Beliefs about Language Learning and Language Learning Strategy Use in an EFL Context in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated a sample of 218 preparatory class university learners’ beliefs about language learning and their use of strategies in the School of Language Preparatory School at Beykent University. Beyond the descriptions about beliefs and strategies, notably, the second objective of the study was to find out the relationship between the learners’ beliefs about language learning and use of language learning strategies. The study obtained data using quantitative research methods. Pearson r correlation and descriptive analyses were used to analyze the data. Participants reported using metacognitive strategies most. Students had strong motivation and they believed in the importance of learning English and less afraid of speaking English with English speakers. Additionally, the results showed that students believed that repetition and practice in English played important role and English is important to get a better job in the future. The result of the Pearson r correlation revealed language learning strategies were significant correlation with language learning beliefs.

Keywords: Language, Language Learning Beliefs, LLS, EFL Context, Preparatory School

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1. Introduction

We know that every person is unique and different. Every learner brings preconceptions to the learning context. Learner beliefs are one of the main determinants to shape the learning way. Additionally, language learning beliefs lead the way and ensure their students beneficial recommendations about how to be successful. Also, some beliefs may affect motivation, attitude, anxiety, strategy use and language achievement. In addition, beliefs about language learning have been considered to be connected to the learners’ use of language learning strategies (Hosenfeld, 1978; Wenden, 1987; Yang, 1999). To illustrate, learners who have positive beliefs about the significance of grammar want to utilize strategies encouraging grammar learning. It is emphasized that research on learners’ beliefs provides precious sources of language learning (Christison, 1986). According to Oxford (1990), language learning process regards students’ participation necessary. Therefore, their language learning strategy use deduces about how they acquire, organize, control information they are attended. Griffiths (2008) attempted to define this concept as students consciously prefer ways, hence they can organize the language learning process.

This study will build a bridge to understanding the relations concerning learners’ strategy use and their beliefs about language. This comparison between learners’ strategy use and the beliefs might produce significant information regarding approaches to the language learning of learners. Students believe English to be a difficult lesson to learn. Many learners lose interest and have negative attitudes and beliefs to begin study English. Hence, students fail to perform the meaningful language learning strategies. Research is needed to explore beliefs about language learning and language learning strategies of university preparatory school students in Turkey. Furthermore, relationships between learners’ beliefs and strategies were examined. Learners who believe that they can learn a foreign language use a variety of language learning strategies to reach their goal. This personal observation impels me to research beliefs and language-learning strategies. The study attempted to find answers to the following research questions:
What beliefs do preparatory class students hold about learning English as a foreign language?
What strategies do preparatory class students use for learning English? What are the relationships between beliefs and language learning strategy use?

This research will create a resource in terms of theory and practice about language learning by researching beliefs, strategy use and the relationship between these two fields. Practically, this study, which leads the way for the researcher and curriculum developers, will elicit information about learning differentials from learners. Principally, it is expected to have been taken concrete steps in the view of such information in Turkish contexts. Consequently, it is expected that these beliefs can make a difference in the selection of teaching methods and approaches used in the classes.

2. Review of the Literature

Beliefs about Language Learning Learner differences affect the process, also beliefs are one of the factors affecting the process. Beliefs influence the learners' thoughts or behaviors consciously or unconsciously. Huang (1997) considered that beliefs are preconceptions while learning the language. These ideas have an impact on people's understanding of many issues; hence, the beliefs' importance cannot be ignored especially in the language learning process. Every learner comes to class with prior experiences and beliefs that influence learners' behaviors and approaches to the language learning process. According to Mantle-Bromley (1995), positive beliefs towards language learning shapes the process effectively and productively. For example, if learners believe the importance of grammar to learn a new language, they will focus on the linguistic competence to achieve their goal. When students have beliefs about the difficulty of learning a language, it will not a good start for them.

2.1 The Development of BALLI

Horwitz designed three instruments called the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) to obtain descriptive analysis regarding the beliefs about foreign language learning. Firstly, BALLI (1985) designed brought to light teachers' beliefs in four themes. It consisted of 27 items developed by 25 language teachers (1985, 1988). Then, Horwitz focused on ESL students and created the second version of the BALLI (1987). This version is comprised of 34 statements and Horwitz used five major fields to explain the statements in the BALLI. These five areas present a belief system regarding how to evaluate appropriately.

2.2 Studies on Beliefs about Language Learning

Many research exist about learners' beliefs concerning language learning. To begin with, Alsamaani (2012) utilized a modified Arabic version of Horwitz's BALLI to gather information needed for investigating the beliefs of 250 students studying the Intensive English Language Program at Saudi University. Alsamaani obtained positive beliefs about foreign language concerning the nature of language learning, communication strategies, and motivation and expectations about learning English as a foreign language. Similarly, Kurt (1997) examined the beliefs about language learning held by first month university students enrolled in Swahili classes with those of students of French and Spanish. A survey ‘KRI’ that is based on the BALLI and includes 47 statements with a close-ended format was devised to define the beliefs and underlying belief structures. According to Kurt, students of Swahili had positive beliefs regarding language learning. Moreover, many studies exist investigating the relationship between beliefs and gender effect. Jafari and Shokrpour (2012) used the Persian version of BALLI conducted on 40 male and 40 female students in Iran. The results found significant differences between the learners' beliefs and their gender. Rieger (2009) also explored gender effect and the beliefs and the Hungarian version of Horwitz's BALLI was employed to 54 English majors and 55 German majors at a university in Budapest in the study. According to findings of these studies, female students had more positive attitudes and beliefs to some approaches than males in language learning. Both studies had some limitations. Firstly, the number of the participants is relatively small for the findings. Secondly, the study ignored variables such as social, cultural-cognitive, affective, and personal factors. However, some studies exist in contrast with these results. For example, Yazıcı's study was performed on 90 male and 90 female university prep class 5 students at Cukurova University. According to Yazıcı (2014), the only statistically significant difference was concerning the relationship between speaking more than one language and being intelligent. Gender differences were not seen as significant. But, we cannot ignore the importance of genders as a factor on learning a foreign language.

2.3 Language-Learning Strategies

The beliefs lead the way for how to approach language learning and eliciting appropriate language learning strategies reflecting learners’ beliefs. According to Vlckova & Berger & Völkle (2013), learning strategies play important roles for learners to reach their goal and strategies can change easier than learning styles. Rigney (1978) defined strategies as retention, or retrieval of information. According to Rubin (1975), the learners use the language learning strategies to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval and use of information. O’Malley & Chamot (1990) stated learning strategies are the learners’ special thoughts or behaviors. These actions guide them understand new information. According to Rubin (1987), learning strategies divided into three parts. 6 Rubin’s thoughts about language learning strategies include monitoring, that means language learning is about planning and repairing.

2.4 Studies on the Use of Language-Learning Strategies

Many studies are about the learners’ strategy use. For example, Wong (2010) explored strategy use of participants using SILL. According to the findings, pre-service teachers use mostly social strategies, followed by metacognitive, compensation, cognitive, memory and affective strategies. Many studies found that females used more frequently than males. To illustrate, Oxford (1989) investigated gender differences. The results showed females often utilize the language learning strategies. Altunay (2014) examined the use of strategies by Turkish distance learners of English. According to the findings, affective strategies were least used. Similar results have been observed in Suwanarak's study. According to Suwanarak (2012), affective strategies were least used among 220 Thai graduate students at a public university. Judge (2011) explored the strategies of Spanish adults. As a result, students mostly tend to use cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies in business tasks. Noormohamadi (2009) explored on language anxiety and strategy use. The survey was used by high-anxiety and low anxiety students. A significant negative correlation was observed between language anxiety and strategy use. There are differences between high-anxiety and low-anxiety students. So, it is concluded that anxious students less frequently use strategies. Lu & Liu (2011) also explored foreign language anxiety and strategy use influencing learners’ performance in English. The data showed that nearly one-third of the students experienced anxiety in their English class. Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006) investigated the language learning behaviors. It was found that EFL students used many strategies and there were similarities and differences in strategy use. Magno (2010) conducted SILL to 302 learners. It was found that strategies affect the English of the Korean students learning EFL mostly. Additionally, participants used many strategies.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Instruments

The quantitative survey method was considered appropriate to obtain the data. Statistical procedures were implemented to analyze the quantitative data. The data for 218 participants is considered quantifiable and generalizable to a larger population. This research method is ideal for implementing large numbers of students. According to Balsley (1970), the quantitative research methods provide reliability of gathered data owing to controlled results. Two instruments (the SILL and the BALLI) were employed. A Turkish translation were used to minimize any misunderstandings and ensure the accuracy of results. Demirel (2009) run the research to 702 students in Erciyes University. The correlation of the scale with a similar scale measuring the learning strategies was found to be r: 0.70. The internal consistency coefficient of the scale was found as 0.92 and test retest reliability coefficient as 0.83. The analysis revealed that the strategy inventory for language learners was equally valid and reliable for use in Turkey as the measuring instrument. Büyükyazıcı (2010) used The Turkish version of the BALLI to 156 English as a foreign language students and 19 EFL teachers in the Department of Foreign Languages at Celal Bayar University of Manisa. This version was backtranslated by two different experts in the field. A commission of five members composed of linguists and pedagogues translated into Turkish through back translation. The correlation coefficient was .87. Hence, The Turkish version of BALLI was found valid and reliable.

3.2 SILL

The SILL (Oxford 1986) was firstly proposed as an instrument for evaluating the frequency of strategy use. Two types of the SILL are in existence, one for foreign language learners whose native language is English and consists of 80 items (version
5.1) and the other for learners of English as a second or foreign language comprised of 50 items (version 7.0). Researcher used the last version of the SILL (VERSĠON 7.0) in this study. The 50 items in the survey are divided into six categories of strategies: memory strategies (items 1-9), cognitive strategies (items10-23), compensatory strategies (items 24-29), metacognitive strategies (items 30-38), affective (items 39-44), and social strategies (items 45-50).

3.3 BALLI

The BALLI was designed by Horwitz (1985) to examine learners’ beliefs. There are three kinds of BALLI; firstly, for foreign language teachers (1985) with 27 items, secondly, for ESL students (1987) with 27 items, and thirdly, for U.S. students learning a foreign language (1988) with 34 items. The BALLI is made up of 34 Likert-scale items. 32 items were scored on a five-point Likert-scale. Two items have different response scales (4 and 15). Researcher used the BALLI (1988) with 34 items in this study. The BALLI identifies learners’ comprehensions about language learning, hence it does not give a total composite score for the whole instrument and it does not provide clear right or wrong answers. The responses to each item are handled individually. Horwitz (1988) evaluates beliefs and their consequence in five major areas.

3.4 Participants

The researcher aimed to survey all elementary level students in the English Language Preparatory School at Beykent University in the first semester of the 2014 academic year. In total, the questionnaires were given to 218 elementary students for each survey whose ages ranged from 18 to 23 years old. 218 students accounted for 90% of the total number of the students whose was elementary. The students were preparatory class students majoring in various disciplines (i.e., Engineering and Science) and had begun their English education in primary school. Some departments deliver their courses in English; therefore students need to practice English intensively 11 for twenty hours a week. This situation gives learners a reason to learn English, stimulating their external motivation. Additionally, Beykent University is in Istanbul which is the center of tourism. Because of this, people have the chance to have contact with English speakers, and this may have an impact on the students’ internal motivation for learning English.

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

Firstly, the researcher got in touch with the class instructors and administrators at Beykent to request the attendance to this study. The instructors informed the students about the procedures and instructions. The Turkish translation form of the two surveys was given at Beykent in the spring 2015 semester. The questionnaires were distributed during class time by the instructors of the classes preceded by a short explanation about the objective of the study. The completion of the surveys took about 20 minutes. Students were enlightened that they had a right to refuse participation. The privacy procedures and the advantages of attending in this study were clarified. Thanks to their participation, students had the opportunity to raise awareness of their strategy use and beliefs about their own learning. After the implementation of the surveys, class instructors collected and gave them to the researcher for data analysis.

3.6 Data Analysis

218 of each survey and totally 436 completed questionnaires were analyzed using The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows, Version 22 for the quantitative data analysis. Descriptive statistics, including means and frequencies were computed to sum up the learners’ beliefs and strategy use. Pearson r correlations were calculated to specify the correlation.

4. Findings

The objective of this study was to explore the beliefs and strategy use of preparatory school university students. The second purpose was to investigate the relationship between the learners’ beliefs and strategy use. The record of the results includes descriptive analyses (frequencies, and percentages) and Pearson r correlation analyses concerning the relationships between strategy use and beliefs. The results are submitted in order following each research question for the specificity. For investigation of the learners’ beliefs, the BALLI was implemented for the university students in this descriptive study. Horwitz (1987) grouped the questionnaire “BALLI” into five major areas originally. The overall frequency of each item, means, and standard deviations were calculated to determine the beliefs of language learning via SPSS. In the survey phase, the data from the BALLI show that the participants reported beliefs about language learning shared the same tendency in most BALLI items. Most of participants were of the opinion that
everyone can learn to speak a foreign language. Many students agreed that English is a difficult or medium difficult language. And most students agreed that the most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary words and the grammar. As a striking result, a few students believed that knowing about English speaking cultures is important to speaking English. In addition, many participants disagreed that they should not say anything in English until they can say it correctly. Lastly, more than half of the students believed that people in Turkey feel that it is important to speak English and many participants want to learn to speak English well. The SILL (ESL/EFL version 7.0) was implemented in this descriptive study so as to elicit the preparatory class students' language learning strategy use. This SILL survey is utilized to describe the level of strategy use for each strategy. The average scores for groups of strategies on the SILL were calculated according to the reporting scale. There are three levels developed to inform students about how often they apply strategies for learning English: A) High Usage : Always Used with a mean of 4.5-5.0 or Usually Used with a mean of 3.5-4.4 B) Medium Usage : Sometimes Used with a mean of 2.5-3.4 C) Low Usage : Generally Not Used with a mean of 1.5-2.4 or Never Used with a mean of 1.0-1.4. The data from the SILL show that the reported language learning strategies of the participants were mostly consistent in most SILL items. Many participants agreed that they find solutions to remember and not to forget what they learn in some ways. Most of the participants tend to try some ways to progress as watching English language TV shows, going to movies spoken in English and reading for pleasure in English. Half of the participants think about their progress in learning English by noticing English mistakes and using that information to help them do better. Participants try to relax whenever they feel afraid confusing English and encourage themselves to speak English even when they are afraid of making a mistake. Many participants eagerly ask the other person to slow down again if they do not understand something in English, even they ask English speakers to correct them when they talk. Pearson r correlations were used to explore the relationships between the learners’ beliefs and their strategy use on a total of eleven variables: five belief variables and six strategy variables. The correlation coefficient ranges from -1 to +1. The value of a low to moderate significant correlation is between 0.2 and 0.4, a significant correlation is between 0.4 and 0.7 and between 0.7 and 0.9 means a high significant correlation. Findings showed us that the language learning strategies had weak and positive correlation with language learning beliefs (r=.352, p<.01).

**Table: 1 Overall Strategy Use Scores**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Usage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Memory Strategies</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>3.1580</td>
<td>MEDIUM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Strategies</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>2.9037</td>
<td>MEDIUM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation Strategies</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>3.0130</td>
<td>MEDIUM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metacognitive Strategies</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>3.2655</td>
<td>MEDIUM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Strategies</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>2.8081</td>
<td>MEDIUM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Strategies</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>3.2378</td>
<td>MEDIUM</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table: 2 Correlation between Categories of Language Learning Beliefs & Language Learning Strategies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
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<td>3.2378</td>
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</table>

**Table 3 Correlations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BALLI</th>
<th>SILL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correlation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.352**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Conclusion

There are parallel and contradicting views among the results in this descriptive study. Horwitz (1988) identified the BALLI in five belief fields. Concerning foreign language aptitude, learners know how learning English is important when they are older. They were of the opinion that there are more difficulties when you are older. These results are confirmed by BaĢaran (2010). He explored learners’ beliefs from 187 students. Moreover, most students agreed that everyone learn a foreign language. Participants thought some people have a special skill for learning foreign languages. However, BaĢaran found in his study that more than half of them disagreed with this belief. Students believed that learning English would take less than a year or 1-2 years with one hour of daily study.
Yazıcı's study (2014) showed the different results about difficulty of language learning, many participants found English is a medium difficulty in this study; however, Yazıcı's participants agreed that it takes 3 to 5 years to learn English. Additionally, students ignored English-speaking cultures for speaking English. According to Schulz (2001), culture is the main factor influencing the belief system among different learner groups. However, students preferred learning English best only countries where spoken English. The beliefs about this item might result in the learners' own strategy for language learning. For example, students who believe that learning English is best in an English-speaking country might want to travel to an English-speaking country. In addition, the role of grammar and vocabulary still cannot be denied in this study. Most students believed the vocabulary and grammar are crucial to learn English. Students believe that learning grammar is effective in learning English. Truitt (1995) found that most students in Korea believed that grammar is not important. Alsamaan’s study (2012) confirmed the significance of grammar rules for language learning for most students in Saudi Arabia. Altan (2006) tried to examine the beliefs in Turkey and faced the same findings about approaches to grammar. He found that grammar rules are important in learning English. Moreover, when asked if they are shy speaking English with other people, the results showed that Turkish students agreed mistakes were not a problem while speaking English. In fact, studying a lot is important for learners. However, Altan's study (2006) found participants were less intense in their practice and repetition. Lastly, in the area concerning motivation and expectations more than half of the students believed learners in Turkey consider that speaking English is crucial, hence many participants wanted to learn. The purpose of learning English is to have better job opportunities for many students in this study. Gardner (1985) presented motivation triggered bigger attempt and caused bigger achievement to be successful. The students were at the medium level of learning strategy usage.

Metacognitive strategies had the highest usage when compared to other strategies at Beykent University preparatory school (M=3.26). Participants believe the progress in learning English by noticing English mistakes and using that information to help them do better. Hence, they can try to find some ways to use English. In addition, students using metacognitive strategies watch out while spoken English and they are aware of purposes for improving language abilities. Deneme (2008) confirmed that participants in her study applied all the strategies to regulate the process frequently. Secondly, the most commonly used strategy type was social strategies (M=3.23). This means that the students ask for help to repeat when they misunderstand the speaker. Moreover, it can be concluded that they practice English with other students and ask for help from English speakers. They also want to learn about the culture of English speakers. Khalil (2005) noticed the same results about metacognitive and social strategies ranking highest and next to highest. We also notice that only the mean for metacognitive strategies used by university students fell within the high range of use. The third most commonly used strategy type was memory strategies (M=3.15). Most of the students found solutions to remember and not to forget what they learn in some ways. However, few students use rhymes and flashcards to remember new English words. Physically acting out new English words is among the least used strategy. Additionally, only half of the students think of relationships between what they already know and new things they learn in English. Suwanarak (2012) found that learners memorized whole sentences from texts. The fourth used strategy type was compensation strategies (M=3.01). If participants cannot think of an English word, they use the synonyms. Meanwhile, when they cannot think of a word while speaking English, they use gestures. To understand unfamiliar English words, most of the students cannot make guesses as to the meaning of the words. According to Hong (2006), thanks to the compensation strategies students are more motivated to use body language, synonyms, implies in the process. The fifth used strategy type was cognitive strategies (M=2.90). Surprisingly almost half of the participants would like to talk like native English speakers which means that speaking like a native speaker plays a big role in the process. Most students tend to try some ways to make progress such as watching TV shows and reading in English. However, students faced some difficulties when using the language in practice. As proof, most of the participants cannot write something in English. In addition, many students cannot summarize what they face in English.
Oxford (1990) stated cognitive strategies are favorite and significant owing to the fact that they lead the use of input. The least commonly used strategy type was affective strategies (M=2.80). While participants can calm down when they fear of using English and support themselves. Also, almost half of them realize whether they are nervous while using English. Li (2010) stated that social and affective strategies were the least used strategies. Affective strategies means more affective problems that students faced. Thanks to affective strategies, students can monitor their emotions, attitudes in the process. According to the results, there is a significant positive relationship between participants’ beliefs and their use of strategies. So, we can understand that learners who have positive beliefs to language learning use strategies more often. In addition, there is low to moderate correlation between BALLI and SILL. The Beliefs about Language Aptitude had positive correlations with the overall language learning strategies. Students who believed in the foreign language aptitude were disposed to use all language learning strategies to learn English. Li (2010) stated that students prefer more cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, and social strategies.

The difficulty of Language Learning was positively correlated with memory, cognitive strategies, compensation, affective and social strategies. In other words, students who encountered learning difficulties prefer handling this problem directly using strategies. For example, students do not forget new English words by remembering their location on the page or on the board. In practice, students practice new English words. The result indicated that students’ beliefs about the nature of language learning may inspire them to be more successful learners and watch out while spoken English. Students’ beliefs about learning and communication strategies were considered to be significantly correlated with the memory strategy and metacognitive strategy. But, while participants are aware of the significance of communication, they do not use social strategies to use communication skills in a social group. Beliefs about Motivation and Expectation were significantly correlated with the metacognitive strategy. Mostly, learners’ notice their English mistakes asking questions. Lightbown and Spada’s (1990) claimed young adults prefer to use regulations in their learning process. Clearly, it shows that motivated students might use these strategies to reach their goal about language learning. However, as a striking result, this category did not have significant correlations with affective strategies, which means while participants believe the importance of motivations about language learning, they do not use any strategy to control their motivations.

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APPENDICES
Appendix A: BALLI Questionnaire

Appendix B: SILL Questionnaire