

## Beliefs about Foreign Language Learning: The Effects of Teacher Beliefs on Learner Beliefs

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**ABSTRACT** Learners' and teachers' beliefs about language learning can affect the effectiveness of the language learning process. However, the number of research on exploring the effects of teacher beliefs are limited. The present study aimed at identifying English preparatory school students' and teachers' beliefs about language learning and exploring the effects of teachers' beliefs on learner beliefs. Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), a student interview and a teacher interview were used to gather data. The results indicated that teacher beliefs and practices can exert an impact on learner beliefs and learner beliefs tend to approximate to teacher beliefs during the intensive English instruction.

### INTRODUCTION

For many years, various studies have been conducted to render language learning and teaching better. In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), many researchers have argued that foreign language learning includes not only observable factors but also unobservable factors such as beliefs about language learning and teaching which are considered to be "important and pertinent to understanding how languages are learned and thought" (Wesely 2012: 98). In the 1970s and the 1980s, beliefs in this regard were considered to have the power to affect learners' and teachers' behavior and choices in the learning and teaching process. Thus, this tendency in the literature has been transformed into a critical area of inquiry in second or foreign language teacher education.

Beliefs can be defined as "psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true" (Richardson 2003: 2). Beliefs do not have to be demonstrable and they do not need verification. Beliefs may be subconscious, which makes eliciting or identifying them challenging. They may

also constitute strong emotional components (Lefrancois 2000). Formation of beliefs takes time and individuals attach great importance to their beliefs and act in accordance with their beliefs. There is an accord with the idea that beliefs may be so strong that individuals may hold to their beliefs even when there is conflicting evidence (Murphy and Mason 2006). Therefore, altering beliefs with a pedagogic concern is altogether a difficult pursuit (Nettle 1998).

A clear analysis of the attitudes of English language learners, why they do what they do in learning, requires the analysis of how they view language, learning and teaching, which ultimately leads us to scrutinize beliefs as a psychological construct. Therefore, identifying learner beliefs may help teachers to understand the underlying reasons of learners' choices and behavior in the classroom. Not only learners but also teachers bring their beliefs into the classroom and teacher beliefs shape teaching practices and the interaction between learners and teachers (Erkmen 2012). Teachers' theoretical knowledge and their beliefs about language learning and teaching influence their classroom practice and teaching methodology (Inozu 2011). In this regard, there is a relation between teachers' pedagogical beliefs and their teaching practices (Wiebe Berry 2006) in that teachers make decisions regarding classroom practice in accordance with their beliefs, so beliefs have an explicit effect on the performance of both teachers and learners. As Pajares (1992: 324) explained "Beliefs are in-

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strumental in defining tasks and selecting the cognitive tools with which to interpret, plan, and make decisions regarding tasks. Beliefs strongly affect an individual's behavior". Learners' beliefs about language learning can affect language learning process and a learner's effectiveness in the classroom may be influenced by his/her beliefs about language learning (Horwitz 1988). Beliefs may help obtain positive results in language learning process; however, they can cause some difficulties, as well. Although positive beliefs can facilitate learning and encourage learners to reflect their potential power, negative beliefs may hinder learning or build a barrier to learning. Therefore, beliefs can shape the learning process and the outcomes of teaching, which makes them a valuable research focus to investigate.

Studies regarding beliefs about language learning cover learners' and teachers' beliefs about language learning (for example, Horwitz 1988; Kagan 1992; Pajares 1992; Nettle 1998; Borg 2003; Busch 2010; Young 2014; Zhang and Liu 2014), belief change (for example, Nettle 1998; Tillema 2000; Peacock 2001; Mattheoudakis 2007; Ozmen 2012; Lofstrom and Poom-Valickis 2013; Basaran and Cabaroglu 2014), definitions of beliefs (for example, Horwitz 1987, 1988; Richardson 2003; Wesely 2012) and characteristics of beliefs (for example, Pajares 1992; Barcelos and Kalaja 2003; Barcelos 2003). Although, there are many studies focusing on beliefs about language learning, only a limited number of studies have examined the effects of teacher beliefs on learner beliefs and few attempts have been made so far to investigate whether learner beliefs show similarity to teacher beliefs over time. Therefore, empirical investigation of belief change and the effects of teachers on learner beliefs can be a critical contribution to the teacher education and field of ELT.

In fact, beliefs are formed in time and they are, generally, derived from learning experience. As the teachers are one of the primary sources of the educational experience, a deeper insight should be gained into the effects of teachers' beliefs on learner beliefs. In addition, if there is a mismatch between learners' previous language learning experience and the way their teachers teach or if learners have some negative beliefs that hinder the learning process, changing or refining learner beliefs may be necessary. Considering such aspects, in this paper the researchers attempted to provide a deeper understand-

ing of learners' and teachers' beliefs about language learning and to investigate the effects of teachers' beliefs and practices on learner beliefs.

The following questions are addressed in the paper:

1. Do teachers' beliefs and practices exert an impact on learners' beliefs?
2. Do teachers' and learners' beliefs overlap in time?

## METHODOLOGY

In the present research, the researchers sought to explain the effects of teacher beliefs on learner beliefs in an ELT, tertiary context. Whether teacher and learner beliefs overlap in time was another research focus. Identifying teachers' and learners' beliefs about language learning is a necessary step to investigate how teachers' and students' beliefs interact in the learning process. However, beliefs are difficult to elicit as they may be subconscious and they are related to each other in complex and dynamic ways. Therefore, a mixed-method study was conducted to provide comprehensive data about the impact of teacher beliefs on learner beliefs.

### Research Design

The present study aimed to investigate whether teachers' beliefs exert an impact on learner beliefs and whether there is a similarity between teacher and learner beliefs over time. The study was conducted with Gazi University Preparatory School students and instructors. 620 students and 33 teachers participated in the study. As beliefs are unobservable and difficult to elicit, both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used to gather well-rounded data. As Punch (2009: 290) clearly explains, using certain techniques of both qualitative and quantitative research methods provides some advantages:

*...qualitative methods can be strong in those areas where quantitative methods are weak, and similarly that quantitative methods can be strong in those areas where qualitative methods are weak. Combining the two methods therefore offers the possibility of combining these two sets of strengths, and compensating for the weaknesses.*

Combining quantitative and qualitative research methods, instead of using a single-model research, helps to gather detailed data and mini-

mizes the weaknesses that may stem from the research methods. Therefore, the data were collected using a questionnaire, a teacher interview and a student interview.

### Data Collection

Eliciting teachers' and learners' beliefs is challenging as learners and teachers may not clearly express their beliefs. In addition, teachers may express professionally popular beliefs rather than their own beliefs, so using only theoretical measures of teacher cognition is inadequate. Therefore, in the study, both qualitative and quantitative research methods were applied and a well-grounded questionnaire and detailed interviews were used. The Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), which was developed by Horwitz in 1987, was used to identify teachers' and learners' beliefs about language learning. Cronbach alpha estimates .803 which is at an acceptable rate. BALLI is an instrument that was designed to measure beliefs about language learning and it includes 34 items and five categories: 1) language aptitude, 2) the difficulty of language learning, 3) the nature of language learning, 4) learning and communication strategies and 5) motivations and expectations. BALLI was conducted on preparatory school students and their teachers in pre- and post-test design.

To gather more detailed data about teachers' beliefs about language learning and their practices, a semi-structured teacher interview was held. The teacher interview was held privately and face to face. The interview was in English and it took 5 to 10 minutes. The teacher interview contained 5 questions about teachers' beliefs about language learning and their classroom practices. The questions were designed to gather information about teachers' beliefs about the roles of the teacher and the learners and teaching strategies, techniques and principles they prefer and use. Besides, teachers' classroom practices and their attitude towards errors and students were addressed. Then a semi-structured student interview was conducted to verify teachers' answers and to obtain comprehensive data. The students that participated in the interview were chosen randomly and they were interviewed privately and face to face. The student interview took 5 to 10 minutes and it was conducted in learners' native language to eliminate the difficulties and deficiencies that may stem from learn-

ers' proficiency in English. In order to verify teachers' answers and to understand learners' perceptions of language learning process, the questions in the teacher interview were adapted to learner context.

### Sample

The current study was carried out with Gazi University Preparatory School students and teachers. Totally, 620 students and 33 teachers participated in the study. To measure the differences in beliefs over time, all the students took part in the survey which was conducted in pre and post-test design. With the aim of gathering more comprehensive data, 33 teachers were interviewed about their beliefs about language learning and classroom practices. A total of 165 students, 5 randomly chosen students from each class, participated in the student interview to verify teachers' answers. Of 620 students, who were fairly balanced across age, 277 (44.7%) were males and 343 (55.3%) were females. Among 33 teachers, 6 (18.2%) were males and 27 (81.8%) were females and group mean regarding age was 27.18.

Data collection process lasted for 5 months. At the beginning of the semester, the learners and the teachers were surveyed and interviewed. BALLI (Horwitz 1987) was conducted to identify learners' and teachers' beliefs about language learning. Detailed information was collected in five main categories; language aptitude, the difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies and motivations and expectations. The results of the survey were supported by semi-structured teacher and student interviews. The interviews were recorded to get a direct quote. After taking classes for 5 months, students were surveyed again to investigate whether there was a change in their beliefs.

### Data Analysis

The study employed different techniques in data analysis phase. The participants of the study were selected by using random sampling. The data were analyzed through descriptive statistics and constant comparison method for the qualitative data. The semi-structured interviews for the teachers and the students were analyzed

through this method. Teachers' and learners' beliefs about language learning and the difference between pre- and post-test results were calculated in an experimental design. In an attempt to represent demographic information related to teachers and learners and to summarize their beliefs about language learning, descriptive statistics including means, frequencies and percentages of the variables were computed.

P-value was calculated and significance level was set up at  $p < .05$ . The differences between learners' beliefs in pre and post-test were calculated through paired sample t-test. Statistically significant responses were identified and presented in detail.

## RESULTS

The effects of teacher beliefs and classroom practices on learner beliefs were the primary focus of the study. The data were processed through a mixed-method design. In the survey phase, the BALLI (Horwitz 1987) was used to identify learners' and teachers' beliefs about language learning. In the qualitative study phase, teacher and student interviews were held to prevent the limitations that could stem from the self-reported scale and to verify the data obtained through the questionnaire. The findings of the interview corroborated the results of the questionnaire. After the learners took English classes

for five months, post-test was conducted to track the possible change in learner beliefs.

The findings exhibited that there were some significant differences between the learners' pre-test and post-test responses (see Table 1). In language aptitude category, there were two noticeable results. The percentage of the learners who disagree or completely disagree with the idea that they have a special ability for learning foreign languages decreased from 47.4 percent to 41.3 percent and the percentage of the learners who thought they have a special ability for foreign language learning increased by 3.4 percent. Besides, the percentage of the learners who thought that "People who speak more than one language are very intelligent" increased by 7.7 percent.

Learners' beliefs about the difficulty of language learning showed difference. In the pretest a quarter of the learners (25.1%) held the belief that English is a difficult language while in the post-test 18.7 percent of the learners rated English as a difficult language. The number of learners that considered English to be a very easy language was higher whereas fewer learners rated English as a very difficult language. In addition, the percentage of the learners stating that "It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language" was 5.7 percent higher in the post-test.

Considering the nature of language learning, 33.9 percent of the learners held the belief that

**Table 1: Comparison of pretest and post-test scores**

Category	Item	Pretest $\bar{X}$	Post-test $\bar{X}$	P
Language Aptitude	16. I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	2.61	2.76	0.036
	30. People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.	3.07	3.30	0.004
Difficulty of Language Learning	4. English is			
	1) a very difficult language			
	2) a difficult language			
	3) a language of medium difficulty	2.93	3.08	0.002
	4) an easy language			
Nature of Language Learning	5) a very easy language			
	25. It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language.	2.68	2.89	0.009
	23. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar.	2.90	3.08	0.009
Learning and Communication Strategies	27. Learning a foreign language is different than learning other academic subjects.	4.22	4.09	0.029
	14. It's o.k. to guess if you don't know a word in English.	3.06	3.23	0.011
Motivations and Expectations	29. If I learn English very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job.	4.40	4.22	0.007

“The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar” in pretest while in post-test this ratio was 38.5 percent. However, there was a 2.3 percent decrease in the percentage of the learners with the belief that “Learning a foreign language is different than learning other academic subjects”.

A significant difference was found in learners’ beliefs about learning and communication strategies. The percentage of the learners who supported that the use of guessing is okay if a word isn’t known increased from 39.3 percent to 45.5 percent. There was a decrease (4.4%) in the number of learners who stated that if they learn English very well, they will have better opportunities for a good job. Overall results of the pretest and post-test indicated a significant difference in the learners’ beliefs about language learning. Furthermore, teachers’ beliefs about language learning were influential in beliefs about language learning held by learners.

## DISCUSSION

With the assumption that teachers’ beliefs and classroom practices may influence learners’ beliefs about language learning and their behavior in the classroom, the study focused on exploring the effects of teachers’ beliefs on learners’ beliefs. As beliefs may be difficult to identify, a mixed-method study was carried out. The results of the survey were enhanced by student and teacher interviews. Whether teachers’ beliefs have the power of affecting learners’ beliefs and whether teachers’ and learners’ beliefs overlap in time were investigated. The results were analyzed in detail regarding the research questions.

### Do Teachers’ Beliefs and Practices Exert an Impact on Learners’ Beliefs?

The first research question aimed at exploring the effects of teachers’ beliefs about language learning and practices on learners’ beliefs. Beliefs are embedded in the experiences and beliefs are dynamic and contextual (Hosenfeld 2003). The possibility of change in beliefs has found support in many studies. In Cabaroglu and Robert’s (2000) study, the focus was on student teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning and flexibility of these beliefs. In the study, some development and changes in participants’ be-

liefs were found. Similarly, Basaran and Cabaroglu (2014) observed some changes in learners’ beliefs about language learning. Focusing on the belief change in student teachers during pre-service teacher education, Cephe (2009) revealed similar findings in his research. Ozmen’s (2012) four-year longitudinal study examines possible changes in student teachers’ beliefs and provides a critical finding for belief change by indicating various changes at certain degrees.

Experiences can change beliefs; however, the role of teacher in change process is, also, crucial. Teachers can make learners revise some of the elements in their belief system and promote change (Woods 2003). The current study provided supporting evidence for the effects of teachers’ beliefs on learners’ beliefs. The results showed that there are some differences in learners’ beliefs regarding language aptitude, the difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies and motivations and expectations. Smith et al. (2006) argue that change is not easy and not direct or guaranteed. In this study, after taking courses for 5 months, learners’ beliefs about language learning changed to some extent. Similar results were obtained in other studies. Torff (2011) viewed that, teacher beliefs have the power to shape learning for all students. Dewey (2004) found that teacher and learner attitudes are connected and stated that learner attitudes are influenced by teacher attitudes. Quite similar to the present study, many studies supported that teachers have an important role in shaping learner beliefs and learners’ beliefs are influenced by teachers’ beliefs and practices.

### Do Teachers’ and Learners’ Beliefs Overlap in Time?

The second research question examined whether learners’ beliefs about language learning tend to approximate to teachers’ beliefs during the intensive English instruction they receive at the preparatory school. In the current study, it was seen that the learners brought some beliefs about language learning into the classroom. However, after 5 months of language learning, learners’ beliefs changed to some extent. The findings informed that learners’ beliefs showed tendency to change in concordance with teachers’ beliefs. The mean scores of the learner and teacher beliefs were closer in the post-test and there

were some similarities between learner and teacher beliefs. It was found that teacher beliefs and practices influence learner beliefs. Similar results were obtained in various studies. Dewey (2004) emphasized that the student beliefs tend to mirror their instructors' beliefs. Nettle's (1998) study showed that there is an association between learner and teacher beliefs and learner beliefs tend to change in the direction of teacher beliefs. Also, Riley (2009) revealed that learners' responses regarding their beliefs changed in the direction of teachers' responses. Rozelle and Wilson's (2012) study which focused on beginning teachers' practices and beliefs informed that teachers were strongly influenced by their mentors and teachers' beliefs changed to match their mentors' beliefs. Similarly, the present study indicated that some of the learner beliefs changed in the direction of teacher beliefs.

### CONCLUSION

Teachers' and learners' beliefs about language learning affect their choices and behavior in the classroom so the success of the learning and teaching process is directly affected by learner and teacher beliefs. Although there is various studies with a focus on learners' and teachers' beliefs about language learning, there is a limited number of research dealing with the effects of teacher beliefs on learner beliefs. Considering this, the study focused on teachers' beliefs and their impact on learners' beliefs. The current research identified preparatory school students' and teachers' beliefs about language learning using BALLI and two semi-structured interviews. The results of the findings indicated some significant differences in learners' beliefs about language learning. Teachers' beliefs and classroom practices exerted an impact on some of the learner beliefs. Besides, it was found that learner beliefs and teacher beliefs overlapped to some extent.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Belief systems are complex and people are resistant to change. Altering or promoting belief change requires time and effort. Therefore, for future studies, more time should be allocated to track changes in learner beliefs. Besides, surveys and interviews can be enhanced by observations. Teachers' beliefs about the language learning

process may play a crucial role in learner beliefs so teacher education programs can be designed to raise teachers' awareness on learner beliefs which may shape teachers' approach to the learners and to the course.

Teachers have the potential power to influence learner beliefs. However, considering the interaction between teachers and learners, it can be stated that not only learners but also teachers are affected by the teaching and learning process. Learners, also, may exert an impact on teacher beliefs and teachers' beliefs and practices may be influenced by learner beliefs. Therefore, investigating the effects of learner beliefs on teacher beliefs can be useful.

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