Foreign language learners’ beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the beliefs of foreign language learners in relation to the role of grammar teaching and error correction. For the purposes of the study 26 students at a private university responded to a questionnaire (Loewen et al., 2009). As a result of the analysis, it can be said that foreign language learners believed grammar was an important aspect of the language. However, they held beliefs about it to be taught in a more communicative way. On the other hand, participants thought that error correction was useful in language learning process.

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1. Introduction

The concept of belief has been a focused issue of research in education. A belief is a mental state that is accepted as true by the person holding it, although the individual may know that alternative beliefs may be held by others. This is one of the key differences between belief and knowledge, since knowledge must actually be true. So, a belief is a sort of proposition an individual may hold consciously or unconsciously, and it is also evaluative since it is accepted as true by the person who holds it, and therefore it is influenced strongly with emotions (Borg, 2001). Puchta (1999) suggests that beliefs are generalizations about cause and effect, and they affect our inner representation of the world around us. Given the significant role that belief can play in determining thoughts and behavior, learners’ beliefs that are related to language learning gain importance. Moreover, beliefs about language learning may contain some personal judgment value (Vibulphol, 2004). According to Davis (2003), beliefs held by language learners may provide some helpful and illuminating understanding into learners’ thinking processes and behaviors that are in relation to language learning. All learners, particularly older ones have strong beliefs, usually based on former experiences of learning, and opinions on how the instruction should be delivered. The research has indicated that learners’ beliefs may be influential factors in their experience within the classroom. So, studying learners’ beliefs can help teachers extend their repertoire of teaching strategies and develop greater flexibility in their applications (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). A considerable amount of research has been conducted in the language acquisition area. However, it is argued that foreign and second language learner beliefs on specific aspects of language learning such as grammar instruction and error correction have been neglected. Given the significance
of the topic for foreign language classrooms is taken into account, this study tries to investigate the beliefs held by foreign language learners about grammar instruction and error correction.

Beliefs about language learning have become one of researchers’ interests in the field of second language acquisition. Second and foreign language learners come to class with ideas about the process and nature of the learning. They have some presumptions about what language learning is and also how a second language should be learned. These pre-existing beliefs are claimed to have influential effects on learners’ approaches and behaviors in the learning process (Horwitz, 1987). Cotterall (1995) explored about 140 respondents in New Zealand and the study revealed that the beliefs of learners may have a strong influence on learning behavior. Yang (1992) examined the beliefs of more than 500 students in Taiwan. She concluded that learner beliefs could be a variable affecting anxiety. Compared to these, it can be argued that there has been less research specifically into language learners’ beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction in the classroom settings. Increasing evidence (e.g., DeKeyser 1993) indicates that corrective feedback and grammatical awareness can indeed foster L2 acquisition, at least for specific structures and for certain types of learners. In fact, instruction and “negative evidence” might be essential for mastery of certain structures for adult and adolescent learners (Schulz, 1996). Schulz in his study (2001) concluded that discrepancies in student and teacher belief systems could have a negative effect on learning. According to him, it was also important that teachers explored their students’ beliefs regarding factors believed to enhance the language learning process and made efforts to handle possible conflicts between language learners’ beliefs and instructional practices. In a more recent study, the results showed that there were diverse beliefs about the role of grammar instruction and error correction between the learners studying English as a second language and the ones studying a foreign language (Loewen et. al. 2009).

In the light of current discussion provided about the roles of grammar instruction and error correction, this study seeks to examine foreign language learners’ beliefs about these two pedagogical procedures by the help of the following questions:

1. What primary constructs are existing in foreign language learners’ responses to a questionnaire regarding their beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction?
2. What statements do foreign language learners provide about grammar instruction and error correction?

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

A questionnaire (Loewen et. al. 2009) was administered at the faculty of education in English Language Teaching department’s preparatory program at Yeditepe University. A total of 26 participants studying English as a foreign language instruction completed the questionnaire. The proficiency levels of the participant were determined by a standardized proficiency test given at the beginning of the fall term in 2010. 12 of the students were in advanced and 14 of them were in upper-intermediate level, but they were grouped together for the purposes of the study due to the small sample sizes and also not having major differences between their proficiency levels. All participants were L1 speakers of Turkish. Six of the participants (23 %) were male and twenty of them (77 %) were female. Participants ranged in ages 18 -30.

2.2. Data Collection and Data Analysis

A questionnaire developed by Loewen et al. (2009) was used to elicit learners’ responses to statements about grammar instruction and error correction. The questionnaire involved two different parts: a Likert-scale section for the quantitative data and an open-ended prompt section for the qualitative data. The quantitative section consisted of 37 belief-related statements, 13 of which were adapted from Schulz’s (1996, 2001). There were also 13 questions as distracters. These items were removed in the analysis process. In order to elicit the students’ beliefs about error correction in-depth, another open-ended prompt was added to the qualitative part of the questionnaire. During the fall term of the 2010-2011 academic year, 26 participants studying in the English Language Teaching department’s preparatory program completed the questionnaire in during class hour. Therefore the questionnaire return rate was
100 %. Since the questionnaire has both quantitative and qualitative sections methods used to analyze them were selected accordingly.

2.2.1. The quantitative analysis

The analysis of data showed that the Cronbach alpha for the questionnaire was .79. Due to the small size of the participants, a factor analysis was not conducted in this study. Instead, the quantitative analysis was done according to the factors revealed in the study conducted by (Loewen et al., 2009). They were labeled efficacy of grammar, negative attitude toward error correction, priority of communication, importance of grammar, importance of grammatical accuracy and negative attitudes toward grammar instruction. After the correlation analysis on SPSS, both positive and negative significant correlations between the factors were taken to consideration. An inspection of the correlation table results indicates that there is a strong correlation, which is significant at the 0.01 level, between students' beliefs regarding the importance of grammar and their efficacy beliefs of grammar. Another important finding reveals a high correlation, significant again at the 0.01 level, between the efficacy beliefs of participants in relation to grammar and negative attitudes to grammar instruction. On the other side of the coin, a negative significant correlation was found, significant at the 0.05 level this time, between the grammar efficacy beliefs of students and priority of communication.

| Eff. of gram. | Neg. att. to err. cor. | Pri. of com. | Imp. of gram. | Neg. att. to gram. instr. | Imp. of gram. acc. |
|---------------|------------------------|--------------|---------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| 1             | .439                   | .570**       | .508**        | .397*                    |                   |
| 2             | -.426                  | .317         | .271          | -.375                    | .134              |
| 3             | -.034                  | -.398*       | -.375         | .440*                    | .395*             |
| 4             |                        |              |               |                          |                   |
| 5             |                        |              |               |                          |                   |
| 6             |                        |              |               |                          |                   |

2.2.2 The qualitative analysis

In order to explore the beliefs of students about grammar instruction and error correction, the second part of the questionnaire in which there were open-ended prompts was analyzed. The data gathered by this instrument were analyzed under two headings: students’ beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction. The results were analyzed with a pattern coding strategy (Miles & Huberman, 1994). So, by grouping closely related items together in the data, some patterns were established. The analysis of the participating students’ answers revealed some codes that are significant in identifying their beliefs about grammar instruction. These data were grouped under two categories: positive grammar instruction codes including communication, skills, and accuracy and negative codes including its rule-based and boring design, having too many details and favorable and unfavorable grammar teaching ways.

2.2.2.1. Grammar Instruction

Communication: 7 students out of 26 stated that they mostly liked studying grammar since it has been believed to be an important component of language to be able to communicate with foreign people. One of the students commented:

I like studying grammar because knowing the rules while you are speaking makes the message to be understood easily by the foreigner (Student 18, Questionnaire).

Skill: Again 7 students participating in the study mentioned that studying grammar is enjoyable in that it can help improve their reading, listening, writing and speaking skills. The reason for this was explained by one of the students:

Grammar is being very helpful to me while writing. I give much importance to grammar because it helps me to understand in the process of speaking and reading a book (Student 14, Questionnaire).

Accuracy: 5 of the students believed that studying grammar would enable them to use more accurate language. One of the participants comment on this issue was interesting:

To be able to use English in a more accurate way makes me happy (Student 21, Questionnaire).
Rule-based and boring design: This is one of the significant results that was mentioned by the participants. More than half of the students explained that studying grammar was not favorable because it is rule-based and boring and monotonous. One participating student described this by writing:

Studying grammar is boring. There are too many details. Although we do not take the grammar rules into consideration, when we are learning a language the first subject is grammar. It is taught at the very beginning. (Student 22, Questionnaire).

Having too many details: Since the learners are either upper-intermediate or advanced level students, it was not surprising that they believed grammar has too many details that made studying overwhelming. So, it was not shocking to get the following comment as a reason for this:

There are a lot of details. And I don’t like them (Student 24, Questionnaire).

Favorable ways of teaching grammar: The results of the second part of the questionnaire revealed that 11 students were in favor of doing exercises in grammar teaching. However, 10 of the students preferred real life activities and asked for the teaching method to be communicative. One of the participants explained clearly:

I want some other resource books and exercises. I want grammar to be taught in a way that is more helpful to us in daily speech. I also want exercises and homework about the grammar point (Student 22, Questionnaire).

Unfavorable ways of teaching grammar: 7 of the participants out of 26 stated that they did not want a kind of grammar teaching method in which they will have to memorize the rules. They want to internalize them. This situation was explained by a student:

I don’t like memorizing the rules in grammar since I can make lots of mistakes if I study it in that way (Student 14, Questionnaire)

3.2.2.2. Error correction

The data for this section were gathered by a direct question which was not used in the original questionnaire. According to the results of this inquiry, a striking number of the students, 18, wanted to have an immediate error correction by the teacher. So, it was not surprising to get the following comments as reasons for this:

The errors in the class must be corrected by the teacher. Because you can never forget it and you don’t make the same mistake again. It is an effective way (Student 7, Questionnaire).

4. Discussion

The first research question was about the primary constructs existing in foreign language learners regarding their beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction. The results of the study mentioned above made it clear that learners gave importance to grammar instruction. Especially the learners with high efficacy beliefs of grammar believed that grammar was important. According to them, studying grammar was useful not only in general language knowledge but also in language skills. There were also some differences among the participants. This is similar to the previous research (Schulz, 1996, 2001; Loewen et al., 2009). Many participants in this study were thought to have been influenced by their beliefs on their learning behavior. This result is in line with Cotterall’s study (1995). For instance, the learners believed that grammar was boring and therefore they had a negative attitude toward grammar instruction. Moreover, the learners participated in the study commented that they were in favor of immediate correction and indicated that grammatical awareness was useful and helpful for them in the language learning process. This is also an agreeing fact with the DeKeyser’s study’s results (1993) in which the corrective feedback was found to foster that process.

For the second research question of the study concerning the statements made by the participants about grammar instruction, it can be put forward that according to the quantitative analysis of the study students with high grammar efficacy beliefs also had a negative attitude toward grammar instruction. From this point, it can be argued that the learners are aware of the fact that grammar is important in learning a foreign language process but they are in favor of communicative activities, authentic materials, and real word activities containing interaction during the distribution of grammar subjects. Learners in this study also valued communication more than grammar. It means that they placed a higher priority on communication. This result is completely parallel to the ones found by Loewen et al., (2009). Immediate error correction preference of students in this study especially on grammatical structures is also similar to the results of the study conducted by Dekeysor (1993).
5. Conclusion

This study tried to explore the foreign language learners’ beliefs about grammar instruction and error correction. The literature has indicated that beliefs held by learners are quite important and can be helpful for teachers in extending their teaching strategies and designing their applications (Schulz, 2001; Davis, 2003; Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Therefore, the investigation into learners’ beliefs about grammar instruction and also error correction provided here can be described as significant to some extent. At the end of the study, it was found that efficacy beliefs of students regarding grammar positively and significantly correlated with importance of grammar and negative attitudes toward grammar instruction. However, foreign language learners’ beliefs related to grammar efficacy correlated with priority of communication negatively. That is to say, while learners believed that the grammar was an important component of the language, they did not want it to be taught in an explicit and “boring” way. Moreover, some learners prioritized communication over grammar. On the other hand, there are some limitations to this study. The small number of students involved in the study allows for only tentative conclusions. Another limitation of the study is that the participants were from the same department. Individuals from different departments may have provided different answers and results. Further research may wish to combine different departments and also different target languages in the same context. In spite of the limitations, this study attempted to present a picture of the current situation in a Turkish context regarding foreign language learners’ beliefs about grammar instruction. What’s more, the results provided many similarities with the study administered to 754 students (Loewen, et al. 2009). In a nutshell, information about learners’ beliefs in relation to grammar instruction and error correction which are highly debatable subjects of the research was figured out.

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