

LEARNER BELIEFS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING: A STUDY ON THE EFFECTS OF CONTEXT IN LEARNERS' PERCEPTION

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Abstract

Learner beliefs can be defined as the perception of people towards the learning situation that they are in, and it is also believed that those learner beliefs affect the actual performance of the people in the area that the learning takes place. In the scope of this research, the learner beliefs of six Turkish participants are evaluated, towards learning English as a foreign language. The learning context is taken as a determinant which affects the learner beliefs, which can be described as the outer learning environment and the other people around while the learning takes place. Current research investigates the learners' beliefs about the influence of learning context in English language learning and the way the learners evaluate their own competence/performance in the foreign language in different learning contexts. As a part of the study, six learning contexts are taken as learning in the class environment, learning with private tutoring, learning alone, learning together with peers, learning in a mixed-level class environment and learning abroad among the native speakers. The interviews are conducted with six participants learning English in six different learning contexts. The answers that the participants give to the interview questions are analyzed via coding, narrative analysis and thematic analysis methods. It is found out that the learner beliefs of the individuals vary according to different outer conditions of the learning environment. People also evaluate their own competence and performance in the language differently according to different learning contexts.

Keywords: Learner beliefs, learning context, perception towards learning, outer conditions, thematic analysis.

Introduction

As it has been the situation for every learning process, the language learners develop certain mind sets, beliefs and perceptual cues for themselves, which either facilitate or complicate their language learning process, and which also determine the optimum conditions for them to learn any language (Koichi & Ellis, 2014). These beliefs can be identified as the individual differences in the style of language learning, which are formed as a result of the genetic traits, inner personality, upbringing styles and outer environmental conditions, and which also dynamically update themselves according to the rapidly evolving conditions (Matsumoto et. al., 2013). There are different beliefs about how a foreign language can be learnt. For instance, some individuals believe that they will learn the language better in its natural environment, which are the countries that the language is spoken as the native language. However, on the other hand, some believe that learning a language abroad will be so stressful for them and the language can best be learned in one's own country, together with the people who are also new learners of the language. Similarly, some believe that learning a language more depends on a natural tendency that comes at birth, and if you do not have that natural tendency it is not possible for you to be a perfect learner and speaker of that language. Oppositely, others believe that learning a language depends on your ambition, determination and on the effort that you spent. Some people focus on learning a language theoretically, by emphasizing the usage of grammar, vocabulary, etc. while the others believe focusing more on the practical usage of the language such as listening others and speaking. At that point, it would be appropriate to say that more specific beliefs also exist, such as women are better at language learning, or language can only be learned in the early ages of childhood, etc. (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

Literature Review

It is worth consideration that the attitudes, perceptions and beliefs about language learning are highly affected from the context, which means the presence of the other people around us and the effect of the

outer environment (Ellis, 2015). We always choose other people as our reference points and evaluate our own performance by making comparisons with them. In other words, we compete with the people around us at all times, either intentionally or unintentionally. This fact makes the context as one of the most important determinants of the learner beliefs (Ellis, 2015). If we analyze this situation in further details, the fact that some people prefer to learn the foreign language in its native country while others prefer to learn it in their home country together with a group of new learners or alone are highly related to the effect of the actual or the implied presence of other people around us, while we are learning the language. It can also be used to explain why some people communicate with the native speakers of that language when they are abroad, while some prefer to stay together with the other people from the same country, and just to communicate with them with their own native language, using the foreign language in minimum amounts as it is possible, even if they are in a foreign country (Koichi & Ellis, 2014).

Some research studies focused on the relation between the beliefs about learning a language and the success of learning and proficiency in that language (Hosseini&Pourmandnia, 2013). Several researches have also focused on the way the learner beliefs are formed and evolved over time (Koichi & Ellis, 2014). However, there exists very limited study on the effect of the other people around us and the effect of the outer environment in language learning. Therefore, in this investigation, learner beliefs were studied in relation to the context that the learners are surrounded with.

Language learning in different contexts

As it has also been stated above, attitudes, perception and behaviors of the individuals towards any learning process are being affected from the individual differences, perspectives, worldviews, priorities, and also from the outer conditions such as the environment or the context that the language is being taught (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Even though we may claim that the attitudes and the associated behaviors that are formed during a learning process are heavily related to individual differences, the context where the learning takes place also has a huge effect. For instance, learning the language in a foreign country among the native speakers or learning it in a course among the new learners, even learning with people who are at a higher level than you or that are at a lower level affects the learning process. Furthermore, learning the language alone or learning it by the help of a teacher in a one-to-one course also makes a difference (Ellis, 2015).

It is true that the main factor which creates the biggest difference between different contexts is the actual and implied presence of the others. People have a tendency to compare themselves with the rest of the society, especially with the ones that are in the close surrounding or with the ones that they feel they belong to. At that point, the social facilitation and social loafing theories come into the play, which we will mention in further details in the remaining parts of this study. However, at that point, it is worth mentioning that a biggest portion of any learning process is related to the psychological factors, and the human psychology and social pressure may be used in a way of creating new techniques that promotes or facilitates learning (Hosseini&Pourmandnia, 2013). In the scope of this study, different contexts that the language learning process will be observed will be determined according to the level of social pressure that is being exerted in these contexts. An abroad country where the people around are the native speakers of the language, a language course with classmates at a higher level, a language course with classmates at a lower level, and learning alone in a one-to-one course may be taken as examples of our different learning environments.

Participants

The participants of the research are six college students from different universities who are in the preparatory year of their education. Their age varies between 17 and 21. Three of the participants are female, and three of the participants are male. They are all Turkish and the foreign language that they are learning is English. All of the students' universities have English as the main language of the

education. Since they are all at the preparatory program in their own college, they had approximately similar level of English proficiency before they start the preparatory program.

Table 1. The Participants

Participant 1	Preparatory program in classroom setting
Participant 2	Preparatory program in classroom setting & One-to-one tutoring with teacher
Participant 3	Preparatory program in classroom setting & Peer study group
Participant 4	Preparatory program in classroom setting & Studies alone
Participant 5	Preparatory program in mixed-level classroom setting
Participant 6	Studies abroad in a language school

Methods of Data Collection & Analysis

it is possible to claim that the standardized open ended interview appears as the most suitable type of interview for our case (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2008). Our current study highly depends of the exact usage, and even exact order of the words that appear in the context of the interview questions, since we are adopting the strategy of active meaning making from what has been said as an answer. Therefore, in order to ensure the validity and the reliability of our research, the questions have to be repeated in a standardized format, exactly in the same way for every participant. Moreover, while we intent to be strict in our question format, we desire flexibility in the answers that we expect to get from the participants. The uncertain human behavior, preferences and the modes and intentions that are instantaneously determined according to the factors in the outer world are hard to exactly foresee at the time that the interview questions will be prepared, and the course of the interview would probably be determined according to the answers of the participants in a dynamic and interactive manner (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). However, it is worth notation that even though the follow-up questions and some small details would probably differ, the main interview questions have to be identical for each participant, in order to get accurate, unbiased and reliable results (Turner, 2010).

The Interview Questions

The interview questions are grouped under three different sections. In the first section, there exist questions about the participant demographics. In the second section, explicit questions are asked about the preferences of the participants related to the different learning contexts (measuring Research Question 1). In these questions, some clues are given to the respondents about different possible learning contexts, for them to remember or to be aware of the different contexts. In the third section, the learner beliefs are measured implicitly, under four categories, which are learner autonomy, role and effect of English in the world, attitudes towards the learning process of English, and the self-competence in English learning (Meiers & Buckley, 2010). The questions related to the learner autonomy, role and effect of English in the world and attitudes towards the learning process of English measures learners' beliefs about the influence of different learning contexts (measuring Research Question 1), while the self-competence question measures the learners' beliefs about their own language performance (measuring Research Question 2). Certain follow-up questions are asked to the participants whenever it is necessary for them to give a further detailed answer. The interview questions can be found below.

Section 1: Demographic Information

1. How old are you?
2. Do you have any siblings?
3. What is our major area of college study?
4. What is your native language?
5. What is the nationality of your mother and father?
6. For how long have you been learning English?
7. Have you ever been in an English-speaking foreign country? If yes, for what purpose and for how long?

Section 2: Explicit measures

1. There may be different ways that English is learned, such as learning in a classroom setting, learning by private tutoring, learning together with peers while studying in groups with your friends, learning alone at home from online sources or from books, and learning the language abroad, in an English speaking country. According to you, which one of these learning contexts would be more effective? Which one would you prefer?

2. In some classrooms, the students who are at the same English level are grouped together, while in some others students with different English proficiency levels are grouped together to learn the English, which are called mixed-level classroom settings. According to you, which one of these classroom designs would be better?

Section 3: Implicit measures

Learner autonomy:

Would you spend individual effort to learn and speak English? What would you do?

Role of English in the world

What do you think about English, as a language? Do you think it is essential to know English in today's world? What do you think the benefits are?

Attitudes towards learning English:

What do you think about learning English? How can you describe your own learning experiences?

Self-competence

What do you think about your own performance in English? Do you feel yourself competent enough?

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Findings are needed to be discussed under two research questions. The summary of the results can be found in the table below.

Research Question 1: What are the learners' beliefs about the influence of learning context in English language learning?

Related Interview Questions:

Section 2: Explicit measures

1. There may be different ways that English is learned, such as learning in a classroom setting, learning by private tutoring, learning together with peers while studying in groups with your friends, learning alone at home from online sources or from books, and learning the language abroad, in an English speaking country. According to you, which one of these learning contexts would be more effective? Which one would you prefer?

2. In some classrooms, the students who are at the same English level are grouped together, while in some others students with different English proficiency levels are grouped together to learn

the English, which are called mixed-level classroom settings. According to you, which one of these classroom designs would be better?

Inferences:

- The participants believe that learning language abroad, among the native speakers is the most effective method. However they believe that this method is effective only if the learner is alone in the abroad, with no native friend, and has no other choice than to communicate in the foreign language.
- The majority of the participants believe learning the language together with a peer study group is more effective than learning the language alone.
- Participants also prefer classroom learning over private tutoring. The ones who claim perceive the private tutoring as more effective are the ones who think that individualized attention cannot be shown in a classroom setting.
- Participants underestimate the positive effect of mixed-level language classrooms on language learning, unless they experience mixed-level classrooms.
- Participants are well aware of the fact that communicative language skills, such as speaking and listening are more important than the technical language skills, which are grammar, vocabulary, etc.
- Participants misinterpret or underestimate the effectiveness of the learning contexts that they haven't been experienced. It is interesting that none of the participants are really unhappy or have negative learner beliefs towards their own learning context. At that point, it can be said that every learning context has a positive or an advantageous point that may only be realized if it is experienced and perceived appropriately.

Interview Questions:

Section 3: Implicit measures

Learner autonomy:

Would you spend individual effort to learn and speak English? What would you do?

Role of English in the world

What do you think about English, as a language? Do you think it is essential to know English in today's world? What do you think the benefits are?

Attitudes towards learning English:

What do you think about learning English? How can you describe your own learning experiences?

Inferences:

- The most effective way of learning the language is perceived as learning it abroad among the native speakers. At that point, the participants who learn English abroad better perceive English as an important language worldwide and have more positive attitudes towards English learning process. They also have higher language autonomy. However, the learning anxiety constitutes a threat for the learners to learn the language effectively in abroad. The main reason which makes abroad the most suitable context for language learning is the opportunity to interact and communicate with the native speakers. At that point, when learners feel nervous and hesitate to join into the conversation with the native speakers and if they avoid actively using the

language, they cannot benefit from the communicative environment of the English-speaking foreign countries.

- Learners feel less stressful and less bored among their peer study groups than they feel in a formal classroom setting, so they perceive peer study groups as more effective learning contexts.
- Learners underestimate the effects of mixed-level classrooms settings and they anticipate that they would feel anxious while learning English among the ones who are at a higher language level than their level. However, the ones who have experienced mixed-level classrooms are aware of the fact that that this gap in the language levels actually promotes learners to perform better in the language learning process.
- In alone and private tutoring learning contexts, the technical skills of the language have learned successfully, but these contexts remain insufficient in terms of improving the communicative language skills.

Research Question 2: How do the learners evaluate their own competence/performance in the foreign language in different learning contexts?

Interview Question:

Self-competence

What do you think about your own performance in English? Do you feel yourself competent enough?

Inferences:

- Participants in class context, in private tutoring and in peer study group evaluate their own performance as positive, while the participants in alone, mixed-level classroom and abroad contexts evaluate their own performance as negative.
- The main reason that the participant in the alone condition feels as 'Insufficient in language' may be the fact that their communicative skills are not developed sufficiently, since they are not in an intense communication and interaction with the active speakers.
- The fact that the participant in mixed-level classroom context and the participant in abroad context evaluate themselves as 'Limited by language' may be explained by the encountered learning anxiety that is felt while communicating with the people that are better at the foreign language.
- At that point, it is worth notation that even if the mixed-level classroom and abroad contexts evaluate their own language performance negatively, these two contexts are regarded as effective learning environments, since it is expected from learners to become more motivated to improve their performance in such learning contexts.

CONCLUSION & SUGGESTIONS

Conclusion

As the conclusions of the study, it is found out that the learning context is effective while shaping the learner beliefs and while making the learners comment on their own performance. At that point, it can also be said that the learning anxiety is also effective, which can be explained by how confident, comfortable and secure the learners feel. The results of the study sheds light to the fact that the learning context is effective while individuals are forming their learner beliefs; and these learner beliefs also affect the way the actual learning performance is evaluated (Zheng&Boug, 2013). However, at that point, it is also realized that different learning contexts are not being effective by actually how they are, but by how they are being perceived by the individuals that are present in them, as it can be understood from the fact that people develop positive learner beliefs when they feel

themselves secure, relaxed and competent, while they develop negative learner beliefs when they feel themselves insecure, nervous and insufficient (Lambert & Robinson, 2014).

Points for Further Improvement

During the current research, the perceptions towards learner beliefs and the learner belief processes have been analyzed carefully. However, during these analyses, the 'language' is not emphasized as the area about which the learner beliefs are analyzed. Actually, the language is a very special area, as it is been stated in the studies of Chomsky (Ashcraft & Radvansky, 2014) which declares language as the set of symbols and signs which are constructed naturally, without reinforcement, as the proof that the inner mental processes really exists. Piaget and Vygotsky have also referred to the language, Piaget by taking the language as the reflection of action, while Vygotsky by taking the language the driver of action. Moreover, Vygotsky emphasizes that the language learning is a form of social and cultural interaction, and improves by active participation (Smith & Hart, 2011). All these studies have shown that there exists a special relationship between 'language' learning and the outer context, which is further different from the relationship between context and other learning types. Therefore, that special effect of the language as the driver of thought and perception, in the socio-interactive context should further be analyzed deeply in the future studies. Moreover, in the current study just the perception of the learner beliefs in different learning contexts, and the perception of the participants of their own performance are measured. At that point, even though the expectations are stated, the actual language performance is not measured. Therefore, for the future studies it would be appropriate to include the actual language performance into the analyses.

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