



A Qualitative Exploration into Beliefs of Pre-service EFL Teachers about School Experience

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study aims to explore the beliefs of Turkish pre-service EFL teachers about their school experiences and any change in their beliefs during this experience to identify their professional development as prospective teachers. For this purpose, ten Turkish pre-service EFL teachers at a state university in central Turkey reflected their experiences for one semester in the process of their teaching practice period for 14 weeks. The results reveal that pre-service teachers hold different beliefs about overall approaches to teaching and learning a foreign language, language use in the classroom, classroom management, and teaching grammar. The results also indicate a change in their beliefs related to questioning selves as teachers, teaching profession in general, use of technology in the classroom, using teaching techniques, and classroom management. The findings of this study also have implications for teacher education programs, particularly for the school experience component.

Keywords: pre-service teacher beliefs, professional development, change in beliefs, school experience, reflection

Yabancı Dil Olarak İngilizce Öğretmeni Adaylarının Okul Deneyimine Yönelik İnançlarının Nitel Bir İncelemesi

Öz

Bu nitel çalışma, Türkiye'deki yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğretmeni adaylarının, gelecekteki öğretmenler olarak mesleki gelişimlerini tanımlama bağlamında okul deneyimlerine yönelik inançlarını ve bu okul deneyimi boyunca yaşadıkları tecrübeler sonucu inançlarında oluşan değişiklikleri araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaç için, Türkiye'nin merkez bölgelerinden birinde bir devlet üniversitesinde öğrenim gören on yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğretmeni adayı 14 hafta boyunca öğretmenlik deneyimleri süresince edindikleri tecrübeleri yansıtmıştır. Çalışmada elde edilen bulgular, öğretmen adaylarının, genel anlamda bir yabancı dil öğretimine ve öğrenimine, sınıf içinde dil kullanımına, sınıf yönetimine ve dilbilgisi öğretimine yönelik farklı inançlara sahip olduklarını göstermektedir. Ek olarak, elde edilen bulgular, öğretmen adaylarının öğretmen kimliklerini sorgulamaya, genel anlamda öğretmenlik mesleğine, sınıf içinde teknoloji kullanımına, öğretim yöntemlerinin kullanımına ve sınıf yönetimine yönelik değişen inançlara sahip olduklarını da göstermektedir. Bu çalışmadan elde edilen bu bulgular öğretmen eğitimi programları, özellikle bu programların okul deneyimi kısmı için çeşitli öneriler sunmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: öğretmen adaylarının inançları, mesleki gelişim, inanç değişimi, okul deneyimi, yansıma

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Through a shift of understanding in teacher education, specifically in second language teacher education, there have been many attempts to investigate how pre-service teachers have been going through the notion of teachers as learners of teaching (Smith, 2017). Within this framework, research investigating the beliefs of pre-service teachers and in-service teachers has grown, offering new ways of thinking about teaching and the nature of teacher learning. Ever since Shulman's (1986) research on subject matter knowledge in line with the missing paradigm referring to those neglected domains of teacher knowledge, researching the psychological constraints behind teachers' teaching practices has become famous (Zheng, 2009).

Teacher beliefs have crucial conceptual roles in understanding teachers' thought processes, instructional practices and changes in the ways they learn to teach. Therefore, pre-service teachers, who are on the verge of being certified to teach, might have certain beliefs, expectations and concerns about understanding teaching and learning at the beginning stage of their teaching practice experience. Before starting teaching practice, these beliefs might or might not match, affect their understanding of teaching, shape and develop their teaching philosophies in general in positive or negative ways (Löfström & Poom-Valickis, 2013; Uibu et al., 2017).

This study is significant because it will hopefully contribute to the discussion of theory and practice in teacher education programs. It focuses on the school experience component through which pre-service teachers get the chance to see actual practices of the theories learned at the university. Hopefully, the study provides suggestions for teacher education programs that will help design courses effectively. Similarly, Johnson (2009) highlights the discussion of teachers as learners of teaching in teacher education. Even though many studies focus on the practicum experience of pre-service teachers, few studies focus on the school experience component where pre-service teachers do not teach but only observe teaching. The results of this study are expected to provide insights into how teachers experience the teaching profession in natural settings after having taken a theoretical course for a long time.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

In its broadest and widely cited sense, beliefs are “psychologically held understandings, premises or propositions about the world that are felt to be true” (Richardson, 1996, p. 106). Borg (2001) defines belief as “a proportion which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by the individual and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further it serves as a guide to thought and behaviour” (p. 186). The role and importance of teachers' beliefs have a trendy place in teacher education literature. Nevertheless, belief itself is only one form of a complete cognitive system that includes terms such as attitudes, values, perceptions, theories, and images (Richardson, 2003); and perspectives, frames of references, conceptions, world images, schemata, constructs (Anderson & Bird, 1995). Similarly, the term teacher cognition by Borg (2003) also refers to the “unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching; what teachers know, believe, and think” (p. 81). This study defines beliefs as a broad term that encompasses many of these.

PRE-SERVICE TEACHER BELIEFS

In a comprehensive study reviewing the literature of learning-to-teach studies, Kagan (1992) confirms that “pre-service teachers enter programs of teacher education with personal beliefs about teaching images of good teachers, images of self as teacher, and memories of themselves as pupils in classrooms” (p. 142). Whether these beliefs are implicit or explicit, they sure “reflect the ways in which they intend to behave and interact with students, how they judge theories of student learning, organise and manage the classroom effectively, and behave professionally with their school colleagues” (Tillema, 1998, p. 217).

The understanding that pre-service teachers have their own beliefs about learning and teaching before entering teacher education programs has many implications. As Joram and Gabriele (1998) suggest, “the notion that learners come to a domain with prior knowledge and beliefs that influence how they construct new knowledge is a key principle in contemporary learning theory” (p. 175). However, this prior knowledge and beliefs might be potentially limiting, as Anderson et al. (1995) put it. Since beliefs are implicit, often unconsciously held assumptions (Kagan, 1992), they might have several properties. These assumptions might include

conceptualisations beyond reality that are not open to critical examination or evaluation by any outsider because they rely heavily on affective and evaluative factors (Nespor, 1987).

From an epistemological perspective, “learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience as a guide to future action” (Mezirow, 2012, p. 74). From a constructivist view of learning, beliefs are critical in how pre-service teachers comprehend and appreciate what they study (Richardson, 2003). Therefore, studies about teacher education programs emphasised pre-service teachers’ beliefs. It is certain, then, that there is a clear connection between the beliefs of pre-service teachers and any action they would take in their teacher education programs and their teaching. However, Richardson (2003) stresses a critical point asking whether beliefs guide actions, actions guide beliefs, or there is an interaction between the two. When pre-service teachers bring their own beliefs into teacher education programs, their beliefs usually guide their actions. In the literature, different aspects of pre-service teacher beliefs have been studied in the Turkish context, such as efficacy beliefs (Eren & Yeşilbursa, 2019), emotional intelligence and beliefs (Öz & Çepik Kiriş, 2018), career development and leadership aspirations (Ölçü-Dinçer & Seferoğlu, 2018), change in cognition after practicum (Debreli, 2016; Kavanoz et al., 2017; Yüksel & Başaran, 2019), and changes in concerns about teaching (Yalçın Arslan & İlin, 2018) among many others. Still, throughout the teacher education programs, the pre-service teachers’ beliefs need to be guided by their actions (Richardson, 2003). At least, this might be the ultimate aim of teacher education programs in general.

Pre-service teachers’ beliefs play an essential role in their professional growth. It is acknowledged that a high proportion of these beliefs consist of those pre-service teachers bring to teacher education programs from their early experiences. Johnson (2009) states that these beliefs are “constructed through and by the normative ways of thinking, talking, and acting that have been historically and culturally embedded in the communities of practice in which they participate (as both learners and teachers)” (p. 17) when approached from a socio-cultural perspective. While this view might suggest that it is hard to change such beliefs fundamentally constructed by social activities in which teachers engage, there are studies that both reflect stability and change in (epistemological) beliefs of teachers. Most of these reflections are based on empirical studies that investigated the impact of practice teaching on changing beliefs of pre-service teachers.

Primary necessities for change involve changing in believing what one does, in other words, one’s attitudes and motivation. Therefore, talking about change would require consideration of such factors. Teacher education programs need to consider that beliefs, attitudes, and motivation play a significant role; and allow an understanding of the situations or conditions necessary for pre-service teachers’ professional fulfilment and personal development. In the case of teaching, “motivations may therefore determine whether potential candidates elect to teach, how long they remain in the teaching profession, and the extent to which teaching undergraduates and graduates engage with a concentrate on their profession” (Sinclair et al., 2006, p. 1134). As Richardson and Placier (2001) also state, “many of the reforms being called for today, for example, constructivist teaching and teaching for understanding, require great changes in content and pedagogical knowledge and in understandings about schooling, teaching and learning. These instructional changes require belief changes and, therefore, cultural change” (p. 938). This study investigated pre-service teachers’ beliefs and stated changes in their beliefs within the school experience component of teacher education programs.

PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION IN TURKEY

Geographically situated in a position connecting the two continents, Asia and Europe, Turkey has seen significant reforms and innovations in its teacher education policies since the 1920s. The Turkish educational system was centralised and put under the control of The Ministry of Education in 1924 by the Law of Unification of Instruction. All policy and administrative decisions, then, have been made by the Ministry of Education, including the appointment of teachers, selection of the curriculum to be implemented, and the textbooks to be used (Çakıroğlu & Çakıroğlu, 2003). Two significant changes in teacher education in Turkey followed in 1973 by the Basic Law for National Education and in 1981 the Council of Higher Education. Before these changes, teachers were trained through teacher schools or institutions of education. The second significant change in 1981 decided that all teachers were to be trained in faculties of education, which meant that the Council of Higher Education was responsible for teacher education. Today, pre-service teacher education is conducted in four-year teacher education programs in respective departments at the Faculties of Education, under the broader control of the

Council of Higher Education (Akşit, 2007; Çakıroğlu & Çakıroğlu, 2003). With the most recent curriculum, the courses offered in teacher education programs compose of three groups of subject-matter knowledge (45-50%), teacher professional knowledge (30-35%) and general knowledge (15-20%) related to various social issues (Yükseköğretim Kurulu [YÖK], 2018).

TEACHER PRACTICE IN THE TURKISH CONTEXT

The Turkish teacher education curriculum offers two courses for the teaching practicum in the fourth (final) year of the program. The first of these, called the school experience course, focuses on the real-life classroom experience through structured observation tasks. Under the supervision of a cooperating teacher, prospective teachers visit classrooms, observe teaching, carry out tasks that help them lay the foundations of teaching, giving them an overview of the school experience. The second course, teaching practice, focuses on the one-to-one application of all the theoretical knowledge learned at the university in real-life classrooms with structured and on-the-spot teaching tasks. With the updated curriculum in 2018, these courses are now called Teaching Practice I and Teaching Practice II though the contents are the same (Yükseköğretim Kurulu [YÖK], 2018).

3 | METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN AND QUESTIONS

This study uncovered pre-service teacher beliefs and any stated changes in their beliefs throughout their school experience. To achieve this purpose, having detailed and rich data was crucial that best described and reflected the aims. Accordingly, a case study was conducted within the framework of qualitative research methodology. The following section explains the rationale behind the choice of this methodology in detail. This study identified the beliefs of pre-service EFL teachers studying at a state university in Turkey before taking a school experience course concerning their teaching practices. Another aim of this study included tracking any stated change(s) that occurred in the beliefs of these pre-service EFL teachers throughout the 14-week school experience course. In accordance with the aims, this study answered the following research questions: (1) What beliefs, concerns and expectations do Turkish pre-service EFL teachers have about teaching before taking a school experience course? (2) Do these beliefs change throughout their 14-week school experience course?

PARTICIPANTS AND SAMPLING

Participants in this research were ten prospective English teachers in the last year of their teacher education program at a public university in central Turkey, which provides English-only education in its courses. As part of the undergraduate teacher education program, students take a school experience course in the first semester of their senior year, focusing on observing classroom teaching in local public or private schools. As a requirement of this course, the pre-service teachers observe classes taught by mentor teachers. They might even help these mentor teachers by doing in-class activities with the learners without fully immersing in the actual teaching experience. As another requirement of this course, the students write reflection and observation papers about their experiences on classroom practices periodically. They are also involved in online discussions by writing comments to their peers' discussions through an online platform.

Typically, the pre-service teachers visit schools as part of their school experience course differ in terms of level and type; they might observe classes from Grade 4 to Grade 8 at primary and secondary schools and from Grade 9 to Grade 12 at high schools. These schools are either public or private schools; all run under the Ministry of National Education. In this study, there were initially 31 students taking the school experience course at the teacher education program. However, criterion sampling was used in selecting 10 of these participants for the following reasons: the selected students needed to have completed the two reflection papers, which were due at the beginning and the end of the course. Also, these students were selected among those who were observing the same grades at the practice schools (primary school, grades 6 and 7) so as to eliminate any potential effect the grade levels would have caused in shaping their beliefs. When these two criteria were considered, the ten pre-service teachers who met these criteria were chosen as participants in this study.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data collection was carried out in two phases. For the first phase, reflection papers were collected. The pre-service teachers were assigned to hand in two papers; one before the course started and another after the course was finished. The first set of reflection papers was about their approaches to teaching in general, that is, their teaching philosophies about the classroom practices they would carry out. The second set of reflection papers was about their overall ideas and comments about their actions over the course period. For the second phase of the data collection process, weekly online forum discussions of pre-service teachers were collected. Each prospective teacher was supposed to actively participate in the discussions assigned by the instructor on an online platform related to things they were doing and observing in classrooms at the schools. These discussions were about their expectations from the course, their concerns, their ideas about matters raised in class discussions and any point they liked to highlight related to teaching in general. Participants and the course instructor consented to share these papers and forum discussions to be analysed and reported in this study. The first round of reflections and weekly discussions were used to answer research question one. The second round of reflections and weekly discussions were used to answer the second research question in this study.

Due to the nature of the data sources of this study, an inductive approach was adopted by means of thematic analysis using Boyatzis' (1998) data-driven code development model. It has the following stages; "a. reducing the raw information; b. identifying themes within subsamples; c. comparing themes across subsamples; d. creating a code; and e. determining the reliability of a code" (p. 45). The raw information, which was the reflection papers and the forum discussions of the pre-service teachers, was outlined according to their content. Later, this outlined content was used to create themes, followed by a process in which these themes were compared across subsamples (reflection papers vs reflection papers, forum discussions vs forum discussions). After that comparison, similar themes were chosen as codes to be used in the analysis. The exact process was also conducted with the same data by a second coder to ensure the reliability of the themes and codes. Thus, two researchers analysed and coded the data separately to ensure inter-coder reliability. In cases of disagreement, which were not many, they had discussions to improve precision.

RESEARCH ETHICS

This study strictly followed the academic research ethics were strictly followed in all its phases. In accordance with APA's ethical principles and code of conduct, the study was submitted to the Applied Ethics Research Centre of the institution in which the participants were studying, and the Human Research Ethics Committee approved. Besides, the participants were informed that their reflection papers would be used for academic research purposes and that parts of their written work would be presented in this study after masking their identities. Participant consent was taken from each pre-service teacher to use their written assignments. They were also informed that their participation in this study was completely voluntary and that they would withdraw at any point without having to present excuses. Same ethical principles and code of conduct were followed in collecting, analysing, reporting, and storing the participants' work and citing all the sources as appropriate in the references section.

4 | RESULTS

This section presents the results under themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis, with reference to the participants' own words to illustrate their beliefs.

BELIEFS ABOUT TEACHING AND CLASSROOM PRACTICES BEFORE SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

The pre-service teachers in this study had various beliefs about teaching in general and specific classroom practices. Since they were all non-native speakers going to teach English, presumably, in non-native contexts, these beliefs generally focused on teaching English as a foreign language.

APPROACH TO TEACHING AND LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

One of the main findings of the study was related to the pre-service teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning a foreign language. Most focused on the fact that it was not an easy process. Two pre-service teachers emphasised this situation in the following ideas:

[S1] It is known that learning a foreign language is a process that cannot be explained easily. Since many criteria decide and explain some aspects of learning foreign languages, teaching foreign languages is also not an easy job.

[S3] I think teaching a foreign language is not easy because there are different students in the class, they have multiple intelligences, and some students do not like English.

This difficulty, as they stated, primarily stemmed from the fact that different students in the class might have had negative attitudes to learning a foreign language. On the other side, some other pre-service teachers believed that students needed to be informed about any aims for learning a foreign language:

[S2] I think the main aim of learning a language is communicating and interacting in the target language. Therefore, teaching grammar is not enough for students. When I was in high school, our teachers taught us only English Grammar no other language skills such as listening or speaking skills.

These reported difficulties were also linked to their previous experiences. As [S2] stated, using a grammar-oriented approach to teaching a foreign language caused some skills such as listening and speaking to be ignored. For that reason, [S2] believed that the main aim for learning a language should be communication and interaction.

APPROACH AND METHODS IN TEACHING

The specific aims for learning a foreign language bring about specific approaches and methods in teaching that language. This belief was reflected in one of the pre-service teachers' ideas about which approach or method to use to cover the specific aims;

[S4] It is important that the students want to learn English for what reason. For example, suppose they want to learn English for use in real life, communication, interacting with foreign people or applying it in business life. In that case, I should prepare more communicative activities and make them familiar with real-life expressions, conversations and situations such as ordering a meal, asking for an address or introducing themselves in a foreign country.

On the other hand, most pre-service teachers believe that they would develop their teaching methodology by blending all the approaches and methods they had learned. Though some of them favoured a communicative approach to language teaching, the consensus was on the notion that there was no perfect method for teaching a language. For that reason, they believed an eclectic method would be a better one:

[S10] I would like to find my way of teaching, mixing up all the things I gathered and learned all these years. I want to teach from the heart, not from the book. The methods and techniques that I would like to use would be eclectic ones. Since there is no perfect methodology that can be applied in all lessons, I prefer using communicative and task-based language teaching.

As the pre-service teachers indicated, using only the approaches they had learned in their teacher education program was not what they preferred. The pre-service teachers believed that they needed to go beyond what had been taught to them and developed their methodologies in teaching English.

LANGUAGE USE IN THE CLASSROOM

The debate over whether language classrooms should include or exclude the students' first language while teaching a foreign language still maintains its popularity in contexts where students cannot use it outside the classroom. As the below excerpts show, the pre-service teachers in this study highlighted the importance of using the target language in the classrooms:

[S5] I will speak English as much as possible throughout the lesson.

[S6] The most important thing is that I will try not to use my first language while teaching

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Classroom management as a whole was a challenging issue for many participants. Nevertheless, they had some existing beliefs about overcoming possible problems in the classroom. For instance, [S9] was in a dilemma between being strict with the students and being a lovely teacher to maintain classroom discipline, having some

questions about balancing it. Some others believed that the teacher should set some classroom rules and be open to negotiation. Excerpts below illustrate these:

[S9] I will try to give the impression that I am a strict person but a lovely teacher at the same time. But what if I cannot show it in that way?

[S2] There should be order and flexibility in which students feel relaxed and eager to learn. Students know how they should behave in the class. There will be some classroom rules and routines. For example, they will not come late to the class or bring their materials and books together for the course.

[S4] In the classroom environment, I will try not to lose eye contact with the students. So, I will control the class quickly. Apart from eye contact, I will use some verbal and non-verbal warnings to keep the classroom under control. My classroom management techniques will not be strict, but I can use some punishments in the classroom if necessary. I will also try to improve myself in teaching and get a practical course session. During this process, I will be open to suggestions from the students. If they are beneficial and reasonable for the course, I can apply them.

While both [S2] and [S4] stressed the importance of some kind of control by the teacher in the classroom, or even punishments, these would be discussed with the students beforehand. The strategies they believed to be effective classroom management were related to the roles of the students in general, such as coming to the class on time with required course material, and how they used to keep the classroom under control, such as using verbal or non-verbal warnings.

APPROACH TO TEACHING GRAMMAR

Teaching grammar was one of the most frequently reported beliefs regarding teaching. Here again, the pre-service teachers had varying beliefs in their approaches to teaching grammar. While some believed that learning a language meant learning grammar, others stated that using the language for communicative purposes was more important than grammar. For instance, based on experience, [S9] stated that the way grammar had been introduced to him/her before was how it should be taught to the prospective students;

[S9] The main rule of learning a language is to learn grammar. Based on my experiences, grammar is learned through many written and oral practices. We did not have the chance for oral practice. We learnt the grammar by doing so many written practices, and I think it worked well. I guess I will do the same thing for my students.

Some others believed that grammar should be taught using an inductive approach, leaving it for the students to discover. By exemplifying the experience, [S3] emphasised the gap between the high achievement in grammar-oriented exams and the lack of ability in speaking, and [S26] expressly referred to an inductive approach to teaching grammar.

[S3] I do not like focusing on just grammar. As we generally focused on grammar in our education system, we could not speak English most of the time. My students should understand basic and daily things and tell their needs in English, at least. In 9th grade, all my English exams were higher than 90, yet I could not speak English.

[S7] I am in favour of inductive grammar teaching. It is good to let students discover the grammar and encourage them to use it correctly.

STATED CHANGES IN BELIEFS AFTER SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

When the reflection papers and the forum discussions were analysed, pre-service teachers reported stability and change in their beliefs. These changes were related to questioning selves as teachers, the teaching profession in general, the use of technology in the classroom, teaching techniques, and classroom management. These are presented with excerpts from pre-service teachers' reflections below.

The significant change of beliefs of the participating pre-service teachers occurred in their questioning selves as future teachers. Most of the pre-service teachers stated that though they did not consider being a teacher before and felt hostile towards the profession; they had a positive attitude towards teaching after the school experience:

[S3] I did not think about being a primary or secondary school teacher, but I started to think about it. I love being with children.

[S10] I was a student who never wanted to be a teacher in the future, but now I realised that I was happier with those children in that classroom than in my classes. I think I did not know myself, my real ambitions, dreams and aims about what I want from life, but now it is all crystal clear.

As seen in the excerpts above, the school experience course and the experience of practising teaching, in general, changed their existing beliefs about being a teacher at specific types of schools or levels; or being a teacher at all. [S3] states that they did not consider teaching primary or secondary levels before, but after the teaching practice experience, [S3] realised that they like being with children. Similarly, seeing that the students enjoyed their lessons, [S10] stated to have changed the strict belief.

Similar to these examples, the beliefs of [S2] about the teaching profession in general also changed after experiencing the real teaching environment. It is seen in the excerpt that they considered teaching to be an easy job and thought everything could be handled with ease. However, after the school experience, [S2] felt that teaching required additional specific skills and expertise other than what they knew. The following excerpt is illustrative:

[S2] Before this course, I always thought being a teacher was easy. But now I realise that teaching as a profession needs some special skills and expertise.

Apart from the issue of questioning self as a teacher, there were some instances where the pre-service teachers' beliefs about different aspects of classroom practices changed. For instance, in the following excerpt, the pre-service teacher had a negative attitude toward using technology in the classroom. However, after seeing how it increased students' motivations and interest in the lesson, [S1] changed this belief. Though there was no specific reference to what kind of technology was used in which activity, there was a stated change of attitude;

[S1] I did not like computers much at the beginning of the term. However, after seeing how much they work in class, I will absolutely not think of a lesson without technology for young learners and adults.

Some participants also referred to specific teaching techniques to be used in the classroom. For instance, as seen in the following excerpt, the pre-service teacher had preferred not to use group work activities in the classroom as they were hard to manage. However, after seeing how beneficial it was for the students and that the students liked it, he/she changes this belief:

[S3] Before practice teaching, I had thought that group work activities were hard to manage, so I did not prefer using them. I observed during practice teaching that students, especially in secondary school, were eager to work in groups. I will use group activities as much as possible, so there will be a sharing environment in the class.

Classroom management, which was one of the most cited concerns of the pre-service teachers in this study, was also subject to a change of belief. In the following excerpt, [S9] stated that after experiencing teaching in a real classroom; all their concerns disappeared:

[S9] I always thought I could not manage a class efficiently. However, based on my teaching practice sessions, I have seen I could manage the class. I did not look as serious as I am. I was afraid of being so serious during the class that students would not be willing to participate or ask something. However, I have achieved to look happy and smiling even if I was going through the most challenging times of my life.

As the excerpt above reveals, the pre-service teacher managed to be positive in the classroom to the students in spite of an existing belief that his/her looks will be too serious for the students to participate in the lesson.

Though there were various instances of change in the pre-service teachers' beliefs, there was also an instance of stability related to the role of the students and the teachers in the classroom. In the following excerpt, the pre-service teacher pursued their pre-existing belief about student-centred learning in the classroom. However, they saw the application of a teacher-centred approach by the mentor teacher in the practising school.

[S1] By taking all I have learned and observed into consideration, I am insistent on student-centred learning. Although all the schools where I took my education were teacher-centred and I became a somewhat successful person, it does not mean that this is the best way. I believe giving autonomy to the students and making them feel responsible for their learning is different.

By stating this, [S1] referred to the previous learning experience. Even though the teachers they came across in the previous educational life were in favour of a teacher-centred approach in the classroom, and that it did not have any role in their being successful, [S1] was still of the opinion that giving autonomy to the students was necessary to make them responsible for their learning.

5 | DISCUSSION

This study aimed to reveal the pre-existing beliefs of ten Turkish pre-service EFL teachers, their concerns and expectations about teaching and classroom practices, and track any stated changes in these beliefs. The findings suggest that pre-service EFL teachers studying at a teacher education program start the first phase of teaching experience with various pre-existing beliefs about language learning, language teaching, language use in the classroom, and classroom management caused by previous learning experiences (Lortie, 1975). Pre-service teachers have stated changes in some of their beliefs after the school experience (Brownlee et al., 2001; Hoang & Wyatt, 2021; Qui et al., 2021), both concerning their prior experiences of language learners (Yüksel & Kavanoz, 2015) as well as the curriculum of the teacher education program throughout their studies.

Some highlighted the complexity of teaching a foreign language caused by the nature of language, touching upon the learner diversity in the classroom affecting the teaching of a foreign language. Such issues arising from diversity in EFL settings have been emphasised in various forms and contexts, caused by language learning ability, language knowledge, learning styles, attitudes towards languages, motivation, interest (Ur, 1996). The pre-service teachers in this study expressly referred to negative attitudes the students in the classroom had towards English. This finding aligns with other studies that reported challenges caused by diverse classrooms affecting pre-service teachers' beliefs (Çimen & Daloğlu, 2019; Farrel, 2008; Zheng, 2009).

Another pre-existing belief was about methodology. Before the school experience, the participants reported general remarks about how to teach English, based on the courses they had taken up to that point in their studies. After the school experience, they reported that they had the chance to see the application of some classroom practices. Eilam and Poyas (2009) highlight the importance of holistic and situated classroom reality that serves as a knowledge base for pre-service teachers' professional knowledge development by stating the necessity of being "aware of the components of classroom teaching-learning episodes and their interrelations" (p. 103). In this study, while some pre-service teachers had thought that they would not use group work activities as they were believed to be hard to manage, this seemed to have changed after the school experience, seeing the application across different lessons. A similar remark about methodology was also made related to using technology in the classroom. The observation of a successful application of technology integration in the classes made pre-service teachers change their beliefs about how to use them or even consider using them (Park & Son, 2020; Teo et al., 2008). As Kılıçkaya (2009) reported, lack of modelling and familiarity (among other concerns) might cause pre-service EFL teachers to not use computer-assisted language learning (CALL) tools in their teaching practice. This particular finding obtained in this study also stresses the importance of modelling and familiarity in pre-service teachers' tendency to integrate technology in their classroom practices. Therefore, considering ways of integrating CALL into the teacher education curricula (e.g., Akayoğlu, 2017; Kılıçkaya & Seferoğlu, 2013) would help pre-service teachers to overcome this concern in their beliefs about teaching.

Classroom management was another primary concern of many pre-service teachers before the school experience, addressed in many previous studies (e.g., Stoughton, 2007; Balli, 2011; Girardet, 2018). These pre-service teachers had some pre-existing ideas and concerns about managing classroom discipline. After school experience, some reported that these concerns seemed to eradicate after seeing their strategies. From a constructivist perspective, as Girardet (2018) suggests, reflecting on prior beliefs, studying alternative practices, learning by doing, and a collaborative learning environment act as facilitators of change in pre-service teachers' beliefs specific to classroom management.

Lastly, one instance of stability was also observed in this study related to the role of students in the classroom. One pre-service teacher stated that s/he had the same belief about student-centred learning, even after the school experience. This might suggest that some beliefs are anchored knowledge, exhibiting the knowledge that is most worth and has proven itself in action (Pajares, 1992).

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

In this study, the participants reported a change in their professional development through their school experience. Therefore, it might be suggested that teacher education programs need to give more emphasis on such field education practices (Kasapoğlu, 2015). One of the primary goals of the school experience is to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Therefore, the theoretical coursework and micro-teachings at the universities need to be parallel with the practices at the schools. These can be enhanced with follow-up guided reflection sessions (Karakas & Yükselir, 2020), where pre-service teachers can reflect on their observations from the school experience. Theoretical knowledge from university courses contributes to professional expertise, given that they are made explicit in such reflective practical experiences (Ur, 2019). Within this perspective, more opportunities should be created to bridge this gap between theory and practice by exposing pre-service teachers to an early practicum period (Ribaeus et al., 2020) to generate a sense of practice regarding their future profession. Pre-service teachers “need time to wrestle with professional expectations early in the programs, before they can begin to appreciate such expectations as structure for professional and personal growth” (Allsopp et al., 2006, p.31).

In the Turkish context, teacher education programs have two courses for school experience. With the latest update of New Teacher Education Programs by the Council of Higher Education (CHE) in 2018, practicum courses are now offered in the fourth (final) year of the curriculum, Teaching Practice I and Teaching Practice II. However, the organisation of these practices is generally random and left to the personal endeavour of the teacher educators and mentor teachers with outdated guidelines provided by the Council of Higher Education and World Bank in 1998 (Yükseköğretim Kurulu & World Bank, 1998). One suggestion that comes out of this study is that these practicum courses need more emphasis on addressing learner diversity in the classrooms. While this organisation of teaching practice courses requires school experience by asking pre-service teachers to visit schools, this experience can be given more importance and more space in language teacher education programs. It is seen in this study that pre-service teacher beliefs about teaching are affected negatively by the diverse classroom settings they observe, and they find difficulty in coping with different learner backgrounds, learning styles, learner intelligences, and motivation towards English. Another suggestion related to classroom management is focusing more on strategies that work rather than dealing with increased theoretical strategies that pre-service teachers cannot relate to. For this, teacher educators can support and challenge these pre-service teachers through reflective practices (Stoughton, 2007), narratives (Balli, 2011), and focusing on effective strategies of problematic behaviours rather than merely increasing the instruction in classroom management (O’Neill & Stephenson, 2012). In addition, inclusive teacher education practices (Blume et al., 2019) needs to be adopted to give way for a more contextualised practicum experience for pre-service teachers, as a socio-professional network is needed among the stakeholders of the practicum and school experience (Rakıcıoğlu-Söylemez & Eröz-Tuğa, 2014). One other significant finding was how some pre-service teachers questioned themselves as teachers before the school experience and how this questioning led to a positive outcome after the school experience. Such tensions regarding questioning selves as teachers arise in the practicum period (Flores, 2020), and exposure to these contexts bring about significant confrontations with teacher identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). A similar result is noted by Trent (2013), where such practising experiences positively shape pre-service teachers’ professional identity. Therefore, acknowledging that practicum courses help pre-service teachers understand what it means to become a teacher, these courses should address increased reflective practices and collaboration among mentors, teacher educators and pre-service teachers.

6 | CONCLUSION

Teaching practice is a crucial part of pre-service language teacher education. With practicum, the pre-service EFL teachers are “introduced to the real world of teaching where they have a chance to observe experienced teachers and put their knowledge into practice” (Eröz-Tuğa, 2013, p. 1). In this study, the participants reported the significance of this real-world school experience through their reflections. The School Experience course seemed

to help the pre-service teachers to reflect upon their existing beliefs about language learning, language teaching, language use in the classroom, and classroom management. In other words, the School Experience course seems to significantly influence changing pre-service teacher beliefs (Ismail & Jarrah, 2019). This is an essential change because these pre-service teachers are on the verge of becoming teachers in different levels in different schools upon graduation; yet, they need to have a positive attitude towards teaching in general to be effective teachers.

School experience offers possibilities and opportunities for prospective teachers to gain perspectives about seeing themselves as teachers and questioning it if necessary (Chong et al., 2011). Similarly, mentor teachers at the schools need to be aware of the complexities of pre-service teachers' change process to better understand and support pre-service teachers for their transition between the classroom and field education (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020).

The study has the following limitations. Firstly, ten pre-service teachers participated in this study. Therefore, the scope of the study is limited to these pre-service teachers only. A detailed study might be conducted with more participants. Secondly, though this study is longitudinal in that it aims to analyse two sets of data (reflection papers and forum discussions written before and after the school experience course), the school experience course involves more observation than teaching. The study might be expanded to include the reflections of the pre-service teachers written during the Teaching Practice course in the second semester, and the scope of the study might be extended to a year-long process. Lastly, further studies would include detailed interviews with the pre-service teachers about their beliefs and any stated changes.

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