EFL student teachers' beliefs and the effect of a second language acquisition course

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Abstract

The present study regards beliefs about language learning held by Greek university students who were also prospective teachers of English. Answers to a questionnaire administered in the beginning and at the end of a course about how languages are learned indicate that students changed views in the desired direction. Yet this change was not dramatic and did not concern all of the 'erroneous' beliefs.

Keywords: beliefs, second language learning, pre-service teachers

1. Introduction

This paper, partially modeled on MacDonald, Badger and White (2001), presents a small-scale, semi-longitudinal study of Greek university pre-service EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers' beliefs about how languages are learned and whether a course in second language acquisition theories (hereafter SLAT) may change these beliefs. An answer to this question seems important, given that "understanding the belief structures of teachers and teacher candidates is essential to improving their professional preparation and teaching practices" (Pajares 1992: 307).

Whether and how the beliefs under consideration are amenable to change constitutes the subject of a large number of studies. Such beliefs may derive from lay theories and according to Fox (1983) "There are … many teachers who have hardly progressed beyond a simple view of learning because it is consistent with their own simple theories of teaching" (cited in Flores 2001: 159). Moreover, student teachers' entrenched beliefs formed due to their long experience of a specific educational system, alias teachers' 'metacognitive knowledge' (Wenden 1987: 112), may be strong enough to filter out the effect of scientific theories (Lortie 1975 in Borg 2004: 274; see also Borg 1998, 1999, 2003 and Peacock 2001). In addition, this lack of effect may be due to or further enhanced by student teachers' often expressed dislike of "too much theory" (MacDonald *et al*. 2001: 58). An anecdote that points out the problem is the following

question asked by one of my students: "Why does applied linguistics have to be so theoretical"?

A considerable number of studies on beliefs about language learning have sprung up since the eighties, inspired largely by and based on Horwitz's (Horwitz 1985, 1987) research and her development of the 'Beliefs About Language Learning Instrument' (for a recent review, see Mattheoudakis 2007), while other researchers created their own questionnaires (e.g., Gobel and Mori 2007). Studies outside the 'normative approach' (Barcelos 2003: 11) have adopted qualitative methods such as think-aloud protocols, diaries, open-ended questionnaires (see Bartels 2005 for a review) or observation (e.g., Feryok 2008). Thus, there is a bulk of findings concerning the language learning beliefs of learners and in-service teachers. Nonetheless, there is a dearth of studies regarding what pre-service language teachers believe about language learning and whether educational institutes may change these beliefs. Next I briefly review research of this particular ilk.

Macdonald *et al*. (2001) investigated EFL student teachers' beliefs before and after a twelve-week SLAT course in Britain and found that students changed their mind regarding behaviourist beliefs. In addition, Mattheoudakis's (2007) longitudinal study showed that some of the EFL pre-service teachers' beliefs changed significantly after a three-year program in SLA and methodology in a Greek university, the same in which the current research occurred. Yet, a similar study conducted by Peacock (2001) in Hong Kong showed that translation students' incorrect beliefs about language learning did not change significantly. Hence, it has been suggested that educational institutes should contribute to the reconstruction of prospective teachers' lay theories as early as possible (Peacock op. cit., Goodwin 2006).

Due both to the shortage of research in the issue at hand, as well as the arguable effect of educational intervention on teachers' beliefs, it appears that the matter deserves further investigation. In the remainder of this paper, section 2 includes the current study and some preliminary remarks, while section 3 involves a further discussion of the results and their implications.

2. The study

2.1 The course

The SLAT course constitutes one of the compulsory components of a four-year B.A. degree in English Language and Literature at the Aristotle University, in Thessaloniki,

Greece. Students normally take this course in their third semester of studies alongside with other courses in theoretical linguistics. Before this, they take an introductory course in linguistics in their first year of studies.

The present research was carried out in spring 2002. At that time, due to a long strike of university teachers in Greece, the specific SLAT course lasted for ten weeks instead of the usual twelve and the students attended it in their fourth semester of studies. The textbook for the SLAT course was Lightbown and Spada's (1999) *How languages are learned* and the course was taught by the present author. For the full content of this course, see Appendix I.

2.2 Participants

Forty-six Greek students participated in the experiment, forty-five female and one male, with a mean age of 20.6 (age range: 19-32).

2.3 Materials and procedure

The data collection method was a closed-ended questionnaire from the students' textbook. It included twelve statements concerning the targeted beliefs and answers were framed in a 6-point Likert scale with 1 for 'strongly agree' and 6 for 'strongly disagree' (see Appendix II).

The questionnaire was administered once in the beginning and once during the penultimate lecture of the course (hereafter 'pre-questionnaire' and 'post-questionnaire', respectively). The participants were told that the aim of this small research was for both their teacher and themselves to find out if there would be any changes of opinion at the end of the course. Thus, in the last lecture, after photocopying all completed questionnaires, I returned the original ones to the students. Moreover, I presented group results in class. This offered the chance to review the main issues in the course content, which seemed to interest the students, all the more so as it took place before their end-of-semester exams. The post-questionnaire included some extra questions about the students' reading during the course time, how often they had attended the specific course and whether they had also attended another course in language acquisition theories (see Appendix II). The final selection included answers only from students who had attended the course regularly. Moreover, none of these students had attended any of the other relevant courses offered in the department, such as, for example Cross-Linguistic Influence in Language Learning or Psycholinguistics, before or during the

specific semester. Last most students stated that their course reading was limited to the textbook.

2.4 Results

Adapting McDonald *et al*.'s (2001) grouping of the questionnaire statements, I present results in a tripartite classification.[1] The first one includes statements that express behaviourist views, the second one statements relating to the grammatical sequencing of language teaching and the third one statements relating to learner variations. Tables 1, 2 and 3 illustrate percentage responses for each statement divided into three categories. Namely, 'Agree', 'Unsure' and 'Disagree', for the Likert scale points 1-2, 3-4 and 5-6 respectively. In the 'item' column, numbers indicate the order of each statement in the questionnaire, while 'pre-' and 'post-' in the third column stand for 'pre-questionnaire' and 'post-questionnaire' respectively. The last column provides mean scores with standard deviations in parenthesis and shaded boxes in this column indicate a statistically significant change of opinion. The statistical tool used was Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed).

2.4.1 Statements reflecting a behaviourist view

Before the presentation of results, let it be clear that 'change' refers to the modification of students' beliefs in the expected direction. This said, as shown in Table 1, there was significant change of opinion ($p<0.001$) regarding statements 2, 9 and 12. (*Parents usually correct young children when they make grammatical errors*, *Learners' errors should be corrected as soon as they are made to prevent the formation of bad habits* and *Students learn what they are taught*). On the other hand, change of opinion was not significant in statements 1, 6 and 11 (*Languages are learned mainly through imitation*, *Most of the mistakes that second language learners make are due to interference from their first language* and *When learners are allowed to interact freely, they learn each other's mistakes*).

At first glance, results in this category seem to reflect contradictory beliefs, since only half of the behaviourist views changed significantly. Nevertheless, statistical significance aside, mean scores in the post-questionnaire reflect scepticism for five out

[1] McDonald *et al*. use a fourth cohort for the single statement *When learners are allowed to interact freely they learn each others' mistakes*. Here it is included in the category of statements reflecting behaviourist views.

of the six statements results. Moreover, it is noteworthy that with respect to S11, although Lightbown and Spada state the merits of group and pair work, they give vague reference to research evidence without providing examples of studies that would back up this statement. This may justify the students' continued scepticism. Hence, I believe that the only inconsistency in this category of beliefs concerns lack of change with respect to the role of L1 as being the main source of errors, although mean scores indicate a slight change from conviction to scepticism.

Table 1. Statements reflecting a behaviourist view

Time	*Agree %*	*Unsure %*	*Disagree %*	*Mean Score* (St. Deviation)*
S1. *Languages are learned mainly through imitation*.				
Pre-	17.4	43.5	39.1	3.91 (1.5)
Post-	4.4	43.4	52.2	4.30 (1.2)
S2. *Parents usually correct young children when they make grammatical errors*.				
Pre-	60.9	30.5	8.6	2.61 (1.4)
Post-	34.8	13	52.2	3.87 (1.7)
S6. *Most of the mistakes that second language learners make are due to interference from their first language*.				
Pre-	89.1	8.7	2.2	1.72 (0.8)
Post-	67.4	23.9	8.7	2.22 (1.4)
S9. *Learners' errors should be corrected as soon as they are made in order to prevent the formation of bad habits*.				
Pre-	65.2	23.9	10.9	2.26 (1.4)
Post-	26	37	37	3.67 (1.5)
S11. *When learners are allowed to interact freely (for example in group or pair activities), they learn each other's mistakes*.				
Pre-	35.6	37.8	26.6	3.83 (1.4)
Post-	39.1	26.1	34.8	3.50 (1.8)
S12. *Students learn what they are taught*.				
Pre-	28.3	60.9	10.8	3.20 (1.1)
Post-	13	41.3	45.6	4.00 (1.3)

* The higher the mean, the more the disagreement.

2.4.2 Statements relating to the grammatical sequencing of language teaching

In this category (see Table 2) there was not much change regarding one of the statements (S10: *Teachers should use materials that expose students only to those*

language structures which they have already been taught), with which they tended to disagree from the beginning of the course. On the other hand, there was significant change (p<0.001) in two statements (S7: *Teachers should present grammatical rules one at a time and learners should practice examples of each one before going on to another* and S8: *Teachers should teach simple language structures before complex ones*). Note that S7 is in accordance with the Audio-Lingual Method of teaching and therefore savours of behaviourism. Hence, change here is consistent with results in the first category of statements. The same may apply for change towards scepticism regarding S8 because although this statement possibly complies with the way students had been taught foreign languages, research presented during the SLAT course involved convincing evidence about developmental routes in the acquisition of some structures, generally unaffected by instruction. Now, such evidence contributed to the shift in EFL methods away from audiolingualism and towards methods underpinned by Krashen's (1982) 'Monitor Model' (characterised as 'innatist' by Lightbown and Spada) or towards a communicative approach to language teaching. Therefore, we can assume that students' change of view with respect to S8 may also indicate a shift away from broadly behaviourist beliefs.

Table 2. Statements relating to the grammatical sequencing of language teaching

Time	*Agree %*	*Unsure %*	*Disagree %*	*Mean Score (St. Deviation)*
S7. *Teachers should present grammatical rules one at a time, and learners should practice examples of each one before going on to another.*				
Pre-	78.3	19.5	2.2	1.83 (1.0)
Post-	56.6	21.7	21.7	2.74 (1.6)
S8. *Teachers should teach simple language structures before complex ones.*				
Pre-	97.8	2.2	-	1.24 (0.6)
Post-	71.8	19.5	8.7	2.11 (1.3)
S10. *Teachers should use materials that expose students only to those language structures which they have already been taught.*				
Pre-	17.4	43.4	39.2	4.00 (1.5)
Post-	13	47.8	39.2	4.07 (1.4)

2.4.3 Statements relating to learner variations

There was no significant change regarding beliefs supported by any of the statements in this category, as Table 3 demonstrates.

Table 3. Statements relating to learner variations

Time	*Agree %*	*Unsure %*	*Disagree %*	*Mean Score & (St. Deviation)*
S3. *Students with high IQs are good language learners*.				
Pre-	23.9	41.3	34.8	3.83 (1.4)
Post-	17.4	30.4	52.2	4.26 (1.6)
S4. *The most important factor in second language acquisition success is motivation*.				
Pre-	58.7	39.1	2.2	2.41 (1.0)
Post-	65.2	30.4	4.4	2.26 (1.0)
S5. *The earlier a second language is introduced in schools, the greater the likelihood of success in learning that language*.				
Pre-	93.5	4.3	2.2	1.57 (0.8)
Post-	78.2	10.9	10.9	2.07 (1.3)

Students were highly sceptical regarding S3 before the course, probably based on world wisdom. This stance altered only slightly (towards disagreement), in accordance with research findings discussed in class. Also, they remained sceptical, although less so, regarding the role of motivation in second language acquisition (S4). This complies with what they were taught, since research in the specific area offers controversial results (for example, compare Gardner and Lambert 1972 with Muñoz and Tragant 2001, discussed in class). Last, lack of essential change regarding S5 can be justified as follows. In the course textbook, although it is stated that the critical period hypothesis may not be related to instructed language learning and that adolescents seem to be better than children in such a context, no relevant study is mentioned to support this claim (Lightbown and Spada 1999: 67-68). On the other hand, the textbook contains a detailed exposition of two studies supporting the critical period hypothesis and one study which seems to disprove it. However, the latter is criticised for its methodology that may have biased results against children and in favour of adolescents (Lightbown and Spada 1999: 61-67). Moreover, the authors note that in this study, although the adolescents fared better than both the adult and the children learners, by the end of the year the children caught up with the adolescents. The point here is that the way age effects are presented in the textbook may be the reason why the student teachers' belief in young children's superiority in language learning was not effectively challenged.

3. Discussion and conclusions

According to results, the SLAT course did not influence seven out of the twelve beliefs endorsed by student teachers. However, three of the unchanged beliefs had a mean score showing conviction in the correct direction (see S1, S3, and S10). Moreover, as I have speculated, beliefs concerning three other statements remained unchanged either because the textbook did not offer any solid evidence congruent with the authors' claims (see S5 and S11) or due to that the relevant empirical evidence discussed during the course was inconclusive (see S4).

On the other hand, lack of belief change about the role of the first language (L1) as reflected by S6 is not justified, given that the course offered robust empirical support for errors which are developmental in nature and can therefore not be accounted for by L1 effect. However, at the end of the course only 8.7% seemed convinced that L1 is not the primary cause for errors. Hence, it is probable that the specific statement reflects a deeply rooted belief, impervious to change through education.

Nevertheless, students modified their attitude with respect to five of the six behaviourist or broadly behaviourist beliefs. To further reflect on the magnitude of this modification, let us consider results from a detailed analysis of individual data concerning the five significantly modified beliefs. Table 4 demonstrates percentage results rounded to the nearest integer, except those with values halfway between two integers.

Table 4. Individual data analysis (%) of significantly changed beliefs (2, 7, 8, 9, 12)

	2	7	8	9	12
Agree → disagree	26 (12/46)	11 (5/46)	9 (4/46)	15 (7/46)	6.5 (3/46)
Agree → unsure	9 (4/46)	13 (6/46)	17 (8/46)	22 (10/46)	6.5 (3/46)
unsure → disagree	19.5 (9/46)	11 (5/46)	-	11 (5/46)	33 (15/46)
Total	54 (25/26)	35 (16/46)	26 (12/46)	48 (22/46)	46 (21/46)
Remained in disagreement	11 (5/46)	-	-	9 (4/46)	4 (2/46)
Remained unsure	2 (1/46)	4 (2/46)	2 (1/46)	11 (5/46)	24 (11/46)
Remained in agreement	24 (11/46)	44 (20/46)	72 (33/46)	22 (10/46)	11 (5/46)
unsure → agree / disagree → unsure	9 (4/46)	17 (8/46)	-	9 (4/46)	15 (7/46)

Individual results reveal certain facts glossed over by the group means. Importantly, they show that change of opinion involved slightly more than half of the students at best, i.e. 54% for (S2), and about one fourth of them at worst i.e. 26% for (S8). They also show that even with respect to the most discredited belief, underpinned by S2 (*Parents usually correct young children when they make grammatical errors*), about one-third of the students either remained in agreement (24%) or changed opinion in the opposite direction (9%). In addition, individual results reveal that, at the end of the course, a considerable number of students continued to agree with the beliefs reflected by S7 (*Teachers should present grammatical rules one at a time, and learners should practice examples of each one before going on to another*) and S8 (*Teachers should teach simple language structures before complex ones*). It is plausible that results regarding S7 are due to the teaching culture of the students, which is mostly structure-based (see also Mattheoudakis 2007: 1274). As for S8, Lightbown and Spada (1999: 166) state that although the developmental route of certain interlanguage structures may often be independent from the order in which these structures are taught, it is still beneficial for the learners to be exposed to modified speech which omits complex forms. Therefore, the high number of continuous agreement with the latter statement should come as no surprise, since not only it may comply with students' prior beliefs but it is also rather congruent with the opinion expressed in the students' textbook.

As there is no individual data analysis in any of the studies similar to the present one, no comparison is possible in this respect. Leaving these aside, group results here agree with some previous findings and discord with others. Specifically, both here and in MacDonald *et al*. (2001) the greatest attitudinal shift occurred in behaviourist beliefs, although this shift was not enormous. Importantly then, both studies indicate that theory teaching supported by conclusive evidence may change "folklinguistic theories of language learning" (Barcelos 2003: 8) – at least in the short run. On the other hand, differences between the two studies verify the importance of the "culture of learning" (Cotterall 1999: 495-496). To elaborate, although the majority of undergraduate student teachers in MacDonald *et al*. came from Greece, they changed their mind significantly about L1 as the main source of errors in a second language, unlike what happened with the Greek students in the present study. This is possibly due to that those students lived in the UK and "had been studying in an ethos of communicative language teaching"

(MacDonald *et al*. 2001: 959).[2] The effect of cultural context may also explain why Greek university students' beliefs here and in Mattheoudakis (2007) were modified, unlike in Peacock's (2001) similar study with Chinese university students in Hong Kong.

Another important factor in belief formation is age and teaching experience. As our study included only pre-service teachers, most of whom were between nineteen and twenty years old, it may be interesting to compare our pre-questionnaire results to those from experienced teachers or postgraduate teacher students in studies where the same or a similar questionnaire was employed to probe language-learning beliefs. This comparison shows differences from our results with respect to beliefs about (a) immediate error correction, (b) presenting grammatical rules one at a time, and (c) the effect of interaction between learners of the same level (Brown and McGannon 1998, Davis 2003). In addition, both the experienced teachers in Davis (op. cit.) and the less experienced postgraduate teacher students in MacDonald *et al*. (2001) were sceptical about the advantages of an early start in instructed language learning and did not believe that the main cause for errors was the learners' first language.

Admittedly, age and experience mesh with social and cultural context (Horwitz 1999), so the above comparison may be of dubious validity. Namely, Brown and McGannon's study took place in Australia, MacDonald *et al*.'s in the UK and Davis's in China. With this caveat in mind, it is reassuring to discover that the beliefs embraced by experienced or more mature teachers are closer to theories solidly supported by research findings compared to beliefs of inexperienced or less mature teachers.

Before ending this discussion, I will briefly acknowledge the limitations of the present paper. A potential sample bias due to that the respondents were not anonymous may be one methodological shortcoming and the fact that almost all respondents were female may be another one. The next and most important weakness concerns the use of a single data source such as a questionnaire to research abstract and vague constructs. Despite the advantages of this method, such as the possibility of quantification and statistical analysis of the results, questionnaires have well-known disadvantages too (see, among others, Cotterall 1999: 197 and references therein). For instance, respondents may not interpret question items in the way they are expected to (Sakui and Gaies 1999). In addition, this danger may be enhanced if question items are ambiguous. By way of

[2] Another important factor to consider when discussing differences between the two studies is the SLAT course reading materials. However, this is not feasible, as MacDonald *et al*. are not explicit in this matter.

illustration, consider statement 12 used here: *Students learn what they are taught*. Agreement with this statement depends on whether one interprets it as implying that students *learn* everything they are taught or that there is also learning that occurs not as a direct result of the teacher's focus on particular language items, which constitutes acquired language knowledge. Thus, findings in the present study would probably be more valid if answers in the questionnaire were juxtaposed to answers obtained from interviews, as in Sakui and Gaies (op. cit.).

The present research was concerned to establish the effectiveness of a SLAT course on pre-service teachers' beliefs. In my viewpoint, granted the highly context-specific nature of the current research object, the central result reflected in the data may justify a cautiously optimistic stance on the value of teaching theories. Moreover, this study offered the chance to reflect upon why certain beliefs were resistant to change. In the light of this knowledge, certain modifications were made to the SLAT course regarding reading materials and teaching method, in compliance with certain researchers' admonitions mentioned in section 1. I hope that the specific changes may have improved the SLAT course to the benefit of my students. Of course, whether this is indeed the case should be empirically validated, perhaps in a future study.

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Appendices

Appendix I

Content of the language acquisition course
1) Theories of first language acquisition
2) Theories of second language acquisition
   - Behaviourism: The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis
   - Innatism: Universal Grammar, Krashen's 'monitor model'
   - Interactionism
   - Other theories: information processing, connectionism
3) Learner characteristics affecting SLA
   Personality, Intelligence, Aptitude, Motivation, Learning style, Age
4) Learner language
   Interlanguage, developmental sequences, fossilisation, avoidance, cross-linguistic influence.
5) SLA in the classroom
   Focus on form/meaning, types of teacher feedback

Appendix II

(1) Instructions in the pre-questionnaire with an example of how participants had to evaluate the statements.

It is claimed that most of us teach as we were taught or in a way that reflects our ideas and preferences about learning. Reflect on your views about how languages are learned and what the implications are about how they should be taught.

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING BY TICKING (√) THE APPROPRIATE SPACE

1. Languages are learned mainly through imitation.	
Strongly agree	Strongly disagree

(2) Extra questions in the post-questionnaire

A. Is this the first time you have attended this course? Yes ☐ No ☐

B. Have you attended any of the following courses? If yes, write down which ones and when you attended them:
Psycholinguistics, Cross-Linguistic Influence in Language Learning, Theories of Language Learning: _____

C. During the semester, did you do any reading on your own? If yes, specify (e.g., the course textbook, recommended articles in the textbook, books on reserve)?
_____

D. How often did you attend classes?
regularly ☐, often ☐, sometimes ☐, not very often ☐, rarely ☐