groups 1a, 2a, and 3a were composed of a total of 41 students (10 male-31 female) who had taken only the first methodology course, while groups 1b, 2b, 3b,
and 4b consisted 48 students (9 male-39 female) who had covered all or most of the methodology courses necessary for graduation from the program.

2.4. Data-collection instrument

The Turkish version of Horwitz’s (1988) Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory was given to the participants. BALLI consists of 35 items, and participants’ respond on a scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” The instrument has five major areas: Foreign language aptitude, the difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation and expectation.

2.5. Data-collection and analysis

The BALLI questionnaire was administered to the pre-service English Language teachers studying in Eastern Mediterranean University in North Cyprus. First, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study and then the data was collected with the cooperation of the researchers and the course instructors. The Statistical Package for Special Sciences version 15.0 was used for the analysis of the data.

3. Results

Q1. To compare the teacher’s beliefs about language learning in the first and last year of a pre-service program.

All five areas namely “Foreign Language Aptitude”, “The Difficulty of Language Learning”, “The Nature of Language Learning”, “Learning and Communication Strategies”, “Motivation and Expectation” were examined separately, and the analysis showed that, with some exceptions, there were not a significant difference among the beliefs of students taking the first and the last methodology course. The findings, detailed in the following sections, showed that nearly all the beliefs of pre-service teachers were in the same range, with the exception of some variations of items in the fields of Foreign Language Aptitude, Nature of Language Learning and Motivation and Expectation.

In the area, “The Difficulty of Language Learning,” there were no major differences between the second and fourth year students’ responses. Participants commonly believed that some languages are easier to learn than others, and a majority in each group (%54, 60, 70, 59 of the fourth year students; %58, 62, 67 of the second year) agreed that the language they are going to teach is of medium difficulty.

The field of “Foreign Language Aptitude” also had some similarities. Like much research in this field, this study found that teachers believe that children are better language learners than adults and that if one speaks one foreign language it will be easier for them to learn another. Most of the subjects believed that everyone can learn to speak a foreign language (% 77, 100, 77, 74 of fourth year students; % 79, 77, 67 of second year students); but many also believed that some people have a special ability to learn foreign languages and that they are among the people who have this special ability.

In the area of “Learning and Communication Strategies,” the respondents’ beliefs were similar. Nearly all of each group (%100, 100, 100, 92 of fourth year students; % 100, 93, 100 of second year students) strongly agree that repetition and practicing are very important. All groups of second and fourth year students that it is important to speak the language with excellent pronunciation. On the other hand, 85, 80, 62, 92 percent of fourth year students and 95, 77, 89 percent of second year students disagreed with the belief that one shouldn’t say anything until one can say it correctly.

Additionally, in the area of “Motivation and Expectations,” a majority of all groups stated that speaking English in their countries is very important and most or nearly all believed that speaking English will provide opportunities for finding better jobs.

Q2. To describe the difference between the beliefs of students taking the initial and those taking the final methodology courses.

In the field of “Foreign Language Aptitude,” there were some differences between the beliefs of second and fourth year students, especially regarding gender and the intelligence level of people learning foreign languages.
This field involves nine items which are 1, 2, 6, 10, 11, 16, 19, 30 and 33. Items 19 and 30 are discussed in the table 1(a) and 1(b).

**Table 1: BALLI Survey Results: Foreign Language Aptitude.**

(a) Inventory item 19

19. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Agree &amp; strongly agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree &amp; Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 01b:*</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>53.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 02b:</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 03b:</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 04b:</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>33.3</td>
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<td>Group 01a:</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 02a:</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>30.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 03a:</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Pre-service teachers’ responses to BALLI items: First four groups belong to the students taking last methodology course and next three belong to the students taking the first methodology course.

There are two major differences in the area of “Foreign Language Aptitude.” Table 1 (a) shows that the percentages were different between the groups; therefore, this item is the first important difference of the study. Despite the fact that female teachers made up the majority in all the groups, the findings of item 19 showed that the first and second groups of fourth year students mainly disagreed with the statement but that the third and fourth groups had neutral feelings. On the other hand, most of second year students in groups one and two showed similar findings with group three and four of fourth year students, but the third group showed totally different beliefs about the item. 78 percent of that group believed that women are better, which is contrary to the beliefs of the majority of the fourth year students. What is interesting here is the degree of neutral beliefs, since 54 percent of the fourth year and 53 percent of second year held that belief.

(b) Inventory item 30

30. People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Agree &amp; strongly agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree &amp; Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 01b: *</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>53.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 02b:</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 03b:</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>38.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 04b:</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 01a:</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>52.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 02a:</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>46.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 03a:</td>
<td>55.6</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Pre-service teachers’ responses to BALLI items: First four groups belong to the students taking last methodology course and next three belong to the students taking the first methodology course.

Item 30 also showed a difference between the beliefs of the students taking the initial and the final methodology courses. The third group of second year students’ (%12) disagreed the least with the statement, while nearly half of all groups (%54, 40, 39, 34) disagree that people are more intelligent if they speak more than one language. 46 percent of the final year students in the third group and 46 percent of the second year group two agree with the statement that if one can speak more than one language are very intelligent.

The area of “The Nature of Language Learning” consists of six items 8, 12, 17, 23, 27, 28, but the only major difference was observed in item 17, which is “the most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary words.”
Table 2: BALLI Survey Results: The Nature of Language Learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item 17: The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary words.</th>
<th>Agree &amp; strongly agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree &amp; Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 01b:*</td>
<td>69.1</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 02b:</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 03b:</td>
<td>92.2</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 04b:</td>
<td>49.9</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>41.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 01a:</td>
<td>68.4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>31.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 02a:</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 03a:</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Pre-service teachers’ responses to BALLI items: First four groups belong to the students taking last methodology course and next three belong to the students taking the first methodology course.

The respondents’ beliefs about the most important parts of learning English were largely the same. A majority of the second year students believed in the importance of vocabulary, and this result may be acceptable to some extent, but the important point here was the effect of preconceived beliefs on learners. It was clearly seen that these beliefs are stable, since most of the fourth year students still considered that vocabulary was the most important aspect, despite the different views of their methodology courses. However, although findings of item 17 looked similar, the most significant difference in this area belonged to the fourth group of four year students since nearly half of those (%42) disagreed with the statement, while all other groups of second year (% 69, 100, 100) and also fourth year students (%70, 80, 93, 50) agreed with it.

The area “Motivation and Expectation” consisted of items 20, 24, 29, 31, and the main difference was found in item 24: “I would like to learn English so that I can get to know English speakers better.”

Table 3: BALLI Survey Results: Motivation and Expectations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item 24: I would like to learn English so that I can get to know English speakers better.</th>
<th>Agree &amp; strongly agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree &amp; Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 01b:*</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 02b:</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 03b:</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>30.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 04b:</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 01a:</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>78.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 02a:</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>50.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 03a:</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>55.6</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Pre-service teachers’ responses to BALLI items: First four groups belong to the students taking last methodology course and next three belong to the students taking the first methodology course.

Sixty percent and 46 percent of the second and third groups of the fourth year students agreed that they wanted to learn English to know English speakers better, whereas 79 percent and 50 percent of first and second groups of second year students disagree and 56 percent of third group was neutral about the statement.

4. Discussions and Conclusion

According to the results of the current study, it can be concluded that second language learners’ beliefs and attitudes toward the target language was the determinant factor on their behavior. According to Mayer (1999), pre-service teacher education seemed to have little impact on the beliefs that pre-service teachers brought to teacher education. Even when those courses deliberately set out to change prior beliefs, there seemed to be little or no change in the content of those beliefs. In light of those views and findings, the current study explored the ways that pre-service EFL teachers held preconceived beliefs and ideas about language learning and teaching at the beginning of a four-year program and at the end of that program. The results showed that the beliefs of those learners were still the same or changed to a small extent in certain areas. These findings suggest that students’ involvement in teaching practice may lead them to review the beliefs formed during the teacher education program and similar changes.
might be expected when our students actually embark on the teaching profession. In view of this possibility, emphasis needs to be placed on addressing and changing pre-service teachers’ deep-seated beliefs and behaviours, as suggested by the normative – re-educative strategy (Chin & Benne, 1985).

Other research in this field shows similar findings in the area. For instance, Horwitz’s (1985) research found similar findings in a program where the participants were enrolled in their first foreign language methods class. In this study, she suggested that teachers should not put pressure on students about shifting their previous beliefs too quickly, as this might cause students to cling even more strongly to their old opinions. According to Peacock’s (2001) longitudinal study, teacher trainees’ beliefs changed very little over the three years of study, despite the hope that training in TESL methodology might change some of their mistaken ideas about language learning. Mattheoudakis (2006) study of student teachers’ beliefs about learning and teaching showed that students entering teacher education programs carry with them definite beliefs about learning and teaching, and student teachers’ engagement in teaching practice seems to have a low impact on the development of their beliefs. The study found that, while some beliefs of pre-service teachers stayed stable, other beliefs tended to change or changed to some extent. The findings of the current study showed that even though the fourth year students covered almost all of the required methodology courses during the education program, they still tended to use their past experience and knowledge that they had at the beginning of the program. Since students had been taught by the same methods throughout their educational life, even by the help of given courses in teacher education program it seems very difficult to change their implemented beliefs and attitudes about language learning or any other thing.

5. Recommendations for further research

Prospective English-language teachers seem to be effected by their previous language learning experiences in ways that might influence their teaching negatively. Therefore, this paper conducted a systematic assessment of pre-service teacher beliefs in order to eliminate or mitigate the damaging beliefs before students start their teaching. If beliefs do not change, the misconceptions might affect language learning of the students. It might be advisable for EFL teachers to take a more active role in finding out precisely what beliefs their learners hold and to work toward correcting some of those beliefs (Peacock, 2001). The more teachers are aware of the learner conceptions, the more they will be effective in the teaching process. Furthermore, teacher educators should tailor instruction with the assumption that pre-service teachers have a complex history of experiences and that they should be encouraged to bring their beliefs about teaching and learning to a conscious level to help understand their thinking about teaching and learning (Hileman & Knobloch, 2005). For more reliable and valid results further research is needed.

Notes
* First four groups represent fourth year students’ responses and next three represent the second year students’ responses.
** Strongly agree and agree are combined to represent total percentage of agreeing subjects. Similarly, total percentage of strongly disagree and disagree represent the percentage of disagreeing subjects.

References


