

World Conference Education Science 2009

Foreign language learners' beliefs about language learning: a study on Turkish university students

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Received October 24, 2008; revised December 11, 2008; accepted January 02, 2009

Abstract

The present study addresses the differences and similarities among English, German, and French language groups' beliefs about language learning. The participant students (n=343) completed Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) and a demographic information questionnaire. The results of a cross-tabulation of thirty-four items showed that although French language learners had more positive expectations in language learning, all three groups held certain beliefs that would be detrimental to their long-term language learning. To alleviate the negative outcomes of these beliefs on language learners, the Language teachers could implement and discuss positive instructional practices and realistic expectations in the classroom.

Keywords: Foreign language learning; language learner beliefs; preconceived notions; teacher training.

1.1. Introduction

The role of individual learning beliefs and how these beliefs affect language learners' learning experiences has been an issue and investigated for more than two decades. The first attempts to systematically investigate those beliefs started with Horwitz' studies (1985; 1987; 1988). With a self-reported scale she developed and called, 'The Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)', the researcher investigated the language learning beliefs of American university students taking foreign language classes as a requisite course. One finding of this study is that preconceived notions the students hold could negatively affect the way they viewed the language learning experience.

So far, most of the research conducted in the field have mainly investigated the beliefs of English language learners in ESL and EFL settings by using Horwitz's BALLI instrument (see Ayhan, 2008; Bernat, 2004; 2006; Oz, 2007; Peacock, 2001; Tercanlioglu, 2004). For instance, Peacock's (2001) longitudinal study investigated the belief system changes of pre-service ESL teachers during their three years of training. At the end of the study, he found no significant change in student teachers' beliefs, which he explained by observing that "student beliefs about language learning originate from their second language learning experiences, particularly in secondary schools" (p. 187). Bernat's recent study (2006) was conducted with two hundred and sixty-two university students enrolled in academic English classes at an Australian university. One of the purposes was to find out whether the analysis of the

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findings of BALLI in her study would be context-specific or parallel to a study conducted in the US. The researcher found out many similarities across the categories of BALLI in two different contexts.

There has still been scarcity of empirical research both internationally (Graham, 2006; Horwitz, 1988; Hurt, 1997; Nikitina & Furuoka, 2006; Rifkin, 2000) and locally (Altan, 2006) that investigate foreign language learners' beliefs. Altan's study can be provided as an example for Turkish context. The researcher used the thirty-four statements foreign language BALLI with four hundred, thirty-six English, French, German, Arabic, and Japanese pre-service language teachers in Turkey. The findings of this study suggested that there is a significant similarity among the responses given by all groups except a few items that are slightly different from each other.

As there has been insufficient investigative research into the beliefs of foreign language learners other than English especially in a local context, the purpose of this study is to compare English, German, and French language groups' beliefs about language learning in Turkey and find out in which areas they were similar and different from each other. The hypothesis of this study is that there is no difference in language learning beliefs among foreign language groups.

2. Methodology

The methodology section of the paper comprises of research question, participants, measures, and procedure.

2.1. Research Question

- Do English, German, and French language learners in Turkey differ in their beliefs about foreign language learning?

2.2. Participants

Three hundred and forty-three English, German and French language students in Turkey entered into the study: one hundred and forty-three students of English, one hundred and thirty-eight students of German and sixty-two in French. The mean age of respondents was 19.64%. All the participants were freshmen students enrolled in an intensive language school of a large research university with a minimum workload of twenty hours of week of foreign language training. Because some departments use foreign languages as the language of instruction, students were required to study a foreign language intensively for one academic year before starting their degree programs. Their degree programs ranged from nursing to German language teaching.

2.3. Measures

Demographic survey:

A short questionnaire containing demographic questions was used. This consisted of questions regarding gender, degree program, foreign language grades in both semesters, foreign languages spoken, and the time spent to learn each language.

The beliefs about language learning inventory (BALLI):

In this research, Horwitz's (1987) Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory was administrated to investigate Turkish foreign language learners' beliefs on language learning. This self-report questionnaire includes thirty-four questions in Likert Scale format. The Likert Scale questions used a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

2.4. Procedure

The actual questionnaire and the demographic survey were administered during the students' regular foreign language classes at the end of the 2006-7 academic year to understand foreign language learners' beliefs in five main areas: difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, the nature of language learning, learning and

communication strategies, and motivations and expectations. Descriptive statistics, including mean, SD, and frequency, were calculated. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) statistical analysis was used to understand the differences between the three different foreign language groups' scores on BALLI.

3. Results

Five components of BALLI were discussed in the result section of this paper: the difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivations and expectations of foreign language students.

3.1. *The difficulty of language learning*

BALLI items in the difficulty of language learning category are mostly concerned with the perceptions of students on the foreign language they learn. The current study supports the findings of several other studies in the field arguing that there is an hierarchy of language learning difficulty (Horwitz, 1987; Altan, 2006). For example, eighty-two percent of the French students and sixty-two percent of German students and twenty-nine percent of the English students rated the language they learnt as difficult. Parallel to that question, when they were asked, "If someone spent one hour learning a language, how long would it take him/her to become fluent?", English and German language learners appeared to be more optimistic and unrealistic than French learners as sixty-six percent English and fifty-nine percent of German learners assumed that it would take maximum two years to speak the foreign language fluently. However, forty percent of French language learners agreed with that statement and a further forty-two percent stated that it was not possible to learn a language by only studying for one hour per week. The responses of each language group to the rest of the items in that category (3, 4, 15) were similar and this category has been found to be statistically insignificant between the language groups ($F_{value} = 1,996 < F_{table} = 3,00$, $R < 0.05$).

3.2. *Foreign language aptitude*

BALLI items in this category aim to understand whether the respondents believe in the existence of specialized abilities regarding foreign language learning. Students from the three language groups agreed on the statement, "Some people are born with a special ability which helps them learn a foreign language". Eighty-eight percent of English students, eighty-nine percent German, and ninety-seven percent French students believed that some people possess a gift for languages. However, when they were asked whether they had foreign language aptitude, thirteen percent English and thirty-six percent of German learners believed that they had the aptitude to learn a foreign language. The analysis of this item appears to be somewhat parallel to Horwitz's study which the responses were between thirty-two to forty-one percent among German, French, and Spanish learners. An interesting finding of the current research was that seventy-eight percent of French learners assessed their ability as considerably higher than their English and German language counterparts. The analysis of the two items described above was consistent with Horwitz's findings except the French learners but inconsistent with a study conducted in a Turkish context (Altan, 2003). When the students were asked, "women are better than men at learning languages", thirty-six to forty-percent agreed on that statement. More than sixty percent in each group disagreed that "people who are good at math and science are not good at learning foreign languages". The responses to the rest of the items in this category were nearly consistent with the responses provided in each language group. This category has been found to be statistically significant between the language groups ($F_{value} = 18,496 > F_{table} = 3,00$).

3.3. *The nature of language learning*

BALLI items in the nature of language learning category vary from how the foreign language is best learned, such as living in a country where the target language is spoken and exposure to foreign culture, to items defining the language learning. When the students responded to an item, "It's necessary to know the foreign culture in order to speak the foreign language", there was a clash between English and the other language groups. While fifty-five to sixty-three percent of French and German learners agreed on that item, only twenty-eight percent of English learners

believed that culture was important in foreign language learning. Unlike the common belief that the best way to learn a foreign language is to live in a country speaking the target language, only seventy-two to seventy-eight percent of all language groups responded positively on that issue. When it comes to how learners perceived language learning, almost half of the respondents believed that foreign language learning mostly entails learning grammar rules and translating from English. When the students were asked, “Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words”, it drew a slight difference among three groups. While seventy-nine to eighty-one percent of English and German students agreed on that statement, sixty-eight percent of French learners supported that. This category has again been found to be statistically significant between the language groups ($F_{\text{value}} = 6,787 > F_{\text{table}} = 3,00$).

3.4. Learning and communication strategies

BALLI items in this category focused on the use of learning strategies and were concerned with communication strategies and all were related to measure students’ beliefs during actual classroom practices. The majority of the students believed in the power of practising with audio materials and repeating what they have learned. However, there were other items in communication strategies that the students provided conflicting responses. For instance, when the students were asked, “It’s important to speak a foreign language with an excellent accent”, interestingly ninety-one percent of French learners in contrast to fifty-one percent English learners and seventy-one percent German students agreed with that statement. Parallel responses were given when they were asked, “If I heard someone speaking the language I am trying to learn, I would go up to them so that I could practice speaking the language”. Ninety-percent of French learners were again in contrast to fifty-seven English and seventy-five percent of German learners on that item. From the responses given to these two statements, one can predict that although French learners set higher standards for themselves compared to other groups, such as excellent accent in a foreign language, this did not prevent them from using their language skills when the opportunity presented itself. However, a clash appeared to exist between the former two statements and a statement measuring communication strategy. When the students were asked to comment on a statement, “I feel self-conscious speaking the foreign language in front of other people”, forty-two percent of French learners in contrast to fifty-eight English and forty-nine German learners agreed with it. If, depending on the former two statements, French learners had pursued every opportunity to speak with native French speakers then they would be expected not to feel self-conscious in front of them. This category has again been found to be statistically significant between the language groups ($F_{\text{value}} = 11,201 > F_{\text{table}} = 3,00$).

3.5. Motivations and expectations

BALLI items measure the motivation level of students in learning foreign languages. Eighty-five to eighty-nine percent of students in all three groups agreed with the statement: “If I learn to speak this language very well, I will have many opportunities to use it”. The responses to that statement were in sharp contrast to the responses given by American foreign language students. In Horwitz’s study (1988), only twelve to twenty-seven percent of students agreed with that statement. It appears that Turkish foreign language learners were more extrinsically motivated to learn a foreign language than their American peers as American students might feel that learning another language would not make much of a difference in finding a better job. When the students were asked whether they would want to speak the language to get to know the speakers better, seventy-three percent of French and sixty-two percent of German students agreed with that statement in contrast to fifty-percent of English language learners. From those percentages, only seventeen percent of English, twenty-four percent of German and forty-eight percent of French learners strongly agreed on that. As this item is used to measure students’ level of integrative motivation, a desire to connect with the native speakers did not appear to be very strong. This category has again been found to be statistically significant between the language groups ($F_{\text{value}} = 8,486 > F_{\text{table}} = 3,00$).

Table 1. Anova results

		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
TOPIC 1	Between Groups	0,998	2	0,499	1,996	0,137
	Within Groups	85,024	340	0,250		
	Total	86,022	342			
TOPIC 2	Between Groups	7,026	2	3,513	18,496	0,000
	Within Groups	64,575	340	0,190		
	Total	71,601	342			
TOPIC 3	Between Groups	3,706	2	1,853	6,787	0,001
	Within Groups	92,821	340	0,273		
	Total	96,526	342			
TOPIC 4	Between Groups	4,523	2	2,262	11,201	0,000
	Within Groups	68,648	340	0,202		
	Total	73,171	342			
TOPIC 5	Between Groups	4,928	2	2,464	8,486	0,000
	Within Groups	98,732	340	0,290		
	Total	103,660	342			

Table 2. The difficulty of language learning

Table 3. Foreign language aptitude

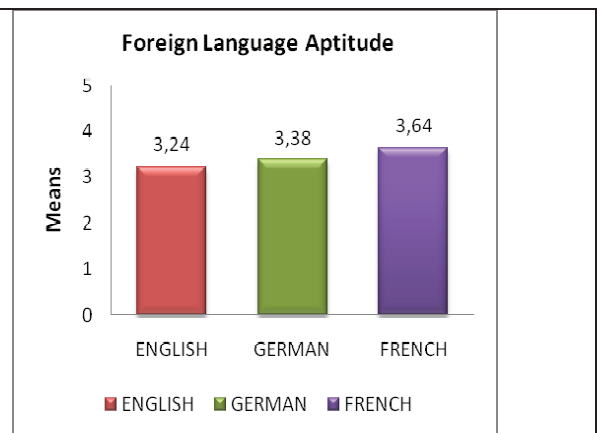
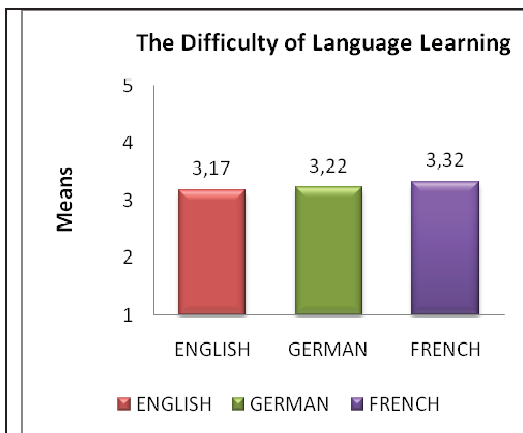


Table 4. The Nature of Language Learning

Table 5. Learning and Communication Strategies

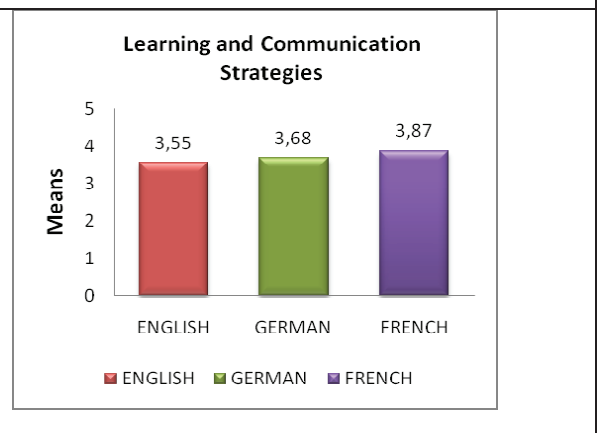
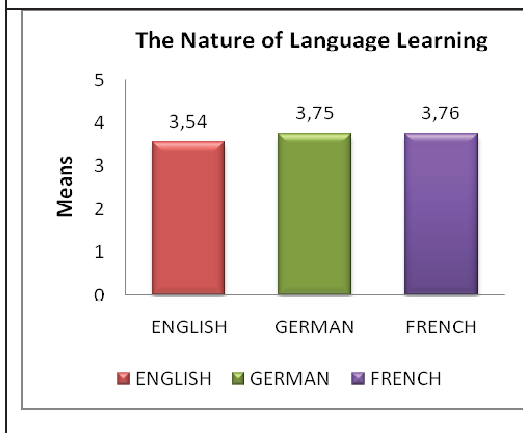
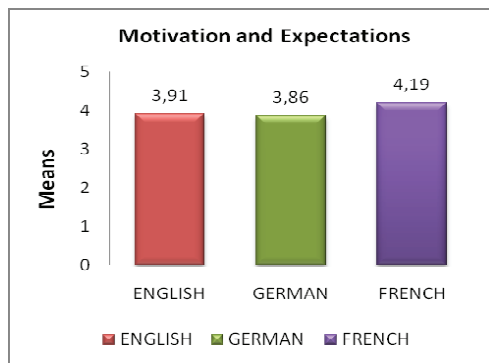


Table 5. Motivation and Expectations



4. Conclusion and Implications

The main purpose of this study was to compare English, German, and French language groups' beliefs among the categories of BALLI and to discover the areas of similarity and difference. A null hypothesis, that there is no language learning belief differences among foreign language groups, was also tested. As there have been differences in beliefs among language groups in four categories, the null hypothesis was rejected. All three groups' beliefs have been found slightly different from each other and for some of the items; the students' responses have been strikingly contrastive. For example, all three groups agreed when they were asked whether some people were gifted to learn languages but disagreed on whether they possessed that special skill to learn a language. Among the groups, French learners appeared to have a higher motivation and confidence to learn and speak the language. They have been found more perfectionist than English and German learning peers as they agreed on the importance of excellent pronunciation in speaking.

Some of the Turkish foreign language students' responses were also compared to Horwitz's (1988) study conducted with American foreign language students and were found to be similar. For example, both studies underlined the language learning difficulty hierarchy in which French learners rated the language they learned as the most difficult one. However, in terms of learning motivation, Turkish students appeared to be more motivated to learn a foreign language than their American peers as they considered it as an opportunity to improve their future career prospects.

As in Horwitz's study, some views the students held were also "indicative of a restricted view of language learning" (p.288). For example, almost half of the respondents agreed that foreign language learning was mostly based on learning grammar rules, translating from a foreign language, and learning a lot of new vocabulary. French learners, in comparison to other groups, slightly disagreed with these views as only twenty-eight percent of the English learners believed the necessity of knowing the foreign culture. Similarly, more than half of the English and German language students and nearly half of the French learners supported the idea that it would take maximum two years to become fluent in a foreign language. Foreign language learners who maintained these beliefs might be disappointed if they were unable to learn language with the strategies they employ and with the time frame they set to be fluent in a language (Horwitz, 1998). Language teachers could implement and discuss positive instructional practices and realistic expectations in the classroom (Horwitz, 1998). This would help to alleviate negative preconceived beliefs of some language learners. Thus, communication and positivity between teacher and student could be the key to successful language learning.

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