

## The Opinions of Prep Class Students at Dokuz Eylul University about Language Learning

Kadim Ozturk <sup>1</sup>, Ferdane Denkci Akkas <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>(Buca Education Faculty/ Dokuz Eylul University, Turkey)

<sup>2</sup>(School of Foreign Languages, Dokuz Eylul University, Turkey)

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**Abstract:** Foreign language learners have different beliefs about language learning which are known to have a significant effect on learners' motivation as well as learning process. This study aims to find out the language learning beliefs of the prep class students of Dokuz Eylul University and identify the factors which result in the differences in their beliefs. The data were collected with Horwitz's Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) slightly modified by Tercanlioğlu (2005) for use in Turkey[1]. The inventory was given to 643 prep class students at Dokuz Eylul University, School of Foreign Languages in 2011-2012 academic year. The analyses were conducted with SPSS analysis software. The results revealed that the prep class students of DEU were highly motivated learners who considered English as language of medium difficulty which could be learnt in a few years and who believed in the power of practice and repetition as well as the value of making mistakes. They also thought that although some groups like children had an advantage in language learning over the others, everyone could learn a foreign language. Finally, the only factor which resulted in a significant difference in these beliefs was having done a prep class before or not which indicates the influence of the past experiences on the recent beliefs.

**Keywords:** Language learning, opinions and beliefs

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### I. Introduction

All language classrooms have some degree of diversity in them since each learner comes to the class with his/her own unique identity and background. One of the significant differences of language learners is their beliefs about how languages are learnt. Recent research has shown that these beliefs have a significant effect on their motivation and learning process. Therefore, it is suggested that understanding the learner and awareness of his/her approach towards language learning will help the teacher plan more appropriate language instruction [2], [3]. Moreover, Horwitz (1988) points out the need to explore learner beliefs as they seem to have relevance to the understanding of student expectations of, commitment to, success in and satisfaction with their language classes [4].

#### Research Questions

- 1) What are the language learning beliefs of the prep class students of DEU School of Foreign Languages?
- 2) Do their beliefs vary significantly in terms of their:
  - a) gender,
  - b) shift,
  - c) being an undergraduate or graduate student,
  - d) having done a prep class before or not,
  - e) knowing another language or not,
  - f) Having been abroad before or not?

### II. Method

This study aims to find out the language learning beliefs of the prep class students of Dokuz Eylul University and identify the factors which result in the differences in their beliefs. It can be considered as a descriptive study with a quantitative approach. The purpose of a descriptive research is to specify or describe naturally occurring phenomena without experimental manipulation which often leads a quantitative style [5]. Such type of research tends to construct statistical models and figures to explain what is observed and makes use of tools such as questionnaires, surveys, measurements and other equipment to collect numerical or measurable data [6].

#### 2.1. Data Collection Instrument

In this study, the data have been collected via the *Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)* which was developed by Horwitz (1987) and then slightly modified for use in Turkey by Tercanlioğlu (2005) [7], [1]. The BALLI is a 5-point Likert scale which consists of 34 items measuring the beliefs about language

learning under 5 major areas: 5 items for motivations and expectations, 6 items for the nature of language, 8 items for learning and communication strategies, 9 items for foreign language aptitude and 6 items for the difficulty of language learning [3]. The participants were expected to decide to what extent they agreed with each item on a 5-point scale: (1) Strongly disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Neither agree nor disagree, (4) Agree, (5) Strongly agree.

The inventory was originally developed for research and teacher training purposes; that is, the initial research target was not EFL or ESL learners. However, most studies conducted in an EFL context, then, used the ESL version of the inventory and modified it for their particular group of students. The inventory was usually translated into the first language of the students to accommodate the students' language ability levels [8]. In the present study, the ESL version of the BALLI was also used in this way. The modified version by Tercanlioğlu (2005) was administered to pre-service EFL teachers in English in order to investigate their opinions on language learning [1]. In this study, the inventory was administered to prep class students; therefore, it was translated into their first language, which is Turkish. In order to check the language validity of the instrument, it was administered to 22 English instructors at Dokuz Eylul University, School of Foreign Languages first in Turkish and two weeks later in English. The analysis was carried out via SPSS packet program. As a result, the scale was found to be valid at the level of .000 ( $p < 0.01$ ).

## 2.2. Participants

643 prep class students at Dokuz Eylul University, School of Foreign Languages in 2011-2012 academic year participated in the study. Of the 643 participants, 359 were males and 284 were females who were registered in graduate or undergraduate programs in Economics and Administrative Sciences, Engineering, Science, Maritime or other faculties or institutions. 354 students from day classes and 289 from evening classes did the questionnaire. The participants represented five language levels since 121 beginner, 299 elementary, 162 pre-intermediate and 61 intermediate level learners were included in the study. More detailed background information concerning the participants is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Participants of the study

		Number	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	359	56
	Female	284	44
Undergraduate or graduate	Undergraduate	551	86
	Graduate	92	14
Shift	Day	354	55
	Evening	289	45
Having done a prep class before	Yes	80	12
	No	563	88
Knowing another language or not	Yes	132	20
	No	511	80
Type of high school	General high school	283	44
	Anatolian high school	298	46
	Other	62	10
Language level	Starter	121	19
	Elementary	299	46
	Pre-intermediate	162	25
	Intermediate	61	10
Faculty	Economics and Administrative Sciences	266	41
	Engineering	137	21
	Science	100	16
	Maritime	65	10
	Other	75	12

## 2.4. Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Frequencies and means were used to analyze single items. For ease of viewing, the BALLI item ratings were collapsed into three categories, representing agree, neutral and disagree as well as difficult, neutral and easy. Moreover, some other statistical analysis with Pearson Correlation, T-test, Anova, Levene and Scheffe tests were carried out in order to find out whether the learner beliefs varied in terms of the pre-determined factors like their gender, shift, etc.

## III. findings

The findings of the study are presented in terms of the two research questions.

1. What are the language learning beliefs of the prep class students of DEU School of Foreign Languages?

The results concerning the first research question are given according to the five major areas measured with the BALLI inventory.

a. Foreign Language Aptitude

The findings related to the items of foreign language aptitude are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Response frequency for foreign language aptitude

Items	1+2	3	4+5	0
easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.	29	64	550*	-
%	4	10	86*	
Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	96	132	415*	-
%	15	20	65*	
People from my country are good at learning foreign languages.	396*	184	57	6
%	61*	29	9	1
4. It is easier for someone who already speaks a language to learn another one.	109	155	377*	2
%	17	24	59*	0
5. People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages.	455*	108	77	3
%	71*	17	12	
6. I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	396*	157	87	3
%	62*	24	14	0
7. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.	434*	83	125	1
%	68*	13	19	0
8. People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.	320*	168	146	9
%	50*	23	26	1
9. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	105	141	394*	3
%	16	22	61*	1

1:Strongly disagree, 2:Disagree, 3:Neither agree nor disagree, 4:Agree, 5:Strongly agree, 0:Not answered

\*Most frequently preferred option

It is presented in Table 2 that the students in general agree with four of the items concerning foreign language aptitude and disagree with the other five. Table 2 shows that majority of the participants believe that some people have a special ability to learn a foreign language (65%) and children can learn a foreign language more easily than adults (86%) and it is an advantage to speak a language already to learn another one (59%). Moreover, they mostly do not agree with the idea that math or science people are not good language learners (71%). However, they do not believe neither they themselves (62%) nor people from their country (61%) have such a special language learning ability. On the other hand, they largely disagree with the statement that women are better than men at learning foreign languages (68%) and do not consider speaking more than one language as a sign of intelligence (50%). Also, they widely think that everyone can learn to speak a foreign language (61%). Of all these items, it is significant that the most frequently agreed item is the one defending children's superiority over adults in learning a language easily.

b. The Difficulty of Language Learning

Table 3 shows the findings concerning the items for the difficulty of language learning.

**Table 3.** The difficulty of language learning

Items	1+2	3	4+5	0
1. Some languages are easier to learn than others.	56	146	437*	4
%	9	23	68*	0
2. I believe that I will learn to speak English very well.	97	236	305*	5
%	15	37	47*	1
3. It is easier to speak than to understand a foreign language.	258*	189	186	10
%	40*	29	29	2
4. It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.	152	141	345*	5
%	23	22	54*	1
<b>Items</b>	<b>a+b</b>	<b>c</b>	<b>d+e</b>	<b>0</b>
5. English is: a very difficult language a difficult language a language of medium difficulty an easy language a very easy language	161	367*	109	6
%	25	57*	17	1
6. If someone spent one hour a day learning a language how long would it take them to speak the language very well? less than a year 1-2 years	406*	115	115	7

3-5 years				
5-10 years				
You can't learn a language in 1 hour a day.				
%	<b>63*</b>	18	18	1

1:Strongly disagree, 2:Disagree, 3:Neither agree nor disagree, 4:Agree, 5:Strongly agree, 0:Not answered

\*Most frequently preferred option

It can be seen in Table 3 that the prep class students mostly believe that some languages are easier to learn than others (68%). 47 % of them think that they will learn to speak English while 37 % are indecisive about it. Majority of the students say that English is a language of medium difficulty (57%) which can be learnt in up to two years by spending one hour a day (63%) whereas only 25 % of the students find English difficult or very difficult. When they are asked to consider the language skills, 40 % of them do not agree with the idea that speaking a foreign language is easier than understanding it while 54 % find reading and writing English easier than speaking and understanding it.

### c. The Nature of Language Learning

Table 4 presents the findings concerning the items for the nature of language learning.

**Table 4.** The nature of language learning

Items	1+2	3	4+5	0
1. It is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures in order to speak English.	220	162	<b>261*</b>	-
%	34	25	<b>41*</b>	0
2. It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country.	24	44	<b>575*</b>	-
%	4	7	<b>89*</b>	0
3. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary.	64	152	<b>426*</b>	1
%	10	24	<b>66*</b>	0
4. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar.	225	<b>235*</b>	175	8
%	35	<b>37*</b>	27	1
5. Learning a foreign language is different from learning other academic subjects.	36	90	<b>503*</b>	14
%	6	14	<b>78*</b>	2
6. The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from my native language.	178	213	<b>244*</b>	7
%	28	33	<b>39*</b>	1

1:Strongly disagree, 2:Disagree, 3:Neither agree nor disagree, 4:Agree, 5:Strongly agree, 0:Not answered

\*Most frequently preferred option

Table 4 exhibits that 41 % of the students believe in the necessity of learning about English-speaking cultures in order to speak the language while 34 % do not consider culture as a need in language learning. 89 % of the participants say that it is best to learn English in an English-speaking country. Taking the most important part of language learning into account, 66 % agree upon the importance of vocabulary while 39 % believe translating from their L1 is the most important part. On the other hand, when they are asked about grammar as the most important part of learning a foreign language, 37 % are indecisive, 35 % do not agree and 27 % think grammar is the most important part of language learning. Lastly, the majority of the students report that learning a foreign language is different from learning other academic subjects (78%).

### d. Learning and Communication Strategies

Table 5 reports the findings concerning the items for learning and communication strategies.

**Table 5.** Learning and communication strategies

Items	1+2	3	4+5	0
1. It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.	68	149	<b>416*</b>	10
%	11	23	<b>65*</b>	1
2. You shouldn't speak anything in English until you can say it correctly.	<b>540*</b>	61	41	1
%	<b>84*</b>	10	6	0
3. I enjoy practicing English with the native speakers of English I meet.	69	115	<b>454*</b>	4
%	11	18	<b>71*</b>	0
4. It is ok to guess if you don't know a word in English.	228	<b>243*</b>	169	3
%	35	<b>38*</b>	26	1
5. It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	7	46	<b>586*</b>	4
%	1	7	<b>91*</b>	1
6. I feel timid speaking English with other people.	<b>349*</b>	173	115	6
%	<b>54*</b>	27	18	1
7. If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on.	<b>390*</b>	122	122	9

%	61*	19	19	1
8. It is important to practice with cassettes or tapes.	33	130	470*	10
%	5	20	73*	2

1:Strongly disagree, 2:Disagree, 3:Neither agree nor disagree, 4:Agree, 5:Strongly agree, 0:Not answered

\*Most frequently preferred option

It can be seen in Table 5 that a vast majority of the students believe in the power of practice in language learning. 91 % of them agree with the item that it is important to repeat and practice a lot. Likewise, 71 % state that they enjoy practicing English with the native speakers they meet and 73 % believe that it is important to practice with cassettes or tapes. It is also obvious that they value errors in language learning since 84 % of the students disagree with the statement that you should not speak anything in English until you speak it correctly and 61 % do not think that it will be difficult for students to correct themselves later on if they are permitted to make errors in English. On the other hand, 65 % of the participants believe in the importance of speaking English with an excellent pronunciation. Moreover, 26 % think that it is ok to guess if you do not know a word in English while 38 % are indecisive about that. Lastly, 54 % report that they do not feel timid speaking English with other people.

#### e. Motivations and Expectations

Table 6 shows the findings for the items of motivations and expectations.

**Table 6.** Motivations and expectations

Items	1+2	3	4+5	0
1. People in my country feel that it is important to speak English.	99	135	407*	2
%	16	21	63*	0
2. I would like to learn English so that I can get to know native speakers of English better.	250*	152	233	8
%	39*	24	36	1
3. If I learn English very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job.	17	28	592*	6
%	3	4	92*	1
4. I want to learn to speak English well.	9	19	610*	5
%	1	3	95*	1
5. I would like to have native-English speaking friends.	60	99	478*	6
%	9	16	74*	1

1:Strongly disagree, 2:Disagree, 3:Neither agree nor disagree, 4:Agree, 5:Strongly agree, 0:Not answered

\*Most frequently preferred option

Table 6 presents that the participants are highly motivated to learn English. 95 % of them state that they want to learn to speak English well and 74 % say that they want to have native-English speaking friends. 63 % believe that speaking English is important in their country and 92 % think that learning English will provide them with better job opportunities. However, 39 % report that they do not learn English to get to know native speakers of English better while 36 % say they do.

2. Do the beliefs of the prep class students vary significantly in terms of their: gender, shift, being an undergraduate or graduate student, having done a prep class before or not, knowing another language or not or having been abroad before or not?

The statistical analyses carried out to answer the second research question have revealed that the beliefs of the prep class students about language learning do not vary significantly in terms of their gender, shift, being an undergraduate or graduate student, knowing another language or not, having been abroad before or not. However, their beliefs do vary significantly in terms of their having done a prep class before or not. The mean of the students having done a prep class before ( $X1=119,50$ ) is different from the ones who did not ( $X2=112,89$ ) and this difference is statistically significant ( $p=0,013$ ). The Scheffe test results show that this difference stems from the difference in their beliefs about the nature of language learning. The students having done a prep class seem to be more likely to agree with the items under this major area ( $p=0,009$ ).

The first paragraph under each heading or subheading should be flush left, and subsequent paragraphs should have a five-space indentation. A colon is inserted before an equation is presented, but there is no punctuation following the equation. All equations are numbered and referred to in the text solely by a number enclosed in a round bracket (i.e., (3) reads as "equation 3"). Ensure that any miscellaneous numbering system you use in your paper cannot be confused with a reference [4] or an equation (3) designation.

## IV. Discussion

This study aims to reveal the language learning beliefs of the prep class students of Dokuz Eylul University and identify the factors which result in the differences in their beliefs. The results suggest that the

prep class students have certain beliefs concerning their language learning which are consistent with the findings of the previous research in general.

Prep class students think that being a child or being able to speak another foreign language has a positive effect on learning a foreign language. This finding has consistency with those of many other researchers' [9], [10], [1]. However, they don't agree that women or math or science people have a special ability to learn a language. Nor do they consider it as a sign of intelligence. Nationality, gender and social status might cause variety on this item in different studies [9], [10].

Interestingly, the 61 % of the students do not agree that people of their nation are good at language learning whereas the rate was 29% in Bernat's study (2006) and the participants of Tercanlioğlu's (2005) and Altan's (2006) studies were indecisive about the language aptitude of Turkish people [10], [1], [9]. It is also significant that they do not believe neither they themselves nor people from their country have a special language learning ability even though they widely think that everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.

They also believe that some languages are easier to learn and consider English as a language of medium difficulty which can be learnt in a few years. This is also consistent with Bernat's (2010) finding about Middle Eastern students' tendency to underestimate the length of time it takes to learn a language and their belief that they have special language abilities [10]. They find speaking more difficult than listening and believe that reading and writing skills are easier than listening and speaking.

They believe that learning a language is different from learning other subjects and the best way to learn English is to learn it in an English-speaking country. This was also what Horwitz (1999) found in his research [3]. They think it is important to learn the pronunciation and find it necessary to practice the language as much as possible without being afraid of making mistakes. Horwitz (1999) found that generally EFL learners gave more importance to pronunciation and were more positive about mistakes [3].

The prep class students want to learn English very well because they believe English is a valued language in the society which will provide them with better job opportunities in the future. Similarly, Arnoğul, Ünal and Onursal (2009) and Horwitz (1999) discovered that Turkish students appeared to be more instrumentally motivated to learn a foreign language than their American peers as they considered it as an opportunity to improve their future career prospects [11], [3].

Finally, all these beliefs do not vary significantly in terms of their gender, shift, being an undergraduate or graduate student, knowing another language or not, having been abroad before or not. This is also consistent with Tercanlioğlu's (2005) research results which imply that foreign language learners have certain beliefs about language learning regardless of the stated factors[1]. However, their beliefs do vary significantly in terms of their having done a prep class before or not showing that the students having done a prep class seem to be more likely to agree with the items related to the nature of language learning. This finding suggests that previous language learning experience may change the beliefs about language learning. Moreover, this result brings up the need for further research to discover other factors or variables which might have a significant influence on the formation of learner beliefs.

## V. Conclusion

Overall, the prep class students of DEU are highly motivated learners who consider English as language of medium difficulty which can be learnt in a few years and who believes in the power of practice and repetition as well as the value of making mistakes. They also think that although some groups like children have an advantage in language learning over the others, everyone can learn a foreign language. Finally, the only factor which results in a significant difference in these beliefs is having done a prep class before or not which indicates the influence of the past experiences on the recent beliefs.

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