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TURKISH PREP SCHOOL EFL STUDENTS' BELIEFS ABOUT LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between Turkish EFL learners' beliefs about language learning and learner features, such as gender, age, and language proficiency level. The study was conducted at Anadolu University, School of Foreign Languages, with the participation of 242 Turkish prep school EFL students with different levels of English proficiency in the spring semester of the 2018-2019 academic year. The data were collected using Horwitz's inventory (1987), "Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory" (BALLI). The results of the study showed no significant relationship between the participants' features, that is, gender, age, and language proficiency level and their beliefs about language learning. However, subtle relationships were discerned between the participants' features and their beliefs about language learning. Considered in the light of the results of previous studies on the same issue, the results of our study suggest that the interplay between learner beliefs about language learning and learner features is dynamic, complex, and context-specific, which underlines the importance of adopting a hands-on approach with individualized attention to the situation and a timely-intervention of students' misplaced beliefs about language learning. Taking the results of previous studies into account, the results of this study are discussed, and pedagogical implications are offered for stakeholders in language learning and teaching.

Keywords: Turkish EFL learners, prep schools, language learning beliefs, learning features

1. 1. Introduction

As the history of foreign learning and teaching shows, we have all been "absorbed in a relentless pursuit of continuous improvement" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 225) to meet the demands and needs of language learners imposed by the never-ending changes in life. Among the many pressing matters in teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language, such as teacher-centered, learning-centered, post-method-related matters (Kumaravadivelu, 2006)—one of the most consequential ones tends to be learner-centered issues. The paradigm shifts observed in language teaching so far, and their consequent breakthroughs have aimed to come up with a solution to the question: How can people learn a foreign and/or second language more quickly and efficiently? Applied linguists, scholars, researchers, and language teachers alike have sought to answer this question. In their pursuit of a solution, a lot of studies and research have inevitably focused on the language learner.

It would not be an overstatement to say that the language learner is the most critical component in the language learning experience. Knowing language learners and identifying their individual differences, such as personality traits, needs, aspirations, strategies, motivations, strengths and weaknesses, undoubtedly play a key role in answering the question posed above. Designing courses that can cater to learner needs forms an integral part of the

design and implementation of effective language instruction (Horwitz, 1999). As Stevick (1980) underlines, "success depends less on materials, techniques, and linguistic analysis, and *more* on *what goes on inside* (italics added) and between the people in the classroom" (p. 4).

Learning a foreign language, English in particular, has become an essential part of tens of thousands of people's lives around the world for a variety of reasons, which are no longer a mystery, even to the laypeople. Despite striving to learn English and sacrificing quite a lot of time, unfortunately, most people, especially in expanding circle countries (Kachru, 1985), may not be able to become proficient language users, and Turkey is no exception (Bodur & Arıkan, 2017). Numerous factors can account for this, which involves a range of issues from context-driven, teacher-driven to learner-driven. In accounting for Turkish learners' failures to learn English, (Bodur & Arıkan, 2017) underline social, educational and individual factors. Individual-driven reasons include, but are not limited to, cognitive factors (e.g., language aptitude), affective factors (e.g., attitude, motivation, anxiety) and metacognitive factors (e.g., planning, monitoring and evaluating one's learning). Another individual-related issue is learners' beliefs about language learning, convictions which learners might make up about language learning. These beliefs are 'situated' and 'active' (Ellis, 2008, p. 7), so they shape the way the learner sets about the learning task (Horwitz, 1999; Richardson, 1996). As Yang claims (1999), beliefs are prognosticators of the learning process.

1.1. Literature Review

Beliefs, the deeply held knowledge about various factors concerning learners' language learning process (Wenden, 1991), can be formed through personal experience (Barcelos, 2012) and/or through influence from other people, in other words, culture (Foss & Reitzel, 1988; Li, 2010). Many factors form the origin of beliefs, such as background in family and culture, relationships with social and classroom peers, interpretations of prior repetitive experiences and differences in individuals (Alexander et al., 1991; Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005; Victori & Lockhart, 1995). Beliefs, according to Dewey (1983), depend on thoughts, traditions, and customs instead of proof; consequently, beliefs are not an optimal form of thought.

A quick look at the literature on learning beliefs will reveal that various definitions of them abound in the literature. In one of these definitions, Barcelos (1995) puts forward the following definition:

> Learners' intuitive implicit (or explicit) knowledge made of beliefs, myths, cultural assumptions and ideals about how to learn languages. This knowledge, according to learners' age and social economic level, is based upon their previous educational experience, previous (and present) readings about language learning and contact with other people like family, friends, relatives, teachers and so forth. (p. 4).

Horwitz suggests the various definitions of learner beliefs in the literature can be summed up as 'preconceptions' (1985), 'preconceived ideas' (1987), and 'preconceived notions' (1988). Learner beliefs cover issues ranging from learning to teaching and from learner roles to teacher roles (Gabillon, 2005).

Characteristics of learner beliefs may help us conceptualize and comprehend beliefs better. Beliefs, (as cited in Barcelos, 2000, p. 10), possess and exhibit the following characteristics:

1. They guide action, but they are also influenced by action (Dewey, 1906/1983, 1933; Richardson, 1996; Rokeach, 1968; Peirce 1877, 1958).
2. They are organized in a structure in which each belief has a specific domain (Rokeach, 1968).
3. They are more difficult to change, the earlier they are incorporated (Munby, 1984; Pajares, 1992).

4. They are socially constructed and culturally transmitted (McAlpine, Eriks- Brophy, & Crago, 1996).
5. They are part of our interpretive ability to make sense of our social world and responding to the problems we face (Dewey, 1933).
6. They have to be inferred from statements, intentions, and actions (Pajares, 1992; Rokeach, 1968).
7. They are dynamic (Furhan, 1988; Kalaja, 1995; Woods, 1996). According to Furhan 1988, "beliefs not only change over time but maybe expressed differently in different situations."

In addition, there is a disagreement among researchers about the categorization of beliefs. The disagreement among scholars about the classification of beliefs seems to be related to the different approaches adopted: the Normative Approach (Horwitz, 1987, 1988), the Metacognitive Approach (Wenden, 1986, 1987), and the Contextual Approach (Barcelos, 2000; Wenden, 1987). Sakui and Gaies underscore that beliefs about language learning consist of 'beliefs about the nature of language, the language-learning task, likely outcomes, and learners' personal language learning strengths and limitations (1999, p. 474). However, Tanaka (1999) categorizes learner beliefs in two main dimensions:

1. Beliefs about self as a language learner, including self-efficacy, confidence, aptitude, and motivation of the learners (1999).
2. Beliefs about approaches to language learning, consisting of beliefs about analytical and empirical learning (cited in Tanaka & Ellis study, 2003, p. 65).

On the other hand, Richards and Lockhart (1996) mention eight themes on learner beliefs: the nature of English, speakers of English, the four language skills, teaching, language learning, appropriate classroom behavior, and the self.

1.1.1. Beliefs about language learning inventory (BALLI)

Recognizing the existence of beliefs about language learning and their impact on achievement and searching for the common beliefs among language learners and teachers, Horwitz (1988) developed her inventory: 'Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory' (BALLI). This inventory consists of 34 items in the following five themes: beliefs about foreign language aptitude, the difficulty of language learning, motivation and learner expectations, language learning process, and learning strategies. Beliefs about the difficulty of language learning cover issues such as the general difficulty of language learning, relative difficulty of the target language, optimism about language learning, and estimates of time it will take to learn a language. Beliefs about foreign language aptitude consist of items like child superiority, general aptitude, and personal aptitude. Beliefs about the nature of language learning include language study compared to other subjects and the degree of importance placed on vocabulary, grammar and translation. Beliefs about language learning and communication strategies focus on the importance of accent and beliefs about guessing. In contrast, motivation and expectations cover issues such as employment, promotion, perceived significance of the target language and the type of motivation the learner has, intrinsic or integrative, to learn the target language.

Given their crucial role in everything related to language learning, that is, learner experiences, language learning strategy use, learner actions as well as the outcome of the language learning process (Horwitz, 1987; Wenden, 1986), learner beliefs have been of concern to scholars and researchers since the 1980s (Altan, 2006; Cısdık, 2014), and there have been numerous studies on the subject (e.g., Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Aragao, 2011; Barcelos, 2000, 2003; Benson, 1999; Chang & Shen, 2010; Cotterall, 1999; Hall, 2011; Peacock, 1999; Riley, 1996; Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Saeb & Zamani, 2013; Suwanarak, 2013; Victori & Lockhart, 1995; Yang, 1999; Zare-Ee, 2010).

2.2. Studies on beliefs about language learning conducted in Turkey

Contemporaneous with the research carried out around the world, similar studies have been conducted in Turkey. The studies done in Turkey on the relationship between beliefs about foreign language learning and learner features are in the following categories: language learning and learners' strategy use (Kayao lu, 2013; Geyimci, 2015), language learning and learner self-efficacy (Genç, Kulu aklı, & Aydın, 2015), language learning and epistemological beliefs (Munis, 2017; Dere, 2018), language learning and gender (Akta 2001; Tercanlıo lu, 2005; Çokçalı n, 2018), language learning and major (Altan, 2006, 2012; Arıo ul, Ünal, & Onursal, 2009; Büyükyazı, 2010; İnözü, 2011), language learning and educational background (Çokçalı n, 2018; evik, Yalçın, & Bostancıo lu, 2018), language learning and learner metacognition (Öz, 2005), language learning and teachers' beliefs (Do ruer, Menevis, & Eyyam, 2010), language learning and foreign language proficiency (A .

As seen above, three studies have been conducted in Turkey on the interplay between beliefs about language learning and learner characteristics such as gender, age, and proficiency level. One of these studies, conducted at the turn-of-the 21st century by Akta (2001), investigated the relationship between prep-school learners' beliefs about language learning and their gender, major, educational background and English proficiency level, using BALLI. The researcher found no relationship between gender and beliefs about language learning; however, the study found that the female participants tended to view English as more complicated, and children had advantages in learning a foreign language. The question probing the possible relationship between the learners' major and their beliefs about language learning yielded significant differences between Social Sciences and Natural Sciences majors. Social Sciences majors saw English as difficult, and majors of Natural Sciences regarded English as medium difficulty.

Similarly, Anatolian high school and private high school graduates found English to be of medium difficulty, whereas the others considered English rather difficult. When it comes to the relationship between language proficiency and language learning beliefs, Akta (2001) results indicated a correlation between proficiency level and perceived difficulty in English. The participants with a high English proficiency level found English to be of medium difficulty, whereas the rest saw it as rather difficult.

In another paper published in the same year, Tercanlıo lu (2005) also focused on the relationship between pre-service EFL learners' gender and their language learning beliefs using the same inventory. The researcher found no relationship between gender and beliefs about language learning, lending support to A s (2001) finding. In a recent study, Çokçalı n (2018) explored high school students' beliefs about learning English as a foreign language and possible relationships between language learning beliefs, gender and success. The female and male participants had similar views on foreign language aptitude, the difficulty of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation and expectation. The students believed that everyone could learn to speak another language. In terms of the likely correlation between language learning beliefs and success, the researcher found no statistically significant relationship between beliefs about language learning and achievement/success. Yet the participants with a high level of proficiency tended to hold more positive beliefs about language learning.

As seen, not enough research has been conducted into the relationship between beliefs about language learning and learner gender, age, and proficiency level. Taken together, the results of these studies should be viewed cautiously, since their findings are not consonant with one another. Given the circumstances, this study sets out to investigate the relationship

between prep-school EFL learners' beliefs about language learning and their gender, age, and their level of proficiency in English

Research questions

This exploratory study investigates the following research questions:

1. Is there a relationship between Turkish prep school EFL learners' gender and their beliefs about language learning?
2. Is there a relationship between Turkish prep school EFL learners' age and their beliefs about language learning?
3. Is there a relationship between Turkish prep school EFL learners' level of proficiency in English and their beliefs about language learning?

2. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study aims to examine the relationship between Turkish prep-school EFL learners' language-learning beliefs and learner-related variables such as gender, age, and level of proficiency in English.

3.2. Setting and participants

The exploratory study was carried out at Anadolu University, School of Foreign Languages, with the participation of 243 prep school students in the spring semester of the 2018-2019 academic year. The data were collected from 242 participants (Male = 145, Female = 97), whose ages ranged from 17 to 40. The participants were from different majors and had different levels of English proficiency, which was ascertained through an official placement test administered at the beginning of the fall semester of 2018-2019 academic year. : A success: 10, A: 54; B: 63, C: 74, and D: 42. The participants, who had intensive English instruction for 24 to 26 hours a week, were chosen through a non-random convenience sampling technique for ease of access (Dörnyei, 2011).

We investigated the participants' beliefs on language learning using Horwitz's BALLI (1987), which is comprised of five different themes with 34 items in total. These five themes are language learning difficulty (items 3, 4, 6, 14, 24 and 28), language learning aptitude (items 1, 2, 10, 15, 22, 29, 32, 33 and 34), the nature of language learning (items 5, 8, 11, 16, 20, 25 and 26), learning and communication strategies (items 7, 9, 12, 13, 17, 18, 19 and 21) and motivations and expectations (items 23, 27, 30 and 31). The inventory was first translated into Turkish. Then three language professionals, who were unaware of the content and the purpose of the study, translated the items back into English. After the back-translation was completed, two professionals from the same field revised the items in terms of clarity, conciseness and wording. Then Cronbach's alpha of the inventory was examined for internal consistency and reliability. After making sure that Cronbach's alpha was within the acceptable range, the participants were first informed of the purpose, content and confidentiality of the study, and then they completed the inventory voluntarily. The participants marked their agreement with each statement on a Likert-type scale from '1' (strongly agree) to '5' (strongly disagree). Statistic Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26.00 was used to analyze the data. First, descriptive statistics were computed for each variable to analyze the frequency distribution of the participants' responses to each item of language learning beliefs. Then, the means, medians, and standard deviations were computed for each proficiency level. Finally, non-parametric statistical tests were run to investigate the relationship between language learning beliefs and variables such as gender,

age and proficiency level of the participants.

3.4. Data gathering and analysis procedures

The study was conducted in the spring semester of the 2018-2019 academic year. Before conducting the study, the formal procedure was followed for conducting the study, and all the necessary permissions were obtained from the administration of the school. A total of 243 students, 145 males, 94 females, from the School of Foreign Languages, were given the survey by the researcher herself and her colleagues in their class time. The students, who were informed of the purpose, content and confidentiality of the study, completed the questionnaire voluntarily during the first 15 to 20 minutes of their class time.

In this survey, the Statistic Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26.00 was used to analyze the data quantitatively. First, descriptive statistics were computed for each variable to analyze the frequency distribution of the participants' responses to each item of language learning beliefs. Then, medians, means and standard deviations were computed to examine language learning beliefs in general and for each proficiency level. In addition, non-parametric statistical tests were run to investigate the relationship between language learning beliefs and variables such as gender, age, and proficiency level of the participants.

The first research question aimed to investigate the relationship between gender and the participants' beliefs about foreign language learning. To investigate this, three tests were run: a test of normality, the Mann-Whitney U test and an independent sample of t-test. First, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test results were run because the sample sizes for both groups are greater than 35. As the data for the factors, except for BALLI (total), are not normally distributed ($p < .05$), Kolmogorov-Smirnov test should be higher than .05; the nonparametric Mann-Whitney U test was computed for all the factors on the BALLI scale, and the parametric independent samples t-test was run for BALLI.

The second research question investigated the relationship between the participants' ages and their foreign language learning beliefs. To investigate this relationship, four tests were run: a test of normality, the Kruskal-Wallis test, a test of homogeneity of variances and a one-way ANOVA. As the Sig. values of all the groups were checked, it was found that the data were not normally distributed for some factors: foreign language aptitude, motivation and learner expectation and language learning process ($p <.05$). On the other hand, the data were normal for other factors: language difficulty, learning strategy and BALLI (total) ($p < .05$). Since the variables consisted of more than two units (seven different age groups), the parametric one-way ANOVA analysis (for the normally distributed ones) and the nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis test (for non-normal data) were computed for these data sets.

The final research question investigated the relationship between learners' proficiency levels and their foreign language learning beliefs. To investigate this, four tests were run: a test of normality, the Kruskal-Wallis test, a test of homogeneity of variances, and a one-way ANOVA. As is the norm, first, the test of normality was carried out to see to what extent the three components of the survey were distributed normally across the levels. Considering the results of the test of normality by levels, it can be inferred from the data that the factors involving foreign language aptitude, motivation and learner expectations, language learning process and learning strategy were not normally distributed ($p<.05$). In other respects, the data were normal for the language difficulty factor and the entire scale (BALLI-total) ($p >.05$). For this reason, the Kruskal-Wallis test was computed for the first group, and a one-way ANOVA analysis was performed for the second group.

4. Findings

This study investigated the relationship between Turkish prep-school EFL learners' language-learning beliefs and their gender, age, and English proficiency level.

4.1. Relationship between gender and beliefs about language learning

The first research question explored the relationship between gender and the participants' beliefs about foreign language learning. In other words, this research question investigated whether the participants' beliefs about language learning change according to their gender. To explore this question, the Mann-Whitney U test was run, as seen in table 4.1.

Table 4.1. *Mann-Whitney U Test Results by Gender*

	GENDER	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	U	p
Foreign Language Aptitude	Male	145	112.07	16249.50	5664.500	.010
	Female	97	135.60	13153.50		
	Total	242				
Language Difficulty	Male	145	125.72	18229.50	6420.500	.249
	Female	97	115.19	11173.50		
	Total	242				
Motivation and Learner Expectations	Male	145	118.33	17158.50	6573.500	.384
	Female	97	126.23	12244.50		
	Total	242				
Language Learning Process	Male	145	121.28	17586.00	7001.000	.953
	Female	97	121.82	11817.00		
	Total	242				
Learning Strategy	Male	145	116.52	16895.50	6310.500	.175
	Female	97	128.94	12507.50		
	Total	242				

The results show that the participants' beliefs about foreign language aptitude differ according to their genders ($U = 5664.500$, $p<.05$). The female participants have greater foreign language aptitude ($X = 135.60$) than the males ($X = 112.07$). However, this difference is not statistically significant [(LD, $U = 6420.500$, $p>.05$), (MLE, $U = 6573.500$, $p>.05$), (LLP, $U = 7001.000$, $p>.05$), (LS, $U = 6310.500$, $p>.05$)]. Both male and female participants believed that everyone could learn a language, and some people are born with a specific ability to learn a foreign language; moreover, both groups felt neutral as to whether or not they had this specific faculty. However, both groups agreed that children could learn a language more easily than adults. Despite the lack of significant difference between the groups for these factors, the results for the language difficulty factor are in favor of the males. In other words, the male participants found English difficult. Concerning motivation, learner expectations and learning strategy use, the female participants had more motivation for and higher expectations of English and used learning strategies more than their male counterparts. For example, although both groups agreed on the importance of guessing the meaning of unknown words from context, the female participants looked more eager to employ this communication strategy and others. Both groups were inclined to equate language learning to learning grammar and vocabulary. More than half of both groups placed value on repetition and practice in language learning. The mean values for the groups (Male = 121, 3370; Female =

123, 2074) (table 4.2 below) support the results of the Mann-Whitney U test since they are not statistically significant across the groups ($p > .05$).

Table 4.2. *Independent Samples T-Test Results by Gender*

		Group Statistics			Independent Samples T-Test		
	Gender	*N*	*X*	*Sd*	*t*	*df*	*Sig.*
BALLI (total)	Male	145	121.3370	9.68684			
	Female	97	123.2074	9.96014	-1.455	240	.147
	Total	242					

4.2. Relationship between age and language learning beliefs

The second research question looked into the relationship between the participants' ages and their foreign language learning beliefs.

Table 4.3. *Kruskal-Wallis Test Results by Age*

		Foreign Language Aptitude	Motivation and Learner Expectations	Language Learning Process
AGE	N	Mean Rank	Mean Rank	Mean Rank
18	42	128.40	118.74	116.61
19	85	118.08	122.64	116.44
20	58	115.88	107.13	112.28
21	29	108.24	124.74	117.24
22	7	127.71	137.43	165.00
23	10	124.70	107.35	127.65
24	4	74.88	113.00	147.88
Total	235			

Table 4.4. *Kruskal-Wallis Test Results by Age (continued)*

	Foreign Language Aptitude	Motivation and Learner Expectations	Language Learning Process
Chi-Square	3.516	3.077	4.844
Df	6	6	6
Asymp. Sig.	.742	.799	.564

Table 4.4 presents the Kruskal-Wallis test results for foreign language aptitude, motivation, learner expectations and language learning process, which did not show normal distribution in the test of normality. The Asymp. Sig. values of these factors, which are all greater than .05, showed that the participants' beliefs about foreign language aptitude, motivation, learner expectations and language learning processes did not differ meaningfully according to their ages. Although there is no systematic decrease or increase across age groups, the mean rank values of the participants point out that the youngest participants have higher foreign language aptitude than the oldest ones. All the participants across the age groups believed that everyone could learn a language, and children are better at language learning.

Table 4.5. *Test of Homogeneity of Variances*

	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Language Difficulty	1.621	6	228	.142
Learning Strategy	.819	6	228	.556
BALLI (total)	1.767	6	228	.107

As the results of the test of homogeneity of variances show, the sig. values of the groups are greater than .05 [(LD = .142, p >.05), (LS = .556, p > .05), (BALLI (total) = .107, p > .05)]. Therefore, a one-way ANOVA analysis was performed for the groups.

Table 4.6. *One-way ANOVA Results by Age*

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Language Difficulty	Between Groups	41.294	6	6.882	.984	.437
	Within Groups	1594.901	228	6.995		
	Total	1636.195	234			
Learning Strategy	Between Groups	24.750	6	4.125	.397	.880
	Within Groups	2368.253	228	10.387		
	Total	2393.003	234			
BALLI (total)	Between Groups	672.440	6	112.073	1.164	.326
	Within Groups	21947.209	228	96.260		
	Total	22619.650	234			

The results of the one-way ANOVA also indicated no significant difference across age groups in terms of beliefs about language difficulty, learning strategy and overall understanding since the significance values are greater than .05 for all the groups [(LD, F (6,228) = .984; p = .437), (LS, F (6,228) = .397; p = .880), (BALLI (total), F (6,228) = 1.164; p = .326)]. The significance values indicate that the difference is not statistically significant, which descriptive statistics of one-way ANOVA analysis by age clarifies it.

Table 4.7. *Descriptive Statistics of One-way ANOVA Analysis by Age*

		N	X	Sd	SE	Minimum	Maximum
Language Difficulty	18	42	19.2387	2.82017	.43516	13.00	24.00
	19	85	18.8348	2.72630	.29571	13.00	27.00
	20	58	18.3518	2.37540	.31191	12.00	24.00
	21	29	18.5054	2.70259	.50186	14.00	24.11
	22	7	20.4273	3.40886	1.28843	15.00	24.00
	23	10	18.5991	2.31926	.73341	16.00	22.00
	24	4	18.9092	.25818	.12909	18.53	19.11
	Total	235	18.7858	2.64429	.17249	12.00	27.00
Learning Strategy	18	42	27.2320	3.49552	.53937	20.00	35.00
	19	85	27.3406	3.25271	.35281	19.00	36.00
	20	58	26.8582	3.02135	.39672	20.00	36.00
	21	29	26.6808	3.17475	.58954	20.00	33.00
	22	7	28.1429	4.14039	1.56492	21.00	34.00
	23	10	27.4707	2.42954	.76829	22.50	32.00

	24	4	27.8829	2.58441	1.29220	25.53	31.00
	Total	235	27.1594	3.19789	.20861	19.00	36.00
BALLI (total)	18	42	123.1431	10.43239	1.60975	100.00	143.00
	19	85	122.6392	9.78487	1.06132	103.00	149.00
	20	58	120.3135	8.82460	1.15873	97.00	138.00
	21	29	120.4274	10.79911	2.00535	93.38	135.99
	22	7	128.9718	14.22541	5.37670	104.00	146.00
	23	10	122.2772	6.92868	2.19104	107.56	135.00
	24	4	120.8517	5.54114	2.77057	113.00	125.53
	Total	235	122.0251	9.83184	.64136	93.38	149.00

The descriptive statistics show that twenty-two-year-old participants thought that learning a foreign language is difficult. Younger participants seemed more willing to use learning strategies like vocabulary guessing.

4.3. Relationship between proficiency level and language learning beliefs

The final research question investigated the relationship between learners' proficiency levels and their foreign language learning beliefs.

Table 4.8. *Kruskal-Wallis Test Results by Level*

		Foreign Language Aptitude	**Motivation and Learner Expectations**	**Language Learning Process**	**Learning Strategy**
LEVEL	N	Mean Rank	Mean Rank	Mean Rank	Mean Rank
A SUCCESS	42	113.40	121.08	144.18	128.99
A	54	114.50	115.57	122.50	119.68
B	63	112.53	120.13	119.24	125.97
C	74	134.54	132.95	115.34	121.27
D	10	165.45	91.25	92.80	85.60
Total	243				

Table 4.9. *Kruskal-Wallis Test Results by Level (continued)*

	Foreign Language Aptitude	**Motivation and Learner Expectations**	**Language Learning Process**	**Learning Strategy**
Chi-Square	8.628	4.308	6.737	3.387
Df	4	4	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	.071	.366	.150	.495

The Kruskal-Wallis test results for the factors (i.e., foreign language aptitude, motivation and learner expectations, language learning process and learning strategy) did not show normal distribution in the test of normality by levels (table 4.7). The Asymp. Sig. factors are greater than .05 for all the factors, which denotes that the participants' belief about these factors did not differ significantly according to their proficiency levels in English. The mean rank values show that the participants in the D level felt they had higher foreign language aptitude than the ones at other levels. The mean rank values of the participants for language learning

process indicate a systematic decrease from A Success to D level, underscoring the fact that awareness of the importance of grammar, vocabulary, familiarity with the target culture as well as living within the target culture seems to increase in parallel with the proficiency level. In other words, the participants in A success are more aware of these features. A success level students' awareness was also observed in language learning strategy use. The participants in A success looked more willing to communicate.

In contrast, the participants with lower levels of proficiency abstained from speaking English, for they thought that they were not competent enough in the language. An inverse relationship between proficiency level and being nervous while speaking in English was observed. That is, as the proficiency level dropped, the students' nervousness increased. All the same, this negativity did not influence the learners' enthusiasm for communicating with native speakers.

Table 4.10. *One-way ANOVA Results by Level*

		Sum of Squares	**df**	**Mean Square**	**F**	**Sig.**
Language Difficulty	Between Groups	62.618	4	15.655	2.322	.057
	Within Groups	1604.514	238	6.742		
	Total	1667.132	242			
BALLI (total)	Between Groups	338.922	4	84.731	.880	.476
	Within Groups	22904.632	238	96.238		
	Total	23243.555	242			

The results of the one-way ANOVA (table 4.8) show that there is no significant difference among levels on beliefs about language difficulty and overall understanding since the significance values for both are higher than .05 [(LD, F (4,238) = 2.322; p = .057), (BALLI (total), F (4,238) = .880; p = .476)]. Yet as the significance value of language difficulty is quite close to the optimum, descriptive statistics were needed for clarity (Table 4.9).

Table 4.11. *Descriptive Statistics of One-way ANOVA Analysis by Level*

		N	**X**	**Sd**	**SE**	**Minimum**	**Maximum**
Language Difficulty	A SUCCESS	42	18.8796	2.54087	.39206	12.00	24.00
	A	54	18.2884	2.60571	.35459	13.99	24.00
	B	63	18.3808	2.55053	.32134	13.99	24.00
	C	74	19.2453	2.43979	.28362	13.00	25.00
	D	10	20.3000	3.97352	1.25654	13.00	27.00
	Total	243	18.7887	2.62469	.16837	12.00	27.00
BALLI (total)	A SUCCESS	42	123.0453	11.69626	1.80477	97.00	149.00
	A	54	120.9110	9.35578	1.27316	100.00	141.00
	B	63	120.9081	9.75027	1.22842	93.38	146.00
	C	74	123.4415	8.77106	1.01962	104.00	145.53
	D	10	121.6000	11.28618	3.56900	107.00	143.00
	Total	243	122.0781	9.80040	.62870	93.38	149.00

As expected, the results showed a linear correlation between proficiency level and views about the difficulty of English. The participants with the lowest level of proficiency in English (D) had the highest mean value for language difficulty. They found English the most difficult; however, this observation is not statistically significant. However, this finding should be treated with caution since the relationship between level of proficiency in English and views about the difficulty of English may well not be a causal one. Overall, the results of BALLI point to the fact that the participants' levels of proficiency in English do not have a considerable impact on their language learning beliefs.

5. Discussion, Conclusions and Suggestions

5.1. Discussion and conclusions

This study investigated the relationship between Turkish prep school EFL learners' beliefs about language learning and learner features such as gender, age and English proficiency using 'Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory' (BALLI) by Horwitz (1987) to collect the data.

One of the important results of this study is that no statistically significant relationship was found between the participants' gender and their language learning beliefs. In other words, the participants' gender had no impact on their language learning beliefs. This observation supports Akta (2001), whose study indicated no relationship between gender and beliefs about language learning. This finding is also in sync with that of Çokcali an's (2018), which showed no relationship between gender and learners' language learning beliefs. However, our results have underlined subtle differences between the participants' gender and the sub-components of their language learning beliefs.

For one thing, the female participants were seen to have greater language aptitude than their male counterparts. This observation casts doubt on the already complicated issue in that it supports some earlier findings, and it contradicts others. This finding both supports and contradicts Altan's (2012) observation that a great majority of his participants (i.e., 85%) believed that they possessed a particular aptitude for foreign language learning. Nevertheless, only one-third of his participants, both male and female, thought that they had foreign language aptitude. This contradiction may result from the fact his participants were ELT majors, who might have been more conscious of language and the language learning process. The same finding also seems to contradict the findings of evik, Yalçın and Bostanc lu (2018) which show that only a minority of their participants (i.e., 18%) believed that they had foreign language aptitude. On the other hand, this finding partly confirms evik's (2013) finding, which showed that a great percentage of his participants (i.e., 81%), who were Turkish university prep school EFL learners, believed that they had foreign language aptitude.

Another finding of this study is that the female participants had higher motivation for and expectations of language learning and were eager to employ language-learning strategies more than the male students. This result is in sync with Bacon and Finnemann's (1992) findings, which showed that female participants reported a higher level of motivation and strategy use in language learning than male students.

Yet another result of this study is that no relationship was found between the participants' ages and their beliefs about foreign language aptitude, motivation and expectations, and language learning process. Although the participants' beliefs about foreign language aptitude, motivation and expectations and language learning process did not differ significantly according to their ages, the younger participants were observed to have higher language aptitude than the older ones. It seems that the younger ones found language learning easier and more interesting. Most of the previous studies support the argument that children can learn a foreign language more easily than adults can (see Akta 2001; Altan, 2006; Razı,

2009; Kaplan, 2015; Munis, 2017). Similarly, no significant relationship was found between age and components of language learning beliefs, such as language difficulty, language learning strategy, and the nature of language learning. However, a subtle difference was noticed in that the 22-year-old participants had a better comprehension of these factors, learning strategy, and the nature of language learning.

The final finding of this study is related to the relationship between the participants' proficiency levels and their language learning beliefs. As was the case with the other two learner variables, the participants' English proficiency level was found to have no statistically significant relationship with their beliefs about language learning. In other words, the learners' language learning beliefs did not differ concerning their proficiency levels. However, subtle relationships have been noticed. For one thing, language-learning aptitude seems to increase as the proficiency level increases. That is, those with a high level of proficiency think that they have high language learning aptitude. Another important observation was made regarding the participants in level C in that they were seen to have higher motivation for language learning and expectations of it. The findings of this study lent weight to Akta 's (2001) finding, which indicated the existence of a relationship between proficiency level and language learning beliefs in that the beginner level participants of her study found English difficult. The results of this study are also in line with Kayao lu's (2013) finding, which showed that poor language learners' self-efficacy beliefs about pronunciation differed from those of language learners with high English language proficiency.

Moreover, the current research results support Suwanarak's (2013) finding, which underscored the interplay between proficiency level and achievement. Similarly, a direct relationship was found between proficiency level and strategy use in that the participants with higher levels of language proficiency employed learning strategies more. As to the relationship between proficiency level and language difficulty and the nature of language learning, no statistically significant relationship was detected between these two variables. Yet there exists a subtle relationship between them in that the participants with higher levels of proficiency saw language learning as less complicated; learners with low English proficiency found language learning the most difficult.

To sum up, the subtle differences we have discerned between beliefs about language learning and learner related features such as gender, age and language proficiency level led us to conclude that the interplay between learner beliefs about language learning and learner features is dynamic, complex, and context-specific, which indicates that learner characteristics are peculiar to learners, so they demand a hands-on approach with individualized attention to the situation and timely-intervention.

5.2. Suggestions for further research

As has been underlined above, no statistically significant relationships were found between the gender, age and language proficiency levels of the participants and their beliefs about language learning. However, it is virtually impossible to generalize these findings due to the relatively small sample size of the study. Therefore, more comprehensive research with more prep school students having intensive language instruction in different parts of Turkey is needed to verify and generalize the findings. Besides, the relationship between language learning background and language learning beliefs could be investigated. Another venue for further research could be investigating students having intensive language training in state universities and private universities and their language learning beliefs. More importantly, the data of this study, as mentioned before, were collected through a questionnaire. Questionnaires consisting of closed items, according to Sakui and Gaies (1999), allow respondents only to state their beliefs included in the questionnaire, which is, in some ways,

restrictive. Studies with well-conducted interviews would give participants more freedom and, in turn, allow them to reveal the beliefs which are not addressed in the questionnaire.

5.3. Pedagogical and theoretical implications of the study

Despite being unable to identify a statistically significant relationship between the participants' gender, age and language proficiency level and their language learning beliefs, the findings of the study, considered in the light of the results of previous research, have underlined that the interplay between learner-related features and beliefs about language learning is very dynamic, complex, context-sensitive and multi-faceted. The findings have also highlighted the importance of the impact of these learner-related features and learner beliefs about language learning and their components. Given the significance of this relationship, Turkish prep school EFL learners' consciousness on the importance of these and other learner-related features and their impact on learner beliefs about language learning should be raised to help them navigate through the language learning process, a process which is oftentimes challenging. A similar consciousness-raising training could be given to policymakers, administrators, materials designers, parents, and foreign language teachers, the latter being particularly important because of their roles in guiding students.

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