

## INVESTIGATING TURKISH EFL LEARNERS' BELIEFS ABOUT GERMAN, ITALIAN AND FRENCH AS A SECOND FOREIGN LANGUAGE (1)

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### ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study that investigated beliefs about second foreign language learning of Turkish EFL learners, compared their beliefs about learning German, Italian and French as a second foreign language and explored within-group variation in these learners' beliefs. The primary purpose of this study is to identify Turkish learners' beliefs about compulsory second foreign language courses in French, Italian and German at an English-medium university in Turkey. Another aim of the study is to identify the underlying reasons the students have for choosing and not choosing a particular second foreign language course among available options as well as to see whether beliefs varied according to the semester of the students. The results indicated that the participants had different beliefs about second foreign languages and that their beliefs are stable over time.

**Keywords:** learner beliefs, beliefs about language learning.

### INTRODUCTION

Language teachers and researchers currently consider the role of the learner as an important part of the language learning process; learning styles, strategies, attitudes and motivations are some of the factors that learners have in shaping this process. One of the more recently investigated learner variables in the field is learner beliefs about language learning, which refer to opinions that learners hold about various aspects of language learning (Horwitz, 1987). As most language educators argue, these beliefs affect students' success in learning the target language and direct their learning strategies in that way. It has been noted that successful learners develop insightful beliefs about language learning processes, their own abilities and the use of effective learning strategies which have enhanced their performance in language learning. On the other hand, students can also have misconceptions, uninformed or negative beliefs about language learning, resulting in their reliance on less effective strategies and negative attitude towards learning and autonomy (Victori & Lockhart, 1995), classroom anxiety and poor performance. For instance, a student who believes that learning a second language primarily involves learning new vocabulary will predominantly focus on mastering new vocabulary, while adults who believe in the supremacy of younger learners probably begin language learning with some negative expectations of their own achievement (Bernat, 2004).

Beliefs are defined as psychologically held understandings, premises or propositions about the world that are held to be true (Richardson, 1996). Beliefs about language learning consist of "general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning and about the nature of language teaching" (Victori & Lockhart, 1995:224). The first attempts to systematically investigate these beliefs started with Horwitz's pioneering studies (1985; 1987; 1988) and from then on, many studies have been conducted with different learners in local contexts such as Malaysian (Wong, 2010); Turkish (Altan, 2006;

Ariogul et al., 2009); Japanese (Sakui & Gaies, 1999); Vietnamese (Bernat, 2004); Lebanese (Diab, 2006) and many other native and non-native English contexts. These studies have noted that successful learners develop insightful beliefs about language learning processes, their own abilities and the use of effective learning strategies which have enhanced their performance in language learning. According to Horwitz (1987), learners' beliefs or notions about language learning can influence both their experiences and actions as language learners but Horwitz (1987) also asserts that studying learner beliefs about language learning is important not only because such beliefs may influence students' expectations for and commitment to their language learning, but also because such beliefs may be more susceptible to change than cognitive style variables or affective variables such as attitudes and motivation. Thus, knowledge of students' beliefs about language learning may provide language educators with a better understanding of their students' "expectation of, commitment to, success in and satisfaction with their language classes" (Horwitz, 1988, p.283). As a result of this teachers can make more informed choices about teaching (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005) and adopt "a more sensitive approach to the organization of learning opportunities" (Cotterall, 1999, p.494) in their lessons.

Although there are numerous studies in the field, the term *beliefs about language learning* were not clearly defined by researchers in the previous studies. In most studies, the term is used as a known construct without providing further explanation while some of the studies define the term *beliefs* by itself. According to Vibulphol (2004), even Horwitz, one of the pioneer researchers of the studies on beliefs about language learning, did not give an operational definition of beliefs about language learning in her articles (Horwitz, 1985, 1987, 1988). She only refers to beliefs using the terms like *preconceptions* (1985), *preconceived ideas* (1987) and *preconceived notions* (1988) without giving specific descriptions about the construct. She used the statement "opinion" to refer to beliefs to introduce the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory, namely BALLI, which has been used widely for researchers studying beliefs about language learning.

Horwitz (1985) and Wenden (1986) were the first ones to study beliefs about language learning. In more than 25 years, the scope of research on learner's beliefs has grown and several studies have been conducted. Most of these studies were based on the *normative approach*. Halliday (1994) used the term *normative* to refer to studies on culture that sees students' culture as explanation for their behaviors in class. The normative approach includes studies that have used Likert-scale questionnaires to investigate beliefs about language learning. The most widely used questionnaire is the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) developed by Horwitz (1985).

In the field of student beliefs about language learning, most studies in the literature investigate student beliefs about English or other languages either as a second or foreign language. One of many studies in the literature dealing with the issue is of Bernat's (2004) study who investigated learner beliefs about language learning. In the study, there were 20 adult Vietnamese ESL learners who were given the BALLI. Their responses to the questionnaire are analyzed in order to identify learner beliefs about second language learning for the purpose of informing syllabus design and teacher practice as well as to discover if links existed between students' motivation for language learning and their beliefs. 12 of the participants were males and 8 were females aged between 24 and 59. The data was analyzed using the frequency of each item and the results indicated that no links were established between motivation and beliefs about language learning in this study.

Altan (2006) investigated the beliefs about language learning with a total of 248 foreign language-major university students at five universities. BALLI was given to students of English, German, French, Arabic and Japanese who were all going to be the teachers of the language they were learning. The study is a replication of the study Horwitz (1988) conducted with American students. The results of the questionnaire were evaluated again under the five language areas of the BALLI and indicated that students hold a wide range of beliefs with varying degrees of validity.

Another study by Ariogul et al. (2009) addresses the differences and similarities among English, German and French language groups' beliefs about language learning using a questionnaire. There were a total number of 343 participants; 143 students of English, 138 students of German and 62 students of French. All the participants were freshmen students enrolled in the intensive language school of a university in Turkey with a minimum workload of twenty hours of week of foreign language training. Their degree programs ranged from nursing to German language teaching. In their research, they used the BALLI, as well as a demographic questionnaire to answer the research question: *Do English, German and French language learners in Turkey differ in their beliefs about foreign language learning?* Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation and frequency, were calculated. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) statistical analysis was used to understand the differences between the three language groups' scores on BALLI. The results revealed that there have been significant differences in beliefs among the language groups in four categories; *foreign language aptitude, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies and motivation and expectations.*

The primary purpose of this study, therefore, is to identify Turkish learners' beliefs about compulsory second foreign language courses in French, Italian and German at an English-medium university in Turkey. Identification of these beliefs and the reflection on their potential impact on language learning and teaching in general might inform teachers about their future syllabus design in the course as well as making teachers teaching a compulsory second language course gain insight about learners' thoughts.

In spite of the growing number of studies investigating beliefs about language learning of different groups of EFL/ESL learners from various cultural backgrounds since Horwitz's pioneering study in 1985, not much importance has been given to the investigation of students' beliefs about a *second* foreign language. This study is significant in the sense that it investigates the beliefs about learning a second foreign language. In the light of the aims discussed above, the following questions will be answered for the study to reach its aims.

1. What are METU FLE (2) students' beliefs about learning a second foreign language?
  - a. What reasons do METU FLE students have for choosing their second foreign language among the alternatives?
  - b. What reasons do METU FLE students have for not choosing the other second foreign languages available at the department?
  - c. Is there a difference between the students' beliefs about German, French and Italian as their second foreign language?
  - d. Do students' beliefs about a second foreign language change as they make progress in learning the language?

## METHOD

### Participants

For the sample of the study, all students in all the sections of the entire second foreign language courses (FLE 177 and FLE 277) at the department of Foreign Language Education, METU in Ankara, Turkey were selected. 133 students participated in the study. Among these 133 students, 64 of them were learners of German; 42 of them were learners of Italian and 27 of them were learners of French. There were 32 males and 101 females.

### Data Collection and Analysis

As part of the quantitative survey research methodology, a questionnaire was developed and administered in order to obtain the relevant data for the study. In order to analyze the survey results, both quantitative and qualitative processes were used. The data concerning the participants' demographic information and beliefs about second foreign language learning were coded and entered into the PASW 18 statistical analysis program. Descriptive statistics, that is, frequency of items, mean scores and standard deviation scores were calculated to

answer the research questions. In order to analyze the association between the beliefs of the participants about German, French and Italian and to find out if these beliefs change as they make progress in learning the language, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was calculated. Qualitative data obtained through the five open-ended questions in the questionnaire were analyzed by means of content analysis. The answers of the students were grouped into different themes related to the research questions and reported.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this part of the paper, the findings of the statistical analyses of the data collected from the questionnaire will be reported. The results are presented according to the order of the research questions.

### Participants' Beliefs about SFL in General

The first research question, *what are METU FLE students' beliefs about learning a second foreign language*, was answered by item frequencies, that is, according to the frequency of the answers the students gave to the related items in the questionnaire. The items 4, 6, 9, 14 and 18 were composed of statements related to the learners' beliefs about SFL. The items referred to both the nature of language learning in general and to the local situation of the learners.

More than half of the participants (91 out of 132; %68.4) agreed that the instructor teaches the language well. However, 26 participants (%19.5) stated that they were not sure whether the language they are trying to learn is taught well by the instructor. Item 6, stating that, *it is important to learn a SFL from a native speaker of the language*, received agreement from the participants. 107 of the participants (%80.5) marked either agree or strongly agree to the item which show that they believe a SFL is learned better from a native speaker.

Another general belief the participants had about SFL was the statement that *it is easier for someone who already knows a foreign language to learn a SFL*. Out of 133 participants, 113 (%84.9) marked either agree or strongly agree. Since the participants have English as a foreign language (or other languages), they believe that English has an important role in their learning German, Italian or French as a second foreign language.

General beliefs about learning a SFL in the local situation, which is related to the SFL courses they are taking at the department, were also investigated by two items, 14 and 18. The participants mostly disagreed to the statements *if I had a chance, I would change the language I am studying now* and *I would drop the course if I had the chance*. Item 14 received disagreement from 85 participants (%63.9) and Item 18 received disagreement from 104 participants (%78.2). This shows that the students are generally satisfied with their current choice of SFL. On the other hand, according to the results of the questionnaire, 26 participants (%29.5) were not satisfied with their current SFL and 22 participants (%16.5) were not sure.

### Participants' Reasons for Choosing and Not Choosing Their Current SFL

Items 3, 5, 7, 8, 11, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24 aimed to answer the research question (1a); *What reasons do METU FLE students have for choosing their second foreign language among the alternatives* and (1b) *What reasons do METU FLE students have for not choosing their second foreign language among the alternatives* again from both a general and local perspective. The reasons for choosing and not choosing the SFL were themed under four categories; 1) difficulty of the language, 2) general attitudes towards learning a SFL, 3) its being compulsory in the department and 4) the influence of the instructor teaching the course. Almost all of the participants, 131 of them (%98.5), stated that it is important to learn a SFL (Item 7) and 109 of the participants (%82) stated that they will have many opportunities to use the language if they speak very well (Item 19). It might be inferred that these are some of the reasons why the students chose their current SFL. This argument is verified by their answers to Items 3, 11 and 23. Most of the participants (97 of 133; %72.9) disagreed with the belief that their choice of the SFL depended on the course's being a part of the curriculum

(Item 3). Similarly, more than half of them (77 out of 133; %57.9) marked either disagree or strongly disagree with the idea that they chose the SFL since it was compulsory in the department (Item 11). A similar statement in the questionnaire (Item 23) received disagreement from 105 of the participants (%78.9) which stated that their choice of the SFL depended on the fact that they had no other choice.

Regarding the difficulty of the SFL and their choice of the SFL, the three items (1, 12 and 15), the three of which stated that the language they were learning was either easier or more difficult, were analyzed. The results revealed that there is not a clear cut variance among the five statements. It might be inferred from these findings that difficulty of the SFL did not play a major role in the participants' choice of the SFL.

#### **Difference between the Participants' Beliefs about German, French and Italian**

In order to answer the research question (1c) *is there a difference between the students' beliefs about German, French and Italian as their second language*, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was calculated. Significance levels were set at  $P < 0.05$ .

Items 1, 4, 12, 14, 15, 22 and 23 were found to be statistically significant between groups with different  $p$  values. According to the ANOVA results, there is a statistically significant difference among the beliefs of German, Italian and French learners about the difficulty of second foreign languages (Item 1,  $p=0.000$ ). The results of the Post-Hoc Scheffe show that this difference is directed from German to Italian and French which might mean that participants had a tendency to state that German was easier than Italian and French. Item 4, which stated that *the language I am trying to learn is not taught well by the instructor*, was also statistically significant between the groups (Item 4,  $p=0.000$ ). Item 15, *I have chosen this SFL because it is easier than others*, was found to be statistically significant between the groups (Item 15,  $p=0.000$ ). It verifies the fact that German learners agreed with the fact that German is easier than other SFLs than learners of Italian and French. The results also showed that German learners thought they chose the language they are currently learning because of the instructor when compared to learners of French and Italian (Item 22,  $p=0.003$ ).

#### **Difference between the Current Semesters of the Participants**

In order to answer the research question (1d), *Do students' beliefs about a second foreign language change as they make progress in learning the language*, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was calculated. Significance levels were set at  $p < 0.05$ .

The results reveal that there is no change in the belief of the participants as they make progress in learning the language. There is no statistically significant difference in any of the 24 items in terms of their semesters. A surprising result is that the students do not think that they have progress in learning the SFL so far (Item 10,  $p=0.459$ ). They also believe that they have not learned the SFL (Item 21,  $p=0.420$ ).

#### **Responses to Open-Ended Questions in the Questionnaire**

Qualitative data collected through the open ended questions in the questionnaire were analyzed according to their content and the themes; reasons for choosing/not choosing the language, satisfaction with the language and opportunity of chance have been determined. In the following sections, a general perspective of the participants related to these themes will be discussed. Below is the table of descriptive for the number of participants for each second foreign language.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for German, Italian and French Learners

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	German	64	48,1	48,1	48,1
	Italian	42	31,6	31,6	79,7
	French	27	20,3	20,3	100,0
	Total	133	100,0	100,0	

### German

In the study, there were a total number of 64 learners of German. Almost all of the students were satisfied with choosing German as a second foreign language. One of the most frequently cited reason for choosing German is because most of the participants had previous knowledge of the language either from high school or their relatives in Germany and many of the participants chose German because they said they liked the language in general. Some of the participants stated that it was easier than other SFL offered in the department while others stated that they chose the language because their friends chose it as well. Popularity of German language and possible advantages it might bring over the other languages is another reason for German to be chosen. Also, a few participants stated that their advisors suggested that they took German as a SFL.

When asked if they would change the language if they were given an opportunity, almost all replied in a negative way. They stated that German is widely spoken and when they learn the language, they will have many opportunities to use it. There was a consensus among the participants that they would not like to start learning a new language from the beginning and that is why they chose German as a SFL in order to improve their current knowledge.

### Italian

Qualitative data from 42 learners of Italian were collected and one of the biggest reasons for choosing Italian as a SFL among other alternatives was the similarity of Italian to Spanish. Since Spanish is not among those SFL courses offered in the department, the students believed that learning Italian will help them learn Spanish better later on which is why they chose Italian. Another factor affecting their choice of the language was the interest to and attraction of the language. Some students stated that they chose Italian because they had previous knowledge of German and French and wanted to learn a new language.

When asked if they were satisfied with the language and whether they would change the language if they were given an opportunity, half of them said they were not satisfied and would change it with Spanish if Spanish was offered in the department. They stated that they would not change it with either German or French. Those who were satisfied with the language saying that they would not change it were as much as those who think in the opposite way.

### French

27 learners of French participated in the study and qualitative data from these participants were analyzed according to the content related to the research questions. There are a number of different views of French as a SFL among the participants. Since the number of the participants in the study is not very high, generalizations cannot be made; however, most cited reasons for choosing the language include; influence of their friends, previous knowledge of the language from high school, the interest in the French language and culture in general (sound and pronunciation) and not being interested in the other languages offered in the department. Most of the students were not satisfied with choosing the language since they stated that it was a difficult language.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aimed at uncovering the beliefs EFL learners have about a second foreign language at a university in Turkey. The primary purpose of this study was to investigate participants' beliefs about three second foreign languages (German, Italian and French) in general and to explore the reasons why they chose one over the others. Although these languages are compulsory in the curriculum of English Language Teaching, the participants' major area, different reasons that influence choosing one language were identified thus, this study investigated the learners' beliefs about a second foreign language.

In the literature, there are many studies conducted by various researchers in various contexts (Altan, 2006; Ariogul et al., 2009; Bernat, 2004; Diab, 2006; Peacock, 2001 and Wong, 2010). This study differed from the others in two ways; firstly, BALLI is not used as a data collection tool. In most of the studies in the literature, BALLI was utilized to assess learners' beliefs about language learning. Secondly, this study is different from other since it focused on *second* foreign languages. Due to the fact that BALLI items were not written specifically for second foreign language learning, a questionnaire was developed by the researcher and by the help of some scholars in the field.

The first research question of this study was a general one, *what are METU FLE students' beliefs about learning a second foreign language*, and the answer to the question was tried to be found by evaluating the responses the students gave to the items in the questionnaire. Items 4, 6, 9, 14 and 18 were analyzed and the results showed that the students had positive beliefs about learning a second foreign language in general agreeing that it is important for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn a SFL. Participants' knowledge of English as a foreign language seemed to help them learn a second foreign language better. Since METU is an English-medium university and the department they are studying at is English Language Teaching department, most of them are advanced learners of English who study courses like the English language, English literature, methodology, educational sciences and linguistics in order to learn how to teach English to, primarily, students in the primary and secondary levels in Turkey. Also, almost all of the participants believe that it is important to know a second foreign language. They believe that learning a SFL will enable them to have many opportunities later on after they graduate.

The second and third research questions were *what reasons they had for choosing and not choosing the second foreign languages offered in the department (German, Italian and French)*. Results from the quantitative data showed that difficulty of language learning, general attitude towards the language and interest in the language, influence of the friends and necessity of knowing a SFL were among the reasons that directed the students to choose the language.

Another research question of the study, *difference between the students' beliefs about German, French and Italian as their second foreign languages*, was answered with one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to see if there was any difference between the groups. The results showed that German was considered to be easier than Italian and French. This might be inferred from the fact that the frequency of those who agreed with the statement "the language I am learning is easier than others in the department" was higher in the German group. This might also stem from the fact that learners of German as a SFL comprised almost half of the whole population (%48.1).

When the difference was analyzed according to the semester of the students, interestingly, there was no statistically significant difference in any of the items among the three groups. It can be inferred that the belief of the learners do not change as they make progress in learning the language. This was a surprising finding for

the researcher since beliefs were expected to vary with the students who were in the first semester and those who were in their third semester. Wong (2010) investigated Malaysian pre-service teachers' beliefs about learning English and the stability of these beliefs over time. The results revealed that with the exception of slight change to two items on language learning difficulty and six items on nature of language learning, most of their beliefs were stable over time. Since Wong's study was different in that the same questionnaire was administered to the same students 14 months after the first administration, it might reveal that beliefs are stable and not easily change over time with progress in learning the language.

The primary aim of this study was to investigate learners' beliefs about learning a second foreign language. Although the collected data provided some insights about various aspects of these beliefs, due to lack of time, only 133 participants were involved in this study. A further research might be conducted that investigates these beliefs from a wider perspective, with more participants and different contexts. Since the primary aim of this study was to look at the issue from a local setting, data was collected from only one university. The results presented here cannot be generalized and in order to have a general perspective of Turkish learners' beliefs about language learning, a comprehensive longitudinal study should be conducted.

Also, the effect of gender has been ignored in this study since it was not the primary goal and due to the fact that there were not equal number of males and females in the study. According to Tercanlioglu (2004), gender is still a key variable that may directly influence or even determine attitudes, motivation and behaviors. Therefore it is reasonable to suppose that they might have different beliefs about what learning is and how it occurs. A further study might include gender as a variable.

To conclude, exploring the beliefs of learners can lead to more effective language learning behaviors. If teachers are not aware of the beliefs of the learners, their efforts in applying some teaching methods to get maximum benefit might be in vain. Therefore, knowledge of learner beliefs will be important in increasing teachers' understanding of how the students approach the language and a result, will help the teachers to apply more effective strategies during the teaching of second foreign languages.

#### Notes

(1) This study is a revised version of a previous study called *Turkish EFL Learners' Beliefs about Learning Second Foreign Languages* by the same author.

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