



Exploring the Language Learning Beliefs of Tunisian Pre-service Primary School Teachers

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ABSTRACT

The present study was exploratory in nature and its aim was threefold. First, it probed the language learning beliefs of Tunisian pre-service primary school teachers. Second, it sought to examine if those language learning beliefs would determine and shape the pre-service teachers' future teaching practices. Third, it investigated the impact of gender on the language learning beliefs. Data was collected through a questionnaire consisting of 15 Likert scale statements. The participants were (N=224, 98 males and 126 females) Tunisian Pre-service primary school teachers enrolled on the Sciences of Education Course at the Higher Institute of Humanities in Zaghouan. To probe the participants' language learning beliefs, descriptive statistics and a Principal Component Analysis were used. To examine the effect of language learning beliefs on future teaching practices, a Pearson's Correlation Test was used. To examine the effect of gender on the language learning belief, an Independent Samples t Test was used. The findings of the study showed that most pre-service Tunisian primary school teachers value and like English. Most of them approve of the use of Arabic to explain new vocabulary in an English class. However, they are of the view that it wrong to use Arabic to explain grammar points. Most of the pre-service teachers favor immediate error correction in an English class. The study showed that the language learning beliefs held by pre-service teachers would, to a large degree, determine and shape their future teaching practices. The study did not find any statistically significant differences between males and females in their language learning beliefs.

INTRODUCTION

The cognitive revolution has shaped the orientation of teacher education research. Richardson (2003) points out that teacher education research has become highly cognitive in focus. Interest in what goes on in the mind of the pre-service teacher has brought the construct of learning beliefs to the fore. In Tunisia, the requirements of globalization and the emergence of English as a lingua franca have made it necessary for the Tunisian Ministry of Education to start teaching English at primary schools. Current pre-service Tunisian primary school teachers will be teaching English. Therefore, it is essential to carry out exploratory studies to probe their language learning beliefs. In the Tunisian context, the dearth of research into this

area can be explained by the fact that the degree in Sciences of Education was reinstated only in 2016.

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1/ What are the language learning beliefs held by Tunisian pre-service primary school teachers?
- 2/ Do the pre-service teachers' language learning beliefs shape their future teaching practices?
- 3/ What are the basic dimensions of the pre-service teachers' language learning beliefs?
- 4/ Do male and female pre-service teachers differ in their language learning beliefs?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Defining Language learning beliefs

The multidimensional and complex nature of learning beliefs has made it difficult to unanimously agree on a definition. Williams and Burden (1997) stress that learning beliefs are hard to define and evaluate. This would explain why various definitions were put forward in the literature. Wenden (1991) states that, as a construct, language learning beliefs (LLB) encompass the knowledge held by language learners about the various factors that come into play when learning a foreign language. Bayna and Cheng (1997) define learning beliefs as the set of opinions the learner holds about language learning. Bernat and Gvozdenko (2005, p. 2) state that beliefs about language learning can be regarded as a component of metacognitive knowledge that encompasses all what individuals understand about themselves as learners and thinkers, including their goals and needs. Bernat and Gvozdenko (2005, p. 2) explain that language learning beliefs is a concept that applies to how the learner sees the process of learning a foreign language, its challenges, the success of different learning strategies, the existence of aptitude, their own expectations about achievement, and teaching methodologies.

Kalaja (2015, p. 9) defines language learning beliefs as a set of opinions or ideas about aspects of second language learning (SLL) held by learners. She explains that language learning beliefs originate from the personal experiences of learners and from the opinions of others around them. From the aforementioned definitions, one can conclude that language learning beliefs encompass all the thoughts held by the learner as to the nature of the task of learning a foreign language, the role of the learner, the role of the teacher and the level of command that should and could be achieved

The formation of language learning beliefs

There are two main approaches to understanding how language learning beliefs are formed, the psychological and socio-cultural approach on one hand, and the cognitive psychological perspective on the other hand (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005). The socio-cultural approach is premised upon the idea that language learning beliefs are co constructed, appropriated and mediated through social transactions. Therefore, the role of interaction with the others is of vital importance. Language learning beliefs are the outcome of the individual's participation in interaction with the others and therefore they are likely to change (Gabillion, 2005, p. 248). The socio-cultural dimension of language learners' beliefs has gained further recognition recently (Zhong, 2015). Alhamami (2020) states that language learners' beliefs are impacted by the beliefs of those around them. He explains that family, teachers and classmates play a pivotal role in the formation of those beliefs. Conversely, the cognitivist approach is based on the idea that language learning beliefs are internal autonomous stable acts that occur in the mind of the person (Gabillion, 2005, p. 249).

Bernat and Gvozdenko (2005, p. 2) explain that, in cognitive psychology, language learner beliefs are part of the underlying mechanisms of metacognition. However, one must reiterate that, in spite of the growing body of research, opinion is still divided on the way language learning beliefs are formed and the way they develop. Early studies report stability in language learning beliefs, while more recent ones provide evidence of change (Zhong, 2015, p. 44). Researchers used to deal with the construct as a static trait that is not subject to change. The recent view is based on the idea that it evolves and changes as the learning experience goes along. Zhong (2015, p. 44) attributes the controversial aspect of the construct to the dearth of research on the nature of language learning beliefs. He explains that researchers' understanding of the construct is unbalanced; it either highlights the stable or the dynamic nature. The dual nature of the construct of language learning beliefs has emerged as a potential reconciliation. Some language learning beliefs are regarded as stable while others are dynamic. Birello (2012) clarifies that the core language learning beliefs remain unchanged, in contrast to the peripheral ones that are evolutionary. Birello (2012, p. 90) adds that the learner is usually less committed to the peripheral ones and can adapt them if they clash with core ones. However, one must reiterate that the distinction has not enjoyed total consensus among researchers and therefore there is a critical need for more research into this particular area (Birello, 2012).

The need to investigate the language learning beliefs of future teachers

Teaching effectively is conditional on establishing common ground with the learner. Clash between the learning beliefs of the teacher and those of the learner can hinder the learning process (Erkmen, 2014). Improving the quality of teaching and training in the Tunisian context is conditional on understanding the way prospective teachers see and approach the task of learning. Teachers' learning beliefs are important for understanding and improving education processes (Xu, 2012). Altan (2006) warns against the shortage of research that investigates the learning beliefs of prospective foreign language teachers. Erkmen (2014, p. 100) states that probing the learning beliefs and learning strategies of future teachers has become a necessity. He explains that those variables are critical for understanding how the prospective teacher will approach the task of teaching.

One can argue that, to some degree, the literature has overlooked the fact that future language teachers are language learners in the first place. Gonçalves, Azevedo, and Alves (2013, p. 66) warn that discussions about teaching and learning are usually centered on methods and technical approaches, but the meaning of teaching and its relationship with learning is rarely problematized. Gonçalves et al. (2013, p. 54) highlight that globalization and the diversification of learning contexts call for more research on teachers' professional identity. As far as the Tunisian context is concerned, one must reiterate that there is a dearth of research into this area. Therefore, there is a critical need for studies on the cognition of prospective teachers of English (Hermassi, 2016). One must stress that some pedagogical problems identified in the Tunisian context can be attributed to misleading language learning beliefs held by some EFL teachers (Derbel, 2001; Hermassi, 2016). Learning beliefs are context specific and therefore it is not possible to generalize the findings of studies carried out in Asia and Europe to the Tunisian context. Li (2004, p. 28) stresses the socio-cultural dimension of learning beliefs and therefore he calls for more research in different contexts.

Exploring the learning beliefs of future Tunisian teachers will help us anticipate their future teaching styles and practices. Richards and Lockhart (1996) highlight that teachers' beliefs influence how they make decisions or act in the classroom. Pjares (1992) states that teachers'

beliefs are central to determining their actual behaviour towards students. He explains that the teacher's learning beliefs have a greater influence than their knowledge. In other words, the teacher's learning beliefs shape the way they plan the lessons, and they also shape their general classroom practices. Altan (2006, p. 51) states that teacher educators cannot afford to ignore their students' learning beliefs if they would like them to be open to particular teaching methods and to receive the maximum benefit from them. In a similar vein, Richardson, (2003) states that teacher education programs must get teacher candidates to identify their learning beliefs in relation to classroom action.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants who took part in the present study were 224 students training to qualify as primary school teachers. They were selected through a convenience sampling process. They were students at the Higher Institute of Humanities in Zaghoan. They were enrolled on a degree course called Educational Sciences. They finished high school and are studying for three years to get a degree that will allow them to be officially recruited as primary school teachers. The students come from two main backgrounds. At high school, they either specialized in science subjects, or literary subjects. On the sciences of education programme, students take the following modules: Languages (Arabic, French, and English), science subjects, arts (music and painting), human rights, and psychology.

Instrument

Data was collected through a questionnaire that was distributed face-to-face and filled in on the spot. The questionnaire consisted of 15 items. Each item was incorporated with five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The questionnaire was based on the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) questionnaire developed by Horwitz (1987). I had recourse to the BALLI as it is highly valid and reliable. Nikitina and Furuono (2006, p. 213) state that the BALLI is a highly valid and reliable tool for research on language learning beliefs. They add that it was used in various socio-linguistic settings, and with learners of various foreign languages. However, it is worth noting that I added some items with the aim of exploring the students' opinions about the use of the L1 and error correction in English classes.

RESULTS

To answer the first research question (RQ 1: What are the language learning beliefs held by Tunisian pre-service primary school teachers?), I had recourse to the students' responses to the questionnaires items. More precisely, I focused on the percentage of students selecting each alternative, as presented in table1.

Table 1. Percentage of students selecting each alternative

Statements	SA	A	N	D	SD
1/ I like English	36.6	39.3	8.9	10.7	4.5
2/ I like French	32.1	39.3	17	6.3	5.4
3/ English is an easy language	17	42	26.8	12.5	1.8
4/ English is easier than French	30.4	31.3	13.4	20.5	4.5
5/ Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of translating.	8	34.8	16.1	33.9	7.1
6/Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary items.	30.4	52.7	8.9	7.1	0.9
7/Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules.	22.3	50	11.6	13.4	2.7
8/We learn a foreign language through repetition	30.4	47.3	11.6	8.9	1.8
9/We learn a foreign language through making associations	22.3	42.9	24.1	8	1.8
10/In an English class, the teacher should explain the new vocabulary items in Arabic	17	29.5	15.2	28.6	9.8
11/ In an English class, the teacher should explain the new grammar points in Arabic	9.8	7.1	17.9	40.2	25
12/When a learner makes an oral mistake, the teacher should correct him/her immediately.	25.9	27.7	16.1	27.7	12.5
13/In my English classes, I will use Arabic to explain English words to my pupils.	13.4	30.4	16.1	27.7	12.5
14/In my English classes, I will use Arabic to explain English grammar to my pupils	9.8	25	8.9	36.6	19.6
15/ In my English classes, I will immediately correct my learners' oral mistakes.	28.6	27.7	14.3	23.2	6.3

SA: strongly agree; A: agree; N: neutral; D: disagree; SD: strongly disagree

Although there is consensus of opinion on some statements of the questionnaire, opinion was divided on others. The vast majority of the respondents state that they like English and French. With regard to the degree of difficulty, they see English easy to learn, and easier than French. The thumping majority of the respondents place great importance on vocabulary and grammar. They also attach great importance to the role of repetition and making associations in the learning process. For instance, 30.4 % strongly agreed and 52.7 % agreed with the statements *Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary items*. The importance of grammar is also clearly illustrated as more than 70% of the respondents expressed their agreements with the statements *Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules*. There is also agreement on the importance of immediate error correction. More than half of the respondents agreed with the statement *When a learner makes an oral mistake, the teacher should correct him/her immediately*. The majority of the respondents are against the use of Arabic to explain a grammar point in an English class. More than 60% of the respondents expressed their disagreement with the statement *In an English class, the teacher should explain the new grammar points in Arabic*. However, one must highlight that opinion is divided on the use of Arabic in explaining new English vocabulary. As for the statement *In an English class, the teacher should explain the new vocabulary items in Arabic*, 46.5 % expressed their agreement, whereas 38.4 % expressed their disagreement. With regard to the importance of translation in

the learning process, opinion was also divided. Nearly 43% agreed with the statement *Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of translating*, whereas 41% expressed their disagreement.

To answer the second research question (RQ2: Do pre-service teachers' language learning beliefs shape their future teaching practices?), I ran three inter item correlations. I ran a Pearson correlation test between statement 12 "*When a learner makes an oral mistake, the teacher should correct him/her immediately*" and statement 15 "*In my English classes, I will immediately correct my learners' oral mistakes*". I ran a Pearson correlation test between statement 10 "*In an English class, the teacher should explain the new vocabulary items in Arabic*" and statement 13 "*In my English classes, I will use Arabic to explain English words to my pupils*". I ran a Pearson correlation test between statement 11 "*In an English class, the teacher should explain the new grammar points in Arabic*" and statement 14 "*In my English classes, I will use Arabic to explain English grammar to my pupils*". In the table below, S stands for the word statement.

Table 2. Inter item correlations

Statements	S10	S11	S12	S13	S14	S15
S10	1					
S11	.467**	1				
S12	.108	-.018	1			
S13	.800**	.442**	.081	1		
S14	.496**	.667**	.036	.613**	1	
S15	.085	-.001	.840**	.058	.017	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

For a Pearson correlation, Dorney (2001, p. 224) states that the coefficient is meaningful and indicative of the existence of a relationship between variables when it ranges between 0.30 and 0.50. As shown in table2, the three coefficients are high. S 10 and S 13 are significantly correlated with a high coefficient ($p < .01$, $r = .80$). Therefore, one can conclude that pre-service teachers who are of the view that in an English class the teacher should explain the new vocabulary items in Arabic will themselves use Arabic to explain new words in their English classes. S11 and S14 are significantly correlated with a high coefficient ($p < .01$, $r = .66$). We can conclude that pre-service teachers who think that the teacher should explain English grammar points in Arabic will themselves use Arabic when explaining grammar points in their English classes. S12 and S 15 are significantly correlated with a high coefficient ($p < .01$, $r = .84$). Therefore, one can conclude that pre-service teachers who think that errors must be corrected immediately will correct their pupils' errors immediately.

To answer the third research question (RQ3: What are the basic dimensions of the pre-service teachers' language learning beliefs?), I ran a principal component analysis. Mooi, Sarstedt, and Recí (2018, p. 275) define (PCA) as a process that helps reduce large numbers of variables to only several components for the purpose of getting a clearer idea about the various relationships and correlations that might exist between the variables. I opted for it as it is the most commonly used procedure in SPSS, and it is exploratory by nature. To determine the number of principal components that can be retained for the analysis, I relied on three main criteria, the Eigen value criterion (>1.00), the total variance explained and the Cattell's scree. The four principal components accounted for 59.54 % of the total variance. Mooi et al. (2018, p. 276) explain that there is no commonly agreed threshold for a variable's communality. However, they state that the extracted factors should account for approximately 50% of a variable's variance. The Kaiser-

Meyer-Olkin (KMO) index of Sampling Adequacy has the value 0.655. It can be adjudged acceptable and mediocre as long as it is higher than 0.5. The Bartlett's test of Sphericity is significant at level $p < .05$. In order to interpret the principal components, I labelled each one of them on the basis of the variables that load the highest. I also had recourse to theory and the findings of previous research.

Table 3. Varimax rotated principal component matrix of the language learning beliefs

Items	Loadings			
	1	2	3	4
5/ Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of translating.	.501			
10/In an English class, the teacher should explain the new vocabulary items in Arabic	.780			
11/ In an English class, the teacher should explain the new grammar points in Arabic	.721			
13/In my English classes, I will use Arabic to explain English words to my pupils.	.855			
14/In my English classes, I will use Arabic to explain English grammar to my pupils	.830			
1/ I like English		.835		
3/ English is an easy language		.848		
4/ English is easier than French		.794		
12/When a learner makes an oral mistake, the teacher should correct him/her immediately.			.904	
15/ In my English classes, I will immediately correct my learners' oral mistakes.			.879	
6/Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary items.				.718
7/Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules.				.669

On principal component 1, statement 13 *In my English classes, I will use Arabic to explain English words to my pupils* and statement 14 *In my English classes, I will use Arabic to explain English grammar to my pupils* load the highest. Therefore, this component will be called 'Use of the L1' (Total variance explained: 19.46 %). In the Tunisian context, the use of Arabic in English classes is quite common. A lot of students find it comforting and it draws them in (Bach Baoueb & Toumi, 2012). On principal component 2, statement 1 *I like English* and statement 3 *English is an easy language* load the highest. Therefore, this component will be called 'English is easy and I like it' (Total variance explained: 15.18 %). Walters (1999) states that Tunisia students see English a language easy to learn and are often actively interested in learning it.

On principal component 3, statement 12 *When a learner makes an oral mistake, the teacher should correct him/her immediately* and statement 15 *In my English classes, I will immediately correct my learners' oral mistakes* load the highest. Therefore, this component will be called 'Immediate error correction' (Total variance explained: 14.53 %). In the Tunisian context, Teaching is still

driven by a structural view of language, with a greater focus on correctness as opposed to appropriateness and fluency (Daoud, 2019, p. 187). This would explain why most language teachers at all levels are in favour of immediate error correction. One can argue that the respondents grew accustomed to this practice during all their years of schooling and therefore they consider it the best option.

On principal component 4, statement 6 *Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary items* and statement 7 *Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules* load the highest. Therefore, this component will be called 'Importance of vocabulary and grammar' (Total variance explained: 10.35 %). In the Tunisian context, the scope of English teaching is limited to practising grammar and vocabulary (Daouad, 2019). This would explain why the respondents see vocabulary and grammar as the core aspects in the learning process.

Table 4. Descriptives of subscales of the language learning beliefs

Subscale	Number of items	Mean	SD	Alpha
Use of the L1	5	2.85	1.24	.81
English is easy and I like it	3	3.71	1.11	.80
Immediate error correction	2	3.70	1.21	.91
Importance of vocabulary and grammar	2	3.89	0.95	.64

Out of four means, three can be adjudged high as they were higher than 3.5. The one that was not high falls into the medium usage level as it was superior to 2.5. On a scale from 1 to 5, Oxford (1990, p. 291) categorizes a score from 3.5 to 5 as high, a score from 2.5 to 3 as medium and a score from 1 to 2 as low. Out of the four Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients, three can be adjudged very good as they were greater than 0.8. The one that was not very high can be regarded as acceptable (Hulin, Netemeyer, & Cudeck, 2001).

To answer the fourth research (RQ4: Do male and female pre-service teachers differ in their language learning beliefs), I ran an independent samples *t test* on the four components. All the Levene's tests have a significance level far higher than 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis was accepted and equal variances *t-test* was used. As shown in table 5, all the *t test* results have *p* values far higher than .05. Therefore, one can conclude that there are no statistically significant differences between males and females in their language learning beliefs.

Table 5. T test results

Components	Male (n=98)		Female (n=126)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Use of the L1	-.02	.89	.00	1.02	-.16	.87
English is easy and I like it	-.16	.98	.03	1.00	-1.10	.27
Immediate error correction	.05	.89	-.01	1.02	.38	.70
Importance of vocabulary and grammar	.21	.83	-.04	1.02	1.45	.14

DISCUSSION

The study showed that the vast majority of the pre-service teachers value English and like it. This observation is well documented in the literature (Bahloul 2001; Daoud 2016; Walters, 1999). Most of the respondents are not comfortable with the use of Arabic in explaining English grammar points. However, with regard to the use of Arabic in explaining English vocabulary and using translation as a learning strategy, opinion was divided. This conclusion corroborates the findings of previous studies. Ishler (2010) points out that the use of translation as a learning strategy is controversial in the Tunisian context. Although the use of Tunisian Arabic is quite common in EFL classes, most teachers would not acknowledge it (Bach Baouab & Toumi, 2012). The vast majority of Tunisian pre-service place great importance on grammar and vocabulary. They are also of the view that, in a language class, errors must be corrected immediately. One can possibly attribute those language learning beliefs to the fact that the respondents were taught foreign languages in a structural way.

One must reiterate that the structural view of language and its practices are endemic in the Tunisian EFL context. According to Daoud (2019), “In the Tunisian context, the scope of English teaching is limited to practising grammar and vocabulary. Teaching is still driven by a structural view of language, with a greater focus on correctness as opposed to appropriateness and fluency” (p.187). The present study showed strong statistically significant correlations between the language learning beliefs of the respondents and their potential future teaching practices. This relationship is well documented in the literature (Pjares, 1992; Richards & Lockhart, 1996). With regard to the impact of gender on the language learning beliefs, the present study found no significant correlations. This conclusion is in accord with the one reached by Bernat and Lyod (2007). In their study, results indicate that overall males and females held similar beliefs about language learning.

CONCLUSION

The present study was carried out for the purpose of exploring the language learning beliefs held by Tunisian pre-service primary school teachers. The study aimed at examining how males and females differ in their language beliefs. It also aimed at examining the degree to which the learning beliefs held by pre-service teachers would shape and determine their future teaching practices. The findings showed that most Tunisian pre-service teachers like English and place great importance on it. Pre-service Tunisian primary school teachers have no objection to the use of Arabic to explain new vocabulary items in an English class. However, it is worth noting that they are not comfortable with the use of Arabic to explain grammar points in an English class. Most the pre-service teachers favour immediate error correction in an English class. The study showed that the language learning beliefs held by pre-service would have a bearing on their future teaching practices. No statistically significant differences were found between the language learning beliefs held by males and those held by females.

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